

Middle East Report by Nancy Coker

A question of time

President Reagan is renewing his drive for a U.S.-sponsored regional peace—before it is too late.

Described by White House sources as “deeply frustrated” by the continuing deadlock in the Middle East, President Reagan has stepped up efforts to ensure that immediate progress is made toward a U.S.-sponsored peace settlement. Reagan has contacted King Hussein of Jordan and other Arab leaders to urge them to accept the Reagan Plan as the framework for peace negotiations. While King Hussein has endorsed the Reagan Plan, he will not commit himself to negotiations with Israel until he has the go-ahead from the Palestine Liberation Organization, Saudi Arabia, and other key Arab states.

The Reagan Plan is shorthand for President Reagan’s Sept. 1, 1982, peace initiative, under which West Bank Palestinians not belonging to the PLO would join a delegation led by King Hussein and enter peace talks with Israel. Although the plan has been criticized for its many ambiguities and for not explicitly endorsing the Palestinian right to self-determination, it constitutes a potential vehicle for the Reagan administration to assert itself in the Middle East and to challenge those in Moscow, London, and Washington (the Henry Kissinger crowd) who are intent on keeping the region a cockpit and reversing its steps toward economic development.

The Reagan Plan has been rejected both by the Begin government in Israel and by pro-terrorist radical factions of the PLO. The British have been pressuring King Hussein not to cooperate with the Americans, on the

specious grounds that the Reagan Plan will “split the Arab world;” the real reason the British wish to thwart the Reagan Plan lies in their secret, long-standing aim to subvert U.S. influence in the Middle East.

According to sources in Washington and the Middle East, President Reagan is open to the idea of merging the Reagan Plan with the Fez Resolution worked out last year at an Arab League summit in Morocco. The blending of the two plans would provide Arafat with the Arab “umbrella” that he needs to quiet the PLO extremists.

According to one PLO source, a new Arab League peace proposal combining the Reagan and Fez Plans “could go so far as to recognize Israel’s right to exist”—giving the Reagan administration increased leverage in dealing with the recalcitrants in the Begin government who oppose any kind of settlement that would curtail Israel’s territorial ambitions.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone are throwing their weight behind the idea of merging the two peace plans. According to Kyoto news service, Mubarak, who began a state visit to Japan on April 5, is expected to issue a joint communiqué with Nakasone that will “highly appreciate the Fez resolution” and “welcome the moves for a comprehensive peace settlement on the basis of the Reagan and Fez Plans.”

The week before, Nakasone told the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* that his

government was seeking to blend the Reagan and Fez Plans and hoped to use Mubarak’s visit to achieve this objective. “What is required now is to search for a way to reconcile and coordinate between what came in the Reagan and Fez Plans in order to have one initiative based on the same principles for achieving peace. This is a common aim we, together with Egypt, seek to achieve. We will concentrate our efforts on this project.”

Arab leaders know that if President Reagan’s peace efforts are not accommodated at this time, the chances for a settlement will all but disappear, since by mid-1983, all of Reagan’s attention will have turned to the 1984 presidential election.

A State Department spokesman addressed this reality in a statement on April 5: “King Hussein has taken the lead in recognizing the opportunity currently available for revitalizing the peace process. I would hope that others as well will recognize that this is a unique moment, which must be seized before it is lost, and that they will support the king in his desire to move forward toward peace.”

Time is not the only threat to the peace process. Israeli extremists, backed by factions in the Begin government and U.S.-based Christian fundamentalists, still plan to seize the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Everyone knows that this act could trigger religious warfare throughout the Middle East, since the Temple Mount is the site of one of the holiest sites in Islam, the Dome of the Rock mosque.

In addition, Israel and Syria, operating with the tacit approval of Britain and the Soviets, are considering activating a deal to stage what they call a “limited war.” Such a war would probably result in the partition of Lebanon and the liquidation of King Hussein.