

# The Reagan administration starts to get tough on Mideast policy

by Nancy Coker

The Middle East has been the undoing of many U.S. presidents in recent years, and President Reagan is no exception. For the past several decades, British intelligence, working at times with allied factions in Moscow and at times through agents of influence (such as the ignoble Henry Kissinger) in the U.S. State Department, has run circles around the United States in the Middle East. Britain's purpose is to undermine U.S. influence in the region, and the possibilities for a U.S.-mediated peace settlement there. It is all part of a British design for a "New Yalta" agreement with Moscow.

How much President Reagan is aware of this larger strategic gameplan is not clear. What is clear is that he has become aware of the stakes. "Reagan has suddenly become very, very suspicious about what the British are up to in the Middle East," said one U.S.-based Arab intelligence source. "Compounding his suspicions is his perception that the British may be playing along with the Russians to cross the United States in the region. This is a no-no in Reagan's book, and he is hopping mad."

Hence, Reagan's recent moves to bloc with Saudi Arabia against Britain in the oil price war. Hence, America's stepped-up moves to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Evidence of Reagan's state of mind appeared on Feb. 22, when, in a broad foreign policy statement delivered to the American Legion, he pledged to guarantee security on Israel's northern border in exchange for a total Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The offer undercuts Israel's insistence that it must maintain a military presence in Lebanon for "security reasons." The following day, Reagan told the press that Israel must also drop its insistence on working out a total peace treaty with Lebanon prior to withdrawal, and that withdrawal must be achieved now.

The White House has reportedly been studying prospects for increasing the multinational force in Lebanon, which is comprised of U.S., French, and Italian troops, from the current 4,000-man level to 30,000. In his visits to Israel and Lebanon earlier this month, presidential envoy Philip Habib

carried a proposal for increasing the number of U.S. Marines in Lebanon.

Reagan knows full well that unless he achieves a breakthrough in his mediating efforts in the next few months, American influence and the chances for a peace settlement will all but evaporate, as he becomes constrained by the exigencies of the upcoming presidential race.

## 'Five minutes to midnight'

The Egyptians and the Palestine Liberation Organization are also well aware of the consequences of a failure to assert U.S. influence in the Middle East.

On Feb. 22, the Palestine National Council, the parliamentary body of the PLO, ended a week-long meeting in Algiers by granting Yasser Arafat a mandate flexible enough for him to pursue diplomacy along the lines of Reagan's Middle East peace plan.

Despite opposition from George Habash, Ahmed Jibril, and other radicals, Arafat manipulated the meeting to come up with the statement he wanted—one that would leave the door open to the Reagan plan. Extremist demands that the Reagan plan be rejected were quickly swept aside by Arafat.

Even more interesting than the final communiqué was an interview given by Salah Khalaf, a.k.a. Abu Iyad, to the foreign press. Khalaf, the PLO's second-in-command, made it clear that the PLO is prepared to accommodate the Reagan plan. "If the Reagan plan is improved . . . by adding just one word . . . things could change completely," Khalaf said. "If the U.S. government was in good faith toward the Palestinian people—and I do not say toward the PLO, just to the tinian people—and accepting the fact that in the eyes of the United States government we are the bad Palestinians, let your government recognize the right of self-determination not to us, but to the Palestinian people, including the right to the creation of a state and excluding the PLO representatives. I assure you: Arafat and I would agree to being excluded [from direct negotiations]. Give us a reply, an amended Rea-

gan plan, and then we will discuss it. We are prepared to take the consequences of the Reagan plan and its repercussions.”

Earlier, Khaled Fahoum, head of the Palestine National Council, made the unprecedented move of publicly recognizing Israel's right to exist, and expressed the willingness of the Palestinians to live in a state next to Israel. “We do not want to destroy any state in the region” nor to “throw anybody in the sea,” said Fahoum.

Arafat appears to have paid attention to recommendations of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. On Feb. 15, Mubarak told a conference of journalists from the Non-Aligned nations that “time was running out for the Arabs” and that urgent diplomatic moves must be made in the next days and weeks to prevent a catastrophe in the region.

Calling on the Palestinians to reach an agreement with Jordan to negotiate jointly with the Israelis over the West Bank and Gaza, Mubarak stated: “In effect, the Israeli settlements multiply in the occupied territories, and the more one waits, the more difficult it will be to destroy them. If we wait a year or even six months, the United States will no longer be able to do anything.”

Mubarak added: “We had said at the beginning of the war in Lebanon that there existed a tacit accord or connivance between Israel and Syria, so that Israel could take the South and Syria the North, in order to chase the Palestinians out and to oblige them to settle in Jordan. We must rapidly restore sovereignty to Lebanon. Time is working against the Arabs.”

Mubarak then called on the Arabs to “renounce chimeras” and to recognize Israel. “Let us stop making fools of ourselves by denying Israel. Israel exists *'belle et bien.'* It occupies the Arab territories and its existence is guaranteed by the superpowers. It is time to admit reality and to negotiate to defend our rights.”

Mubarak was echoed by Bethlehem Mayor Elias Freij, who recently spent two weeks in Cairo. “We are at five minutes to midnight,” Freij told journalists in the West Bank. “The Israelis have unleashed their bulldozers into the West Bank. By the year's end, the situation will have become irreversible.”

## Targeting Mubarak

Given Egypt's role, it is not surprising that Mubarak has become a political target. Libya's recent provocations against Sudan, a country of vital strategic interest for Egypt, were begun to coincide with a planned series of U.S.-Egyptian joint military maneuvers in the region, to force Washington and Cairo into an overreaction that could have triggered an international crisis on the eve of the New Delhi Non-Aligned conference.

According to an Egyptian source, “Qaddafi started the whole provocation to focus world attention on American-Egyptian military cooperation, so he can try to discredit Egypt and prevent its re-integration into the Non-Aligned movement.

The British are eagerly using the Libya-Sudan crisis as a weapon against Mubarak. The London *Times* editorialized Feb. 23 that the Egyptians were “mightily embarrassed” by U.S. handling of the recent deployment of AWACS reconnaissance planes to Egypt, “which could spoil their entry into next month's Non-Aligned summit.”

At the moment, Mubarak is outflanking these attacks, keeping firm his relations with Washington but at the same time emphasizing his commitment to the Non-Aligned. In a recent interview with the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan*, Mubarak defended Egypt's “unique relationship” with the United States by comparing it to that between India and the Soviet Union. Such a relationship does not mean that either country is “aligned” with its superpower ally, said Mubarak, noting that non-alignment and friendship with Washington are not necessarily incompatible.

## Israeli wild card

With Ariel Sharon still in the Israeli government, Israel's potential for cooperating with the United States in the Middle East continues to be sharply reduced. According to one London source, Sharon has more power than ever. Though he is no longer defense minister, Sharon, as minister without portfolio, sits on the cabinet committee overseeing Lebanon negotiations and belongs to a ministerial defense committee.

Both Prime Minister Begin and Foreign Minister Shamir have categorically rejected Reagan's offer of security guarantees for northern Israel. “We don't want guarantees,” Begin stated. “There is no guarantee that can guarantee the guarantee.”

Sharon's replacement as defense minister, Moshe Arens, is not expected to be as reckless as his predecessor, even though some consider him to be even more hard-line than Sharon. Arens, writes military correspondent Hirsh Goodman in the Feb. 15 issue of the *Jerusalem Post*, “differs sharply from Sharon when it comes to independence from the United States. Unlike the outgoing defense minister, Arens, especially since he has been in Washington [as Israeli ambassador], has come to believe that strong ties are important, even if that involves Israel moderating its policies. . . . Arens knows that American support is vital to Israel's defense in more ways than one, and in order to secure that support the nation must compromise on issues that do not threaten its physical survival or compromise its political conscience.”

Sharon's game was to play along with the British and the Soviets to challenge the United States in the Middle East every step of the way. Now, however, Reagan seems to be putting his foot down—not only vis-à-vis the Israelis but Britain as well. In addition, indications persist that the Soviets might acquiesce to the Reagan plan in exchange for an arms-limitation deal.

The Middle East is at a unique historical juncture; Mr. Reagan's resolve is at this point the key determinant.