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Weinberger's 'conversion'

AN INTRIGUING sound coming out of the U.S. recently has been the cooing of Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger in addresses to Jewish audiences.

Weinberger, it seems, is a great admirer of Israel who cannot find a hard word to say about us; and in a letter to *The New Republic* which had criticized him, he refers to the "strong bonds" between the U.S. and Israel, asserts that "we are bound by the interests of mutual security," "face a common threat from Soviet-backed terrorism" and so on, and so on.

There has been no stated explanation for Weinberger's metamorphosis. He himself has given no hint of an apology for his previously outrageous behaviour towards Israel, when he indulged in patently contrived criticism and public hectoring of the Israeli government.

As the editors of *The New Republic* assert in their reply, "impeccable sources both inside and outside the Reagan administration portray Secretary Weinberger as a consistent advocate of confrontation with Israel as a means of achieving U.S. aims in the Middle East.

They list Weinberger's known stands, utterly inimical to Israel, on a number of issues – including, for example, suspension of sales of F-16 jets, Sidewinder and Sparrow missiles – "as a means of punishing and pressuring Israel."

Then, twisting the knife, they declare that their impeccable sources charge that Weinberger "persistently denies in public what he pushes in private."

The story is, of course, a longer one. Weinberger was the dominating influence in achieving the Reagan administration's abandonment of the policy friendly towards Israel so energetically propagated before the election, in the side-tracking or jettisoning of the friends of Israel who had served on Reagan's "transition team," and in assuring the perpetuation of a fixed Saudi-oriented (indeed Saudi-dictated) hostile stance towards Israel.

WEINBERGER'S "CONVERSION" should be seen in its proper context. It is transparently an expression of the new tactics of the administration as they have matured in the last couple of months.

In part, they are a consequence of the collapse of the great Master Plan (named after Mr. Reagan) first proclaimed last September.

King Hussein (cast also to act for a rehabilitated PLO) was to be mobilized to negotiate with Israel, after a "freezing of the settlements," for the handing over of Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

The bullying of the Israeli government (softened by the prolonged 1982 campaign of almost universal vilification) into entering negotiations on the basis of the "totally unacceptable" Reagan plan, was to be achieved with the help of the Israeli opposition party, whose leader was duly briefed in advance.

From the shambles of the plan, now *sans* Hussein, *sans* Arafat, *sans* Israeli opposition, it was no doubt a relief to be able at least to mend a fence with Mr. Begin.

There were, however, also earlier signs of the new mien towards Israel. Already on March 15, in Jerusalem, Ambassador Lewis announced the end of the "difficult

period” in relations between the U.S. and Israel; and in April, he again told an Israeli audience that the administration intended in the near future to restore the “basic understanding and the good relations with Israel.”

Independent observers of the Washington scene also began to prophesy in the same terms.

These forecasts have indeed come true in practical terms: some 75 F-16 planes are to be delivered; there is to be a relaxation in the supply of other important equipment; and President Reagan is graciously prepared to receive Prime Minister Begin again.

The reasons for the détente are not hard to find. If the Reagan plan misfired, at least on Lebanon U.S. diplomacy was triumphant. Already in March, the signals from Israel in the negotiations over Lebanon had begun to change – by a less “demanding” attitude even on the scope and nature of security arrangements in Southern Lebanon (ultimately encapsulated in the feckless acceptance of joint patrols under Lebanese army command) and the hint of a less-than-commanding role for Major Sa’ad Haddad – in short, at least partial capitulation to the previously “unacceptable” American-Lebanese terms.

LESS ATTENTION, however, was paid to another “side-effect” of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement. What will happen when it becomes clear “finally” that the Syrians and the PLO are not leaving Lebanon, and the agreement remains inoperative.

During the negotiations, various Israeli voices claimed that Israel would then withdraw unilaterally from the northern zone, retire on the Awali River line – and let the Lebanese government solve its own problems in the Bekaa and the Shouf Mountains.

But the prospect of such an Israeli withdrawal sends shivers down Washington and Beirut spines.

After an Israeli withdrawal, the duty of intervention and pacification in the area might fall both on the Lebanese army and on the multinational force – including the American contingent.

Israeli casualties, now a daily toll, may then well be replaced by American casualties – a prospect that is manifestly unacceptable.

On this, too, it appears the Israeli government has promised accommodation. On at least three occasions recently, Defence Minister Moshe Arens, when questioned, has meticulously spelt out that if the Syrians do not withdraw, then Israel will *consult* with the Americans and the Lebanese on what to do next.

Only last Sunday, an unnamed official in Jerusalem emphasized that Israel “*would not contemplate withdrawal to a new line without fully coordinating in advance with the U.S.*” (*The Jerusalem Post*, May 30).

What will happen when Washington, duly consulted, rejects the idea of Israel withdrawing from the area of confrontation? Will Mr. Arens and his colleagues then risk a new “confrontation” with the U.S., an end to the “improved relations,” perhaps a new embargo on the still only-promised F-16s (or some other punishment?? Or – if the U.S. presses on Israel acceptance of a possible Syrian condition: that Israel withdraw from the Golan in return for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon – or else . . . ?

THIS IS no fantasy. This is the texture laid down by Washington for relations with Israel.

When Ambassador Lewis announced the impending improvement in relations, he explained that the turn for the worse had taken place with the adoption of the Golan Law, the Lebanese war and other related developments. That is, relations were reasonable before these Israeli misdeeds (which, in other castigations of Israel, have included also, for example, the destruction of the atomic reactor in Iraq).

This is an implication of deep and far-reaching, even tragic, significance. Let us pinpoint it.

Throughout 1981, a fierce debate went on in the U.S. over the administration's decision to supply Saudi Arabia with AWACS and with equipment to enhance (five-fold) the capacity of previously delivered F-15 planes.

This decision, bearing a dire threat to Israel's basic security, was a flagrant betrayal of a U.S. undertaking in 1978 *not* to supply the F-15 enhancing equipment.

The 1978 promise itself was made in order to squeeze through the Senate approval for the supply of the F-15 planes themselves under the threat to default on an earlier undertaking to supply Israel with F-15 planes (for which Israel had paid in heavy security concessions).

There was then, on this issue alone, an unbroken history of pledges broken, agreements violated, the arming of Israel's enemies and the undermining of Israeli security.

Moreover, throughout the debate, the administration not only indulged in fantastic truths about the benevolent and progressive nature of the Saudi regime, and ridiculous claims about its capacity for deterrence of the Soviet threat, but descended to a volley of threats to oppose the ugly deal and a campaign of denigration and vilification of Israel – with undertones, generating vulgar overtones of anti-Semitism.

This behaviour of the administration – according to the record invoked by Ambassador Lewis – was perfectly in order, a function of normal relations. Only when Israel committed a misdemeanour (not indeed breaking any agreement, merely safeguarding its security) were relations spoilt.

Israel, faced with a series of broken pledges and agreements, subjected – together with its friends in the U.S. – to obloquy, insult and injury, is assumed to have quietly bound up its wounds, wiped the spittle off its apologetic face – and awaited its punishment.

One of the American expert observers, who also recently forecast the improvement in relations – Dr. Harvey Sieckerman, formerly an aid to Secretary of State Haig – cited, as one of the causes of the earlier worsening of relations, the thwarting of the sympathies of a “perfectly well-disposed Reagan” by “*the campaign against the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia*” (*The Jerusalem Post*, April 21, 1983).

Dr. Sieckerman was not exaggerating. This was the revealed wisdom known to all in Washington. Israel, and the U.S. Jewish community (which fought the deal) did not have the right to fight back. The victim was to blame, and must be punished.

THE AWACS episode was not an isolated one. It did, however, illustrate particularly vividly the anatomy of the relations between Israel and the U.S.

Of even deeper and more far-reaching significance was its rounded presentation of the “classic role” imposed on the Jewish people – now 35 years after regained

independence in its own state. There lies the yardstick, which none should forget, for judging the fluctuations in “relations.”

But what is most disturbing at this moment is the euphoric atmosphere in Jerusalem at the “improved relations.”