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### **Make-believe factor**

THE HISTORY of political make-believe in modern Palestine stretches back to the days of the British administration. Its most notable manifestation then was Britain's pretence that it was fulfilling its obligations under the Mandate. In fact, it was busily engaged in frustrating the Mandate's central purpose: The "reconstitution of the Jewish National Home." Thence many tragic consequences evolved.

It is perhaps this long experience with make-believe that enables people in Israel to watch with seeming equanimity, in these very months, a new set of pretences designed to affect the future of Israel. It began with the incredible distortion, in President Ronald Reagan's speech on September 1, of the circumstances of the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut.

"Today," he said, ". . . marked the successful evacuation of the PLO from Beirut, Lebanon. This peaceful step could never have been taken without the good offices of the United States and especially the truly heroic work of a great American diplomat, Philip Habib."

Some American officials pretend (to foreigners) that their president is a god-like figure whose pronouncements and edicts are sacrosanct, his angers devastating. Even Jimmy Carter's head was sometimes adorned, in warnings by State Department officials, with a halo of presidential infallibility.

The fact is that Mr. Reagan's remarks were a mean-spirited slight to the people of Israel whose bitter sacrifice alone made possible Habib's diplomacy and the American leap onto the bandwagon of "bringing peace to Lebanon."

There was nothing in his remarks to recall that his administration – and its predecessors – had contributed directly to the climate and the circumstances of the bloodletting that went on incessantly for seven long years in that unhappy country. No; the suggestion that somehow, by waving some magic wand, Mr. Habib had set Lebanon on the road to peace is only less untruthful than the implicit pretence that the U.S. government had previously "given a damn" about whether there was peace in Lebanon or not.

In fact, Washington consistently bolstered the cruel foreign domination by Syria and the regime of PLO rampage (with its concomitant attacks across the border on Israeli civilian communities) until the Israeli army put an end to them in the summer of 1982.

Throughout those years, the incomprehensibilities of U.S. policy in Lebanon were marked by two consistent notes: nothing must be done that might dislodge the Syrians or free the Lebanese from their dominance; and nothing must be done that might seriously weaken the PLO.

It was, after all, only when it became clear that Israel had effectively destroyed the PLO structure in Lebanon (and, when the Syrians intervened, delivered a heavy blow at their army) that Washington rushed in, suddenly became the Lebanese people's best friend and, with concerned mien and furrowed brow, offered aid and advice.

This may now be all to the good, but does not erase the grim facts of recent history – which no American spokesman has even tried to explain.

IT IS AGAINST this background that the somewhat dramatic news of last weekend must be seen. Suddenly, after several weeks of apparent stalemate in the effort to find a basis for talks between Israel and Lebanon (accompanied by Washington's now customary hectoring of Israel), Defence Minister Ariel Sharon announced that he had reached an agreement with authorized Lebanese representations on agreed goals for negotiations.

These include an end to the state of belligerency, open borders, and adequate security arrangements for Israel in the south. If consummated this agreement will bring great joy to both peoples.

At once, however, the question arises: Why could Mr. Habib not have done this in his innumerable talks with the Lebanese? The terms of the agreement are the same as those shown to the U.S. secretary of state in October.

The mystery can be resolved in only one way. Mr. Habib did not try. The instructions he received from Washington did not aim at a simple solution, at attaining a state of peaceful relations between Israel and Lebanon. Washington's idea was to ensure that if such a relationship were achieved, Israel should pay a price for it.

The price in blood it had already paid in Lebanon had been contemptuously ignored, erased from the record, as we have seen, by the president himself.

The price was to be paid in Judea and Samaria – by a change in the Israeli Government's negative attitude to the "Reagan plan."

Mr. Sharon (and his fellow-negotiators) clearly stole a march on Washington. He had for weeks charged the Americans with hindering rather than helping the conclusion of an agreement with Lebanon.

Now, taking the bull by the horns, he had not only thwarted such a design, but had exposed it. For, truly, why had Habib, with all his persuasive powers, backed by Washington's goodwill, not been able to achieve what the much-maligned Sharon achieved?

THE CAMPAIGN for the Reagan Plan is now in full sail. It is a major piece of make-believe. It has been presented with fanfare as a "new" plan – indeed as Reagan's brainchild – when in fact it is not new at all.

It is the old, old American-Arab plan: Israel must restore the territorial *status quo* of June 4, 1967 (including east Jerusalem). That is the essence; all the rest is rhetoric.

For example, President Reagan is against a "Palestinian State," he prefers the "West Bank" and Gaza to have some form of autonomy in association with Jordan. But, really once Israel has agreed to surrender control of Judea, Samaria and Gaza into Arab hands, who is going to ask Mr. Reagan what he "prefers"? He will not even have one vote. (Not that it makes any difference to Israel.)

Yet there are some eager-to-be-identified members of the American Jewish community and some naïve Israelis who were cheered by the wonderful news that Ronald Reagan does not want a Palestinian state.

The Opposition in Israel has excelled itself in countering government positions by the pretence that somewhere, somehow, the Reagan Plan is made more or less to the measure of Labour Party policy. Mr. Shimon Peres praised it in the United States; and Haim Zadok has claimed that the Reagan Plan provided for "the complete demilitarization of Judea, Samaria and Gaza."

The Reagan Plan provides for nothing of the sort; indeed, the Labour Party Allon Plan naturally “provides” for the demilitarization only of the areas to be given to the Arabs. Significantly, no Labour spokesman has quoted chapter and verse for the claim of identity of similarity. It is make-believe.

THOUGH THE PLAN is old, the mood in Washington is new. With Israel already reduced to the 1967 lines in the south, and the coalition against it much more militant, the policy-makers in Washington feel more confident of the success of their pressures on Israel.

While they may remember the Golda Meir government’s instant rejection of the plan (in its earlier edition as the “Rogers Plan”), they see that the Labour leaders now are willing to cooperate with them.

Above all, however, they will now be expecting flexibility from the prime minister.

In a recent interview (*Yediot Aharonot*, September 17), U.S. Ambassador Samuel Lewis, asked about the prime minister’s dedication to the idea of Eretz Yisrael, pointed out with characteristic elegance that the essence of statesmanship is willingness to make concessions, and that Begin has provided himself a great statesman.

It is that kind of statesmanship that lost us Sinai, and throughout the negotiations before and during Camp David, Washington learned how much make-believe there is in the prime minister’s “firm” and “unbending” attitudes.

That is why Lewis awaits the Begin-Reagan meeting with hopeful expectations and why there is reason for deep concern in Israel.