

Who's in charge of Lebanon policy?

Reagan and Brezhnev are on a parallel track, writes Nancy Coker, attempting to take diplomacy away from Haig and the radicals.

An international policy fight has erupted over the Lebanon crisis whose outcome will determine whether or not a fifth Arab-Israeli war engulfs the Middle East. It will also define the extent to which President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev can cooperate to stabilize this strategic

Broadly speaking, the Middle East policy fight centers around three distinct policy factions:

- Those Arab and Israeli extremists who are gunning for war and the partition of Lebanon. This configuration backed by a sordid alliance between U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and a radical faction in the Soviet Union tied to the KGB intelligence services. Haig and the KGB view a Syrian-Israeli war over Lebanon as useful for polarizing the Middle East into clearly demarcated, rival spheres of influence.

- Closely allied to but distinct from this group is a faction that favors regional polarization and balkanization *without* war, by reviving, if possible, some form of the moribund and widely discredited Camp David accord imposed by the Carter administration. The British elements of this faction are inclined toward reviving the Camp David approach in the guise of some sort of "international conference," in order to undermine efforts by the Soviet Union to convene Geneva-style peace talks aimed at securing a comprehensive settlement.

- The immediate circles around Presidents Reagan and Brezhnev, who, in the interests of stabilizing the region and preventing a war that could trigger a superpower showdown, are working along parallel tracks to keep Lebanon in one piece by restraining Prime Minister Begin in Israel and President Assad in Syria and by treating Lebanon not as a free-fire zone for warring militias and armies but as a sovereign nation worthy of a strong central government.

According to intelligence sources, President Reagan, especially since the attempt on his life in March, has taken it upon himself to stay on top of the Lebanon situation, discreetly wrestling policy-making in this area from Secretary of State Haig. Reagan is reported to be maintaining highly secret, delicate contact with Brezhnev to prevent the Lebanon crisis from deteriorating into full-

scale war. Despite their differences, both Reagan and Brezhnev are acutely aware that should efforts to prevent a war fail, or should the region be polarized any further, the hard-line extremists in both Israel and the Arab world will be in the ascendancy.

However, if the situation is stabilized and war is averted, there is great potential that the moderates will come to the fore—Jordan's King Hussein, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Shimon Peres in Israel, Begin's Labour Party challenger in next month's elections—enhancing the chances for a durable regional peace settlement.

In recent weeks, the Soviets have sent out numerous signals to the Reagan administration that they are willing to cooperate in cooling down the Lebanon crisis. Last week, in a speech in Soviet Georgia, Brezhnev described the Lebanon situation as "profoundly tragic and dangerous." "One miscalculation and the flames of war could sweep the entire Middle East region. And it is not known how far the sparks could fly."

Brezhnev then reiterated a call that he first made in February for the convening of an international Middle East peace conference, intimating that Moscow is prepared to discuss Afghanistan as well as the Middle East as part of a package deal in the interests of restoring some stability to the region. Several days later, at a banquet in honor of King Hussein, who was visiting Moscow, Brezhnev stated that the threat of war over Lebanon "acutely reminds the entire world once again that it is time, high time, to settle the Middle East conflict as a whole." The Soviet Union, stressed Brezhnev, is seeking peace in the region, not only for its treaty allies but also for Israel, "if, naturally, it abandons the policy of seizing other peoples' lands and follows a peaceful rather than aggressive policy."

Secretary of State Haig immediately rejected Brezhnev's peace conference overtures, saying "It's too early to say whether they [the Soviets] have made a constructive or counterproductive contribution" to solving the Lebanon crisis. However, King Hussein welcomed the Soviet call for an international parley.

Last week, Soviet ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Soldatov described the situation in Lebanon as "danger-

ously tense," but declared that the Syrian-Soviet military treaty extends only to the border of Syria, implying that Syrian involvement in a war outside Syrian territory might not come under a Soviet military umbrella. Similarly, Leonid Zamyatin, the head of the International Information Department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, called for patient negotiations, not war, to resolve the Lebanon crisis. Zamyatin also asserted pointblank that the Soviet Union is not interested in a "Yalta arrangement" in the Middle East.

Reagan response

There are signs that Reagan may be picking up on Soviet overtures. Last week, Reagan met privately at the White House with the chief of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service to urge the Saudis to exert their influence on Syria in order to moderate Assad's brinkmanship. Haig was locked out of the meetings. Reagan also took the initiative of inviting Lebanese Falangist leader Bashir Gemayel to Washington for personal consultations.

In addition, Reagan personally requested that U.S. special envoy to the Middle East Philip Habib return to Washington for a first-hand debriefing on the state of negotiations. Habib's presence in the Middle East, said administration officials, is not required at this time, since the Saudis are representing the United States to the Syrians. According to Washington sources, Reagan wants to supervise the Habib shuttle.

The temporary recall of Habib is essential to resolving the Lebanon crisis. According to inside sources, Habib, a close associate of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, was purported to be pressing a face-saving "Arab solution" to the crisis whereby Lebanon would be effectively partitioned and Syria eventually integrated into the Camp David process.

In a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Philip Geyelin of the Heritage Foundation elaborated on this scenario. Habib's shuttle, noted Geyelin, "is a preview of how the door to a wider settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict could someday be unlocked." "The key," he stressed, "would be Saudi Arabia," which, if everything goes according to plan, would be induced to buy off Syrian President Assad and manipulate him into cooperating with the Camp David "partial peace" approach. The Saudis, says Geyelin, hold the cards for breaking Soviet influence over Syria, clearing the way for "getting on with some variation of the Camp David 'framework.'" Echoing Geyelin's scenario, Kissinger's State Department cronies Joseph Sisco and Hermann Eilts (former undersecretary of state for political affairs and former ambassador to Egypt, respectively) recently pointed out that the "greatest benefit that the United States will get out of Habib's crisis management in the Middle East will be bringing Syria around to our

framework."

The question is, will the Saudis go along with this scenario? All indications are they will not—despite columnist Joseph Kraft's overeager report that a "hidden partnership" between the Begin government and the Saudi royal family already exists as a result of their "shared aim" of restraining Syria in Lebanon.

In point of fact, the Saudis are making it known that while they may contribute to restraining Syria in the interest of preserving regional stability, Camp David is not on their agenda.

On May 16, the day after Habib's arrival in the Saudi kingdom, Riyadh Domestic Service issued a strongly worded commentary stressing "the need for a comprehensive solution" to prevent further polarization of the region. "We are confident that any solution that does not deal with the problem as a whole remains shaky, and this itself will not serve the cause of lasting peace and stability in the region, even if it removes the specter of war." Last week at the Arab League foreign ministers' meeting in Tunis, the Saudis blocked a proposal from the radical Arab states, led by Libya and Algeria, for the formation of a pan-Arab force to support the Syrians in Lebanon.

Stabilizing the region requires the neutralization and replacement of the Begin regime in Israel. For the first time since the start of the Lebanon crisis, both the Reagan administration and Shimon Peres's Labour Party have begun to go after Begin for deliberately fanning the crisis as an election-eve move.

This week, Reagan administration officials stated that they had no information to support Begin's charges that the Soviet Union had deployed military advisers into Lebanon alongside Syrian troops. Reagan officials are reportedly angered by Begin's provocative statements.

The Labour Party is meanwhile zeroing in on Begin. Former Labour Party Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin has accused Begin of authorizing the Falangist assault on Zahle, the provocation that triggered the current crisis. He also charged that Israel's attack on the Syrian helicopters earlier this month was a violation of previous understandings between Israel and Syria. Begin should have known that this action could not be "glossed over" or ignored by the Syrians, Rabin said. His charges were echoed by Peres.

In addition, Labour Party leader and former chief of intelligence Chaim Herzog attacked Begin for his off-handed statement about Soviet advisers in Lebanon. Even if Begin's charges were true, said Herzog, "what kind of political wisdom is it to corner the Soviets and close off to them any means of making a diplomatic retreat? What will be our fate with this lack of political wisdom and blabbing which characterize the prime minister's statements?"