

## **Obstacles to Reagan's Plan for a Middle East Peace Settlement**

by  
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The Israeli government sees itself as surrounded by a Soviet-sponsored "outer circle of danger."<sup>1</sup> With the so-called State of Syria-Libya to the north and west, the pillars of the southern entrance to the Red Sea—Ethiopia and South Yemen—to the south, this circle is completed by the Ayatollah Khomeini exhorting his Iranian legions to seize Iraq as a staging ground for the final assault on Israel. The Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO, holds the destruction of Israel as a primary goal and is an ally to this circle of enemies.

Israel enjoys a tenuous hold on security to its immediate south as a legacy of the Carter administration's framework for peace of March 1979, which reflected the Camp David Accords of the previous September. These accords had enabled Israel to gain diplomatic relations with Egypt in exchange for withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, the vagueness of the call in the Camp David Accords for Palestinian autonomy on the West Bank and Gaza had left Israel with enough flexibility to maintain its biblical claim to preeminence in those two areas.<sup>2</sup> Early in 1983, however, Egypt suspended its ties with Israel, and the number of Israeli settlers on the West Bank was reportedly being doubled from 25,000 to 50,000 settlers. According to Georgie Anne Geyer, "it is the settlements, more than anything that are stopping President Reagan's . . . peace initiative."<sup>3</sup>

This essay will consider the impact of Israeli intransigence, along with other critical factors, on President Ronald Reagan's Middle East peace efforts, consistent with the long range objectives of the Camp David Accords, to fashion a role for Jordan and the Palestinians in resolving the problems of the West Bank and Gaza. As already indicated, the Carter administration had left the guidelines for this second phase of the Middle Peace process deliberately vague in order to satisfy Israel.

Like Carter, Reagan attempts to appease Israel by indicating in his Mideast plan that Jerusalem should remain undivided, with its final status to "be decided through negotiations." The plan does not support Israeli annexation or permanent control of the West Bank and Gaza, however. It hedges on this point, with the insertion that "the extent to which Israel should be asked to give up territory will be heavily affected by the extent of true peace and normalization and the security arrangements offered in return." Those security arrangements relate to Reagan's efforts to come to grips with the Palestinian question. Though the plan "will not support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza," it does agree, consistent with the general thrust of the Camp David Accords,

to Palestinian self government of those two areas "in association with Jordan."<sup>4</sup>

Jordan's King Hussein has hinted at willingness to engage in negotiations, should the PLO endorse his role. As of this writing, in spite of direct negotiations between these two leaders, Arafat has refused his permission for Jordan to speak for Palestinians in talks between Israel, Egypt and the United States. Arafat, himself, has been said, on an intermittent basis, to be considering the option. PLO compliance with a Jordanian negotiating role depends to a large extent, nonetheless, on how Arafat and the frontline of the PLO deal with four policy options.

The first is a hard line. It involves complete rejection of the Reagan plan unless Palestinians first receive independent nation status under the sole authority of the PLO. Option number 2 would establish a PLO military headquarters in Syria. This would depend in part on acceptance of the third option, which would guarantee an end to PLO terrorist attacks against Israel proper, limiting such action to the West Bank and Gaza. A fourth option, which would follow number 3, would be to grant implicit recognition of Israel.

The PLO has already engaged the means by which it could legitimately grant Israel limited recognition. This lies in PLO endorsement of the plan articulated at Fez, Morocco on September 9, 1982. The Fez Charter has roots in the Saudi "Fahd plan" of 1981 which implied recognition of Israel through its affirmation of the "right of all states of the region to live in peace."<sup>5</sup>

While the roots of the Fez Charter may thus be construed, in the sometimes convoluted logic of diplomacy, to imply recognition of Israel on the part of the charter's signatories, the emphasis of the text is plainly provocative in relation to Israel's interests. For instance, the charter calls for Israel's withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, and demands Israeli dismantlement of its settlements established "on the Arab territories after 1967." Furthermore, the Fez Charter sanctions the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital while calling for the Palestinian people's right to self-determination under the leadership of the PLO, all this to fall under a United Nations Security Council guarantee of peace.<sup>6</sup>

PLO backing of the Fez Charter is magnified by Syria's endorsement. In addition, Syria also rejects the Reagan plan, angry that it does not address Syria's claim to the Golan Heights, and is intent on preventing Jordan from making peace with Israel.

In a broader sense, Syria has four cards to play as it seeks a wider role in the Mideast peace process. Two of these are the already mentioned PLO connection and Syria's claim to the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. The third card flows from Syria's stationing of an estimated 30,000 to 70,000 troops in Lebanon: successful implementation of Reagan's plan depends on the withdrawal of these Syrian forces, in addition to Palestinian and Israeli forces, from Lebanon. While Syria

has vowed that Israeli troops must move out first, the U.S. is attempting to negotiate disengagement of all of these forces simultaneously.

Syria's fourth card comprises the potentially most explosive element in the Mideast equation: an apparent guarantee from the USSR against an Israeli attack on Syria. As Syria's protector and primary supplier of arms, the Soviet Union is conceivably in a position to sabotage Reagan's Mideast plan not only through the threat of military retaliation against Israel but also through political intrigue, manipulating the responses of both Syria and the PLO to peace initiatives from the U.S., Jordan and elsewhere. In addition, the Soviets seek to implement their own plan hinging on unleashing the PLO as a sovereign and independent force in the area; it had been an unbridled PLO that ignited the crisis in Lebanon, leading to Syrian and Israeli military occupation of that land.<sup>7</sup>

The genesis of the Lebanese crisis is multifaceted. One factor is an oligarchical alignment of feudal leaders whose internecine rivalries have led some of them to obtain backing from outside sources. In this manner Lebanon has become an "ideological cockpit" reflecting the political rivalries of the greater Middle East as countries such as Libya, Iraq, Syria and Israel back one or the other of the feudal factions. Another level of conflict stems from Lebanon's proportional representation system meant to preserve the balance between Maronite Christians and Muslims. Archaic in its continued reflection of the era when Christians were in the majority, the system has waxed increasingly more controversial as Muslims have gained the ascendancy in population. The largest sect of Muslims, the Shiites, inhabiting mostly southern Lebanon, have suffered most from the resultant friction. Augmenting this friction and suffering has been the influx of Palestinian refugees.

The Palestinians came from various places, though mostly from Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. Their sojourn in southern Lebanon reaped chaos after PLO raids and bombardments into Israel led to reprisals from the latter. One repercussion of the resultant incendiary atmosphere in southern Lebanon was a vast migration of Shiite Muslims into Beirut, where Muslims, for the most part poor, came to resent the conspicuous consumption of the Lebanese elite, particularly when many of the elite were Christian. The resultant conflict, when mixed with other ethnic-religious-economic rivalries, threw Lebanon into a civil war by 1975. The Israeli invasion of June 1982 was in a large sense merely the latest chapter in this long and bloody civil war as Israel sought finally to extirpate the PLO from southern Lebanon.

After bringing a modicum of stability to the Lebanese scene, Israel maneuvered a representative of the oligarchical family of Gemayel into the presidency. It was at this point that the initially successful U.S. supported policy of evacuation of PLO fighters began. The assassination of the first Gemayel followed by the ascendancy to the presidency of his brother, Amin, led to the present stalemate characterized by an international peace-keeping, but allegedly non-combatant, force

in Beirut and by a Lebanese Army riddled with ethnic and religious factionalism. With several thousand Palestinian militants continuing to occupy the Bekaa Valley along with their Syrian cohorts, Israel remained dubious that the Beirut peace-keeping force would—or could—move to southern Lebanon to corral the militant Palestinians should they decide to rejoin their families there.<sup>8</sup>

It is within this context that the Menachem Begin government has sought a security arrangement, preferably a treaty, with a strong Lebanese government as its price for withdrawing Israel troops from Lebanon. Begin's original demand that part of the treaty negotiations occur in Jerusalem had rendered talk of a treaty futile as this would connote Lebanese recognition of Israel's claim that Jerusalem is the legitimate capital of Israel. In such a turn of events, the radical elements of the Arab world would become incensed, threatening the existence of at least the Gemayel government. It is for this reason that Gemayel has sought to expand the peace-keeping force of American, Italian and French troops in order to hasten the final departure of the militant foreign elements including Israeli troops, from his country. Chances for a peaceful withdrawal have been enhanced through the Israeli decision, announced in mid-December, to drop the demand for talks in Jerusalem.

By the end of 1982, Israel had followed its decision to yield on Jerusalem as a sight for negotiations with a mollification of its demand for a full peace treaty with Lebanon. Consequently, Lebanese-Israeli negotiations ensued, alternating between the Lebanese site of Khalde and the Israeli location of Kiryat Shmona. As the new year began, however, problems remained: Lebanon's demands for immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops, the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty and an official role for the U.S. in the negotiations clashed with Israel's firm call for official normalization of Lebanese-Israeli relations and a security agreement in southern Lebanon before it would consider withdrawing its troops. Furthermore, Israel would recognize only an observer role in the negotiations for the United States.

The key bone of contention between the U.S. and Israel is the mutual suspicion that the other is linking progress on withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon to movement on the broader Reagan Mideast plan. The Reagan administration, for its part, believes that Israel has been deliberately dragging its feet in order to scuttle the U.S. President's initiative. Israel, on the other hand, believes Washington is prodding Israel to leave Lebanon prematurely in order to curry favor with moderate Arab states, especially the pivotal state of Jordan. On December 10, 1982 the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted Israeli sources as stating that "We are to give in to Lebanon so that it can work things out with Syria, and to concede to Jordan so that it can come to an agreement with the PLO . . . and thus Washington wished to turn us into a dispenser of charity to our neighbours."

Israel, then, wants to cut the tie between progress in Lebanon and the Reagan plan in order to concentrate on security arrangements

in Lebanon, while Reagan's prestige is on the line to solve the Lebanon crisis as a prerequisite to implementing his plan. Meanwhile, another limiting factor on the U.S. administration's efforts continues in the Iraq-Iran War where those countries most amenable to Reagan's initiative, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are forced to divert much of their attention and resources to keep Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini at bay.

Upon his rise to power, the first official delegation which Khomeini received was that of Yasser Arafat's PLO. This event occurred in conjunction with the severing of ties between Iran and Israel, an event which left the Israeli Embassy in Tehran conveniently vacant. Representatives of the PLO soon occupied the Embassy.

What has made the PLO issue particularly alarming to governments around the Persian Gulf has been the alliance of displaced Palestinians, spread throughout that region, with Khomeini-led and/or inspired Shiite Muslims. The Shiites, who constitute a militant 10 percent of the world's Muslims, are also spread through the environs of the Persian Gulf. In combination, the Shiites and Palestinians comprise from 40 to over 75 percent of the population in various Persian Gulf States. Such a sizable minority, or in some cases majority, ready to vent their pent up frustrations even against governments which have harbored them could only send shockwaves through those governments. In the face of such explosive potential many of the countries counted on to help implement the Reagan plan are understandably preoccupied with their domestic security.<sup>9</sup>

These countries have further reason for uneasiness over the Iranian situation, which relates to the role of the Soviet Union in Iran. According to Shahram Chubin, "Soviet domination of Iran would alter the entire context of politics in the Gulf, making an accommodation to Soviet power inevitable." Chubin elaborates that the Soviets already have "*de facto* predominance" in Iran. Following a strategy of "controlled tensions," the Soviets are increasing the insecurity of the Iranian government through manipulating domestic radicalization while simultaneously offering that government protection from the consequences of radicalization.<sup>10</sup>

The USSR is employing versions of this two-pronged indirect strategy throughout the Gulf region. In the process, it is further enhancing the influence it already enjoys as the superpower aligned with the Arab consensus condemning the US-Israeli consortium. It is the Arab consensus which couples the Gulf conflict to Reagan's Mid-east plan and the Lebanon crisis.

By the Spring of 1983, over a thousand Soviet personnel had blanketed Syria and Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to operate the more sophisticated Soviet weapons replacing those of lower quality, also from the USSR, which Israel had destroyed. Soviet citizens thus had taken direct control of top-grade Soviet armaments aimed at Israel. Furthermore, rumors surfaced that Soviet and PLO forces were even infiltrating southern Lebanon.

If the rumors are true, the Soviets have maneuvered themselves into a position where they might demand something hitherto denied them: an official part in the Mideast peace process. Accordingly, they can engage their patented policy of controlled tensions, in this case *feeding Israeli apprehension over its outer circle of danger*, while concurrently posing as a stabilizing force in the region. With the Soviets literally on their northern border, the Israelis must perceive that the circle of danger is tightening.

Evidence of heightened Israeli alarm is seen in Begin's demand that his most trusted ally in Lebanon, Major Saad Haddad, be re-integrated into the Lebanese Army and officially charged with the *defense of southern Lebanon*. The Gemayel government remains adamant, however, in its refusal to comply completely with these terms of Israel for withdrawal of its forces from Lebanon. While agreeing to re-integrate Saad Haddad's Army into that of Lebanon, Gemayel has refused to guarantee its deployment to the south. More importantly, he has refused to re-integrate Saad Haddad himself into the official army.

As of early April 1983, the Saad Haddad problem was the most divisive issue facing the Lebanese peace process. Nor did President Reagan's decision to renege on his agreement to forward seventy-five F-16s to Israel mollify noticeably Israeli intransigence. A primary element here was the U.S. Congress which was insisting on an increase in Reagan's overall aid package to Israel. With the count-down for the U.S. elections already in progress, Reagan's chances to rein in the Begin government appeared dim.

In addition to the U.S. Congress, another powerful American interest section was pressuring Reagan to soften his demands on the Begin government. On February 27, 1983, more than 130 retired generals and admirals had published an open letter to the U.S. President in the *New York Times*. Entitled "At Last—A Soviet Defeat," the letter beseeched the President to refrain from allowing "transitory political strains" with Israel to "detract from the fundamental congruence of strategic interests cemented by a common heritage of Western values and democratic ideals."

Following these calls for re-vitalization of U.S.-Israeli ties, the retired military leaders revealed the basis for the urgency of their appeal. They proffered the view that the recent Israeli dismantlement of Russian weapons manned by Syrian forces had rendered questionable the "viability of Soviet weaponry and military doctrine." Consequently, argued the letter's signatories, in order for the Soviets to continue to carry out their world-wide aggressive designs, they had to test the power of their best equipment, now on the Syrian-Israeli frontlines, against the Israelis.

Soviet-Syrian-PLO machinations seem geared toward stalling the Mideast peace process while Reagan, surrounded by top national security advisors not known for their pro-Israeli views, continues to pressure Israel to withdraw from Lebanon and from further en-

croachment into the West Bank. Israel is also stalling in pursuit of its own perceived interests on the Lebanon front and the West Bank. The danger of this situation lies in the progressive hardening of the positions of all these parties.

The resultant pressure could catalyze an Israeli invasion attempt through Lebanon to Damascus, Syria. Should such an invasion succeed, tremendous pressure would then accrue to the Soviet Union, as Syria's protector, for a direct counterthrust against Israel. This, in turn, could bring the Soviets into a military collision with the United States. The possibility of a U.S.-USSR confrontation ranks as the ultimate obstacle to Reagan's Mideast plan, as well as to world peace.

#### Footnotes

1. Drew Middleton, "Soviets Said to Build Arms Caches In Territory of its Mideast Allies," *New York Times*, March 14, 1980, p. A11.
2. For a nineteen-page review of the Camp David Accords see U.S. Department of State, *The Camp David Summit: September, 1978*, Publication 8954, 1978; The text of the March ratification agreement appears in "Egypt and Israel Sign Treaty of Peace," *Department of State Bulletin*, 79, (May, 1979), 1-15.
3. "Israelis fret over sticky issues as troubled quiet grips nation," *The Houston Post*, December 30, 1982, p. 2B.
4. For an analysis of the Reagan Plan by Secretary of State Shultz, see U.S. Department of State, "President Reagan's Middle East Peace Initiative," *Current Policy Document* no. 418, September 10, 1982.
5. Robin Wright, "PLO said to be ready to reject Reagan plan, regroup in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor* November 22, 1982, p. 6; John Yemma, "Reagan peace plan elbows onto center stage in Mideast," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 6, 1982, p. 3.
6. *Economist*, September 18, 1982, p. 37.
7. For perspective on the Syrian-Russian connection see Drew Middleton, "Israelis View Syria, Despite Setbacks, as Most Dangerous Foe," *New York Times*, December 12, 1982, p. 5; also see "Support for PLO Affirmed by Brezhnev," *New York Times*, September 15, 1982, p. A11.
8. U.S. Department of State, "Lebanon: Plan for the PLO Evacuation from West Beirut," *Current Policy Document* no. 415, August 1982. For an optimistic view of Lebanon's future, see Michael Cieply, "Something Under the Mattress," *Forbes* December 5, 1982, pp. 41-42; also see Talcott Seelye, "Lebanon has a long way to go," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 15, 1982, p. 22.
9. John Cooley, "Iran, the Palestinians and the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, 57 (Summer 1979), 1017-1034; Drew Middleton, "Turmoil in Iran is Breaking Up Patterns in Gulf," *New York Times*, December 2, 1979, p. 17; "Envoy Tells Uneasy American in Saudi Arabia They'll Be Safe," *New York Times*, December 5, 1979, p. A20.
10. Shahram Chubin, "Gains for Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *International Security*, 5 (Spring, 1982), 122-152.