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America's Policy in the Middle East: What is it?, 1982.

America's Policy in the Middle East: What Is It? Daniel Jeremy Silver October 31, 1982

On September 1, the day that the last contingent of acknowledged PLO guerillas and Syrian troops were shipped out of Beirut, President Reagan presented to the nation a series of proposals touching the Middle East. He began by saying: "with the agreement in Lebanon we have an opportunity for a more far-reaching peace effort in that region, and I am determined to seize the moment." His proposals included Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for recognition by the Arab states of unspecified security arrangements, and a Palestinian entity comprising the West Bank and Gaza which would somehow be federated with Jordan. He described what he called America's "iron-clad guarantees" of Israel's security. He specifically ruled out an independent Palestinian state and spoke of a unified Jerusalem, though he was not specific as to its political basis. He also suggested that Israel need not withdraw to the exact boundaries which existed before 1967 since these, following the spirit of United Nation's Resolution 242, were in need of some rectification.

Mr. Reagan had not intended delivering that speech on September 1. It had been scheduled to precede by a day or two the meeting of Arab heads of state at Fez which was scheduled for the second week of the month. The speech clearly was intended for Arab consimption. The United States has been concerned that many in the Arab world assume, or claim to assume, that Washington supported Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The Arab states, as you well know, did not support the PLO during that attack and needed someone to blame for their inaction and America is a favorite target. The President's advisers obviously had told him that here was a way of showing the so-called moderate Arab states that we were "evenhanded" and understood and supported major elements of their demands. The President accepted the idea of a Palestinian entity. He pushed for the rapid resumption of the Palestinian autonomy talks. He understood Arab interests in Jerusalem. This speech was, in effect, an open invitation that the heads of Arab states join the United

States in working out an arrangement which would achieve those goals.

The speech was moved up a few days because of Israel's angry public reaction to the letter which President Reagan sent to Jerusalem, outlining what he intended to say. In international affairs it's customary to forewarn friendly governments of public statements which may affect their interests. President Reagan had sent a letter to Prime Minister Begin in which he had not only outlined his proposal but added a demand that Israel cease building new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and desist from enlarging existing settlements. Israel's blunt reaction became public knowledge and the President moved ahead the schedule of his speech to get America's position on the records.

Israel saw these proposals as introducing America's initiatives into the Palestinian autonomy talks. In these talks the United States' role had been limited to that of a mediator. Now the United States was changing the rules of the game and, in effect, limiting the claims that Israel could advance and so reducing the bargaining chips she could put on the table.

I understand Israel's anger and frustration with the United States, but I believed then, and I continue to believe, that it would have been wiser for Jerusalem to have been non-responsive rather than negative. A statesman must be able to set aside anger and frustration and keep his eye on the long-range interests of his country. The Arabs could be counted on to veto the President's program. Washington may believe that these proposals would meet so-called moderate Arab demands, but they do not. After all, the President specifically ruled out an independent Palestinian state which he said would be as much a threat to Jordan as to Israel. He ruled out the demand that Al Ruds, which is the Arab name for Jerusalem, be established as the capital of an independent Palestinian state. He spoke of federation with Jordan, a position most Arab states do not accept, and of Jordan taking the lead in the next round of negotiation, though the Arabs have insisted that the PIO is the only acceptable negotiator for the Palestinians.

If Israel had bided its time, bit its tongue, I believe that much would have been gained, at least in the area of public opinion. Responding as categorically and negatively as the Begin government did, Israel seemed to confirm the image of intransigence which the media has come increasingly to use.

In any case, Israel reacted as she did and we ought to understand why feelings ran high in Jerusalem. In Israel's eyes the invasion of Lebanon was largely forced on them by American actions. Two years ago when the Palestinians began to bring their long guns to bear on the Galilean settlements, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon to protect her citizens. Fearful of an escalating conflict, Ambassador Habib negotiated, after a great deal of capital hopping, a two-part standstill cease-fire. There would be no more overt military action and shellings; and that there would be no major buildup of forces under the unbrella of the ceasefire. By and large, the Arabs lived up to the first element in this agreement. The shellings of the Israeli settlements became less frequent. But they went ahead with a massive weapons buildup. The PLO stockpiled vast quantities of arms from all over the world; and the Syrians moved surface-to-air missiles into the Becca Valley which gave them air cover over much of Lebanon and parts of northern Israel. When the Israeli government asked the United States government, which by negotiating the cease-fire had, in effect, guaranteed it, to make the Arabs abide by the bargain, Mr. Habib was sent back to the Middle East but was unable to achieve the desired results. The Saudis were not willing to do our dirty work and America was unwilling to take any direct action to achieve the desired results. In a sense, the Lebanon invasion had to be launched because of American powerlessness. America had guaranteed certain proposals and then could not make good on those guarantees.

Then when the invasion was launched and Israeli troops found themselves on the outskirts of Beirut, the United States insisted on negotiations designed to remove the PLO from Beirut without further loss of life or damage to the city.

The Israeli government withheld a direct attack on West Beirut for many weeks and Mr. Habib shuttled back and forth, but it became increasingly clear that the PLO thought they could use these negotiations to prolong indefinitely their stay which provided Arafat a golden opportunity for the media to which he had become a colorful celebrity. Again America proved powerless and Israel felt it had to step up the bombardment of West Beirut to prove to the PLO that their departure was, indeed, inevitable. Then when Israel stepped up the action America became somewhat self-righteous and took to publicly condemning Israel for the bombings, though our own powerlessness had largely made it necessary.

Those issues rankled, but the major reason for Jerusalem's bitter response grew out of our blatant interference in Israel's domestic affairs. The series of proposals which President Reagan presented on September 1 were first cleared not with Mr. Begin and the Cabinet but with Mr. Peres, the leader of the opposition. Then in background interviews, members of the State Department made clear to the media that America deemed in our interest to help unseat the present government of Israel and to bring into power those who would be more amenable to our way of thinking.

The Israeli government had good reason in early September to be angry with us. Their reaction was understandable, but, I continue to believe, not wise.

Arab reaction followed a predictable script. They described the President's proposal as positive, trying to appear conciliatory in contrast to Israel's out-of-hand rejection, but then they went on, item by item, to point up their opposition to the President's position. The Fez final communique spoke of an independent Palestinian state. It made no reference to the recognition of Israel. Even after the return of the West Bank and Gaza, all that Fez proposed was a Security Council resolution which would affirm the integrity of the states of the region. In the Arab terminology, Israel is not a state, so in point of fact, they were saying, 'we will not recognize Israel.' The President had spoken of the

integrity of Jerusalem. The communique at Fez spoke of Al Kuds, never of Jerusalem; and demanded that Al Kuds be the capital of a Palestinian state.

The Arabs turned down the President's proposals on every point. Mr. Schultz, our Secretary of State, began to speak of the President's proposal as the beginning of a long, difficult process of negotiation. At least, he said, people were talking. Washington began to say that the President's proposals would provide a way to draw King Hussein into the negotiating process. Much hope was held out for a meeting which was arranged between Arafat and Hussein. Though they had fought each other twelve years ago, they met and embraced; but that was as far as the meeting advanced our interests. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Company after the meeting, Hussein spoke warmly of the President and his proposals, but when it came down to tachlis he said, I cannot negotiate with Israel or anyone else over the West Bank and Gaza until I'm given permission to do so. The Palestinian Liberation Organization is the only group which has the authority to do so. When it came to recognition, he said, 'not now.'

Eager to find reasons to be optimistic, the United States government began to build up the visit by a delegation from the Fez Conference. Originally the delegation was to include a representative of the PIO, but because of agreements Mr. Kissinger made with Israel's government years ago that the United States would not recognize the PIO until it recognized Israel, this representative could not be officially met. But he came anyway to Washington and every action, every speech made by this delegation, was cleared through him. His eminence grise suggests the real thrust of the Fez mission. After these meetings, though the United States said that there had been a good exchange of views, it was clear to all that even on the simple issue of recognition the Arab governments, including the so-called moderate Arab governments, were not prepared to move.

Actually, the region is not ready for Palestinian autonomy negotiations.

A whole set of ancillary problems, particularly those involving the Lebanon, must

be dealt with first. Fortunately, in the last eight weeks the American government has come to recognize this. These last few weeks there has been a certain clearing of the air between Israel and the United States catalysed by an Israeli offer. Israel is always accused of holding back; yet, it is the United States which is holding back on the further shipment of sophisticated weaponry to Israel. It is the United States which has delayed the shipment of more F-16 planes which had been ordered and approved. It is the United States which has withdrawn a so-called security agreement. Nevertheless, the Israeli government has come forward and said that American military people would be able to examine the weapons and the documents captured during the Lebanese invasion, items which the American military has been most eager to get their hands on because they will tell them a great deal about Russia's military capability.

Israel's gesture broke the ice. And the United States was able to reciprocate in part when several U.N. actions involving Israel found our principles and Israel's needs congruent. The Arab states, together with their Russian alllies and many Third World countries, have been making a concerted effort to delegitimatize Israel. At various meetings of agencies of the United Nations they have moved to decertify Israel's credentials. A few weeks ago at a meeting of the International Telecommunications Authority in Nairobi a serious attempt was made to do just that and the United States, said that if Israel's credentials were not accepted we would remove our representative and our financial support from the agency. The Arab attempt was narrowly defeated. The same scenario was to take place last week at the General Assembly, but the Americans persuaded enough countries that we meant business and would remove ourselves and our subvention from the United Nations if this were done. Israel was particularly pleased when Mrs. Kirkpatrick, our ambassador to the United Nations, forced the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, UNRRA, to admit what was amply proven by captured documents, that the major industrial school supported by UNRRA funds and run, supposedly, for the Palestinian refugees was, in face, a military academy for Palestinian Liberation Organization

officers and men. Had it not been for the United States' persistence, Israel's proof would never have been put on the international record and the head of UNRRA would never have admitted, as he now has, his agency's bias. If anyone wonders why Israel does not want a United Nations-managed peace-keeping force on its borders, here is a case history of why it cannot trust any U.N. group.

In the last two or three weeks both Washington and Israel have spoken of a lightening of the mood and a renewal of good feeling, but I think we would do well, to take a longer view and so the question that I have posed this morning, what is America's foreign policy in the Middle East. By way of answer I'd like to suggest that 1973 represents a watershed in American policy in the Middle East. Until 1973 the United States was the major power in the Middle East; but when Mr. Kissinger made no political, economic or military move to counter the Arab oil weapon, America's power, or pretense of power, ceased to be a truly effective force. Since 1973 America has not been able to call the shots in the Middle East and has had to resort to manipulation and indirection. Simply put, the countries there began to pay less attention to us.

When America was the most powerful military and political presence in the Middle East, Washington could have any relationships it wanted with an individual country. We had a special relationship with Israel, another with Iran, and another with Saudi Arabia, and we left it to these governments to work out arrangements between themselves as best they could. America's only other overriding interest in the Middle East was to seal the area from Soviet penetration, but once America proved to be a paper tiger it became increasingly clear to these countries that while they had to deal with America because of its markets, its economic power, and the possibility of military aid, they could not depend too much on American guarantees because America's power was not ready to be used and so would have to take care of their own defense. The result has been a new military on the part of everyone. The symbol of America's loss of power was the year-long im-

prisonment of our hostages in Tehran. Another symbol of our unwillingness to use power was the timid intrusion of a few Marines into Beirut and their precipitous removal even before the thirty days mandate had been completed.

Since 1973 America's policy in the Middle East has centered on the maintenance of stability. We want to keep the oil flowing and the markets open. Since 1973 the United States has been interested in containing problems and to do so indirectly through surrogates or through armaments. We have arms salesmen to everyone. We'll build up your army. You do the fighting. We can't really any longer even force anyone to negotiate.

A report in this morning's New York Times describes a Cabinet meeting called to decide whether or not to send the Marines back into Beirut. Casper Weinberger, our Secretary of Defense, argued against their return because we might become too deeply involved. According to this report, Ambassador Habib responded by saying; "your kind of thinking is precisely the reason that everyone in Beirut says that the United States is chicken."

The words are graphic, and they may or may not have been spoken, but they accurately represent the assessment most countries in the Middle East have made of our policies. If you wonder why the Begin government has seemed to have rejected American promises of support in favor of going it alone, it is because his government recognizes that Israel cannot depend upon security guaranteed by a government which is chicken and cannot be counted on to make good on its pledge. One of the reasons the Middle East has become increasingly volatile is that the perception is broadly shared.

The United States seeks stability. We want to preserve the status quo and to dissolve any problems which might endanger it. Some issues, like the war between Iraq and Iran, the United States seemingly can do little about. Some, like the support of the fifty thousand Saudi men who control that vast oil reserve, we do something about - if the massive arming of that country actually will achieve our goal. Then there is the continuing Arab-Israel problem. Since 1973 our government

has tried to propose various "reasonable" resolutions. There was the Rogers plan.

Now there's the Reagan plan. You can be sure there will be others. If plans could bring peace to the area, we would win the Nobel Peace Prize, but, given the nature of the international jungle and a situation where the United States is unwilling to put its power at risk, then what really our government is doing is to be a Sunday morning preacher who makes wonderful proposals, reasonable proposals for peace or justice or social welfare but lacks the ability to translate these effectively into the political process. The President in his speech spoke of a "lasting, just and enduring peace" which evolves from his proposals. It's a noble vision. Nor would I say that Mr. Reagan's plansfail to take into consideration the legitimate security interests of Israel. They do. What his plan lacks is America's willingness to get its hands dirty and put its power at risk.

On September 1 the President seemed to say that the problems in Lebanon were at an end. Not so. They've hardly begun. Everyone knows there is the question of getting Syrian, Israeli and PLO troops out, but even that is only the beginning. Lebanon has to be helped to coalesce into a nation state. Sectarian militias which have fought each other for decades must be disarmed. A responsible political process has to emerge. It's going to take time and power, and some power will have to maintain security until these changes take place. We're afraid, and have good reason to be afraid, of the dangers of involvement, but unless we're willing to make some kind of visible, tangible commitment, what country out there will have any reason to credit our "reasonable" proposals?

Washington talks of special arrangements between Israel and the United States which would guarantee Israel's security once a Palestinian entity becomes a reality, but such guarantees are only as good as America's willingness to back them up, and no Israeli government today could bank on that willingness.

Is our word good? Yes, in terms of sending arms. In terms of Marines? we like others to do the fighting. And that's the problem. We are a super power which isn't willing to put its power at risk. Preachers don't like to speak of

power. We like to speak of principle, but principles not backed by some degree of power are empty vessels and sometimes dangerous illusions. America is, I am afraid, busy putting forward reasonable recommendations for an unreasonable situation, and reason will not resolve the problems of the Middle East. Its problems have to do with too little land and too many people, too little resource for too many people, and cannot be resolved reasonably. If America's hopes are to be realized we are going to have to put America's power at some risk, and that's a position that our government seems unwilling to take.

Our preacher's policy is, I'm afraid, a no-win policy, and one which put Israel at a continuing disadvantage, at least in the area of public opinion. When one presents seemingly reasonable policies to people who are relatively innocent of the situation on the ground and one government must say, 'we can't do it your way because we don't trust you,' then those who don't understand all that is at stake end up feeling that the no-sayer is an intransigent fellow.

There is a fundamental asymmetry involved in any negotiation involving Israel and the Arab states. Israel is asked to give up land and security in depth — tangible assets. The Arabs are asked only to make intangible concessions — an admission of Israel's existence, some kind of exchange of ambassadors, give ups which can be readily cancelled. Egypt's actions in recent months shows how tenuous such give-ups can be. Israel is asked to give up what can never be reclaimed. There is no court out there to whom the Israelis can appeal if the Arabs renege. Were America willing to become that court and to use its power in support of compliance, then there might be some hope for negotiations. But clearly, we're not prepared to play that role.

What should American policy be? I'd like to see our policy directed towards resolving the smaller rather than the larger issues. Let's take first things first. Let's help to create a self-governing state in the Lebanon. Let's keep our Marines there until that's achieved. That won't solve the Palestinian prob-

lem, but it would help promote stability. If, as I believe, Egypt is in fact so married to the United States economically that it can't afford to break completely with us over Israel, and if the Lebanon is turned into a self-governing state, then the northern and the southern borders of Israel will be at least quiessent, and no other power in the region can challenge Israel militarily.

What about the Palestinians? What about a Palestinian state? That's one issue which, dear friends, I'm afraid the world must put aside for the time being. There is, of course, an issue of Palestinian rights, but then there's also issues of Kurdish rights, Armenian rights, Druze rights, Ibe rights, Basque rights, the rights of those minorities in Russia and China, and on and on. Not all issues of rights can be adjusted, and certainly not at once. The Palestinians have succeeded in bringing their rights before the conscience of the world, but they have also allowed themselves to be used as political pawns in a battle to delegitimatize and destroy Israel; and, in the process of achieving their rights, they have done harm to many, particularly in the Lebanon. If and when Israel's northern and southern borders are relatively secure, and if and when the uncertainty which understandably surrounds "American guarantees" is cleared up, Israel will be in a position to make significant compromises in the area of autonomy. Until then I am afraid that there is little realistic hope that much will be accomplished.

The President presented his proposals as a contribution towards a lasting, just and enduring peace. The vision is noble but I am afraid it bespeaks the unreality of the American approach. He speaks as a preacher and an effective American policy in the Middle East cannot be based on pulpit pronouncement. It has to combine power and principle. Until we are willing to commit our power I'm afraid we will be as little listened to as most preachers of their all too simple solutions to the obstinate and obdurate problems of the world.

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