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U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER SADAT

Harold M. Waller

For many years a reassessment of American foreign policy toward the Middle East has been a quadrennial ritual closely related to the political calendar. The first year of any administration is seen as particularly crucial in this regard because the persistence of problems in the area demands attention, which seems most appropriate the farther one is from the next election, be it presidential or congressional. The Reagan administration is following the same pattern, but with a major difference. In the past, *the Middle East* was generally interpreted to be a codeword for the Arab-Israeli conflict, although one may recall the late John Foster Dulles and the Baghdad Pact. More recently events have both intensified American concern with Middle East foreign policy and broadened the ambit of the term.

The impact of the Six Day War in 1967 drove home the reality of America's new responsibilities in a region where other Western powers were on the decline. The U.S. assumed a major role in the search for peace, although that quest remained on the back burner until the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Then events began to occur more quickly than the policy makers might have liked, and at a time when the American government was nearly paralyzed because of Watergate. A combination of forces made the Americans appear obsessed with two problems, Arab-Israeli conflict and oil, the relationship of which was very much the subject of debate. Remarkable progress was made on both issues during the Carter administration, even though Carter and his associates frequently appeared to be making things more difficult rather than facilitating solutions of the problems. But then came the destabilization of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, two events which compelled Western policy makers and government leaders to begin to look at the Middle East from a broader perspective.

The Reagan administration in its early pronouncements has been emphatic in the stress on broad strategic planning with regard to the Middle East, with stress on geo-political calculations related to the conflict between the superpowers. For those who have argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict was only a small aspect of politics in the region, this was an encouraging development because it promised a more coherent policy that would not view Arab-Israeli relations in isolation.

The objective of the new policy was very clear: the United States would endeavor to form an alliance, probably informal, of the so-called moderate states in the region. The key elements in such an alliance would be Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, with Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf sheikhdoms, and perhaps Sudan, playing lesser roles. These states would be arrayed with American backing against the Soviet clients and allies, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and South Yemen, and would also deter the anti-Western Iranians. This concept had certain consequences for

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Arab-Israeli relationships, most notably that solution of the conflict would no longer be the highest priority in a formal sense, and that a *de facto* peace with Israel was a realistic expectation for those Arab countries that would be inclined to participate, something which hardly could be taken for granted. Unfortunately the assassination of President Sadat and its implications for American friends in the region may well undercut the basic assumptions of the policy, though that is still an open question.

If President Reagan's foreign policy represents a new departure, it rests on the same fundamental American interests that have existed for years, albeit with new interpretations. Strategic considerations require that the objective of American policy be the limitation of Soviet power and influence in the region. Soviet dominance on NATO's southern flank would undermine fundamental doctrines of the Western alliance. Since the method of Soviet penetration often involves the use of client states and the encouragement of destabilizing actions by radical anti-Western regimes, the U.S. is constantly in search of a strategy at least to neutralize as many regional states as possible. The recent flirtation with Iraq is an excellent example. The attempt to inhibit the development of radical regimes necessarily requires actions to boost governments that are pro-Western. Attempts to placate the Shah's Iran and now Saudi Arabia are part of this effort. The fact that arms sales have significant economic value for the United States gives added impetus to that method of support.

A second broad policy objective of course concerns oil, primarily security of supply. Despite the dramatic decline in Western petroleum demand in recent years, there is little doubt that Soviet control over the oil flow would have disastrous political consequences. It is evident that the Persian Gulf producers cannot defend themselves against an external threat and thus must depend upon U.S. defense capabilities. The U.S. has undertaken this responsibility and President Reagan has already gone so far as to imply the acceptance of responsibility for the maintenance of the present Saudi regime, not just the security and territorial integrity of the country. Logistical challenges facing a defender of the Gulf oil fields without a proper local base prompted the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force, the efficacy of which remains to be demonstrated.

The third objective has to do with local conflicts, of which the Arab-Israeli dispute is only one. Others involve Iran and Iraq, the various communities of Lebanon, and Libya and practically everyone else. The region is such that literally today's friends can be tomorrow's enemies, a situation that is ripe for exploitation. The minimization of conflict within the region is essential if one is trying to forge an alliance. Understandably the United States is most likely to be successful in disputes where it can exert some influence on one or more of the parties, which helps to explain the emphasis on the Israeli-Arab dispute in the U.S. Furthermore, any instability in the region, whether a war, an insurrection, or a civil war, potentially threatens the security of oil deliveries and increases the likelihood of additional Soviet penetration. The Iran-Iraq war is almost a textbook example.

Finally, the U.S. is firmly committed to Israel's security and survival, although there are frequent disagreements over means.

As mentioned, Ronald Reagan shares a number of key objectives with his predecessors, and like them, he is finding it more difficult to pursue those objectives than it was to identify them. The Middle East region is such a complex system, with so many types of interdependency, that any action in pursuit of an American objective is bound to have implications for other interests. The arms package for Saudi Arabia is a case in point. Whether administration officials believe it or not, they claim that the AWACS planes will not pose a threat to Israel's security. The motivation for the sale, other than pecuniary, is said to be the boosting of a key friendly regime. Yet the package is correctly perceived as a danger to Israel, which illustrates the conflict of individually reasonable objectives.

The obvious failure to appreciate the complexity of its foreign policy problems in the region has been a major source of difficulty for the new administration. In fact Reagan has found the Congress to be far more tractable than the sovereign states with whom he is striving to build a partnership. Moreover, the local actors' own perceived sense of national interest often takes precedence over what the U.S. may want or need. Correct and necessary actions in the perspective of the local actor may complicate U.S. attempts to pursue major foreign policy objectives. As a result, valuable resources are squandered in the attempt to resolve fairly minor, but nonetheless prickly, disputes.

Still, when all the dust had settled, a policy was beginning to take shape and had been furthered by the recent visits to Washington of President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin. The assassination of Sadat will necessitate a reexamination of some basic assumptions because the policy's success depended so heavily on Sadat's support and participation. Egypt may well continue on the same course, but real changes are possible. And if there is a major change of personnel, no one can anticipate the policy outcomes.

What America seems to be saying to both Israel and Egypt, and by implication to other countries in the region, is that the issues that divide you are relatively minor compared to the major threat that you face. We will help you meet the danger if you will get on with the business of solving your bilateral problems. Although not a very profound observation, this advice may portend major new developments. Specifically one can foresee an attempt to formalize an American presence in the region, in as many places as possible, and an attempt to become the dominant force in the area. Until now, although several countries have been or are firmly in the Soviet camp, most of the Western-leaning countries (i.e., the more conservative regimes) have not been as firmly in the American camp. Apparently Reagan and associates have decided that such relatively loose ties are too much of a luxury and are pressing for closer relationships and more collaboration and cooperation.

One form of cooperation that has been mentioned frequently is a military relationship between the U.S. and Israel and perhaps Egypt as well. Under the agreement to which Begin and Reagan committed themselves in September, the U.S. would store military equipment and supplies in Israel for use on short notice should trouble flare up in the Gulf or elsewhere in the region. Conceivably the supplies might be needed in central Europe under other circumstances. A recent study has shown that Israel is probably the optimal location if the U.S. wishes to maintain the option of resupplying Europe, although closer ties between the U.S. and Israel might well have a negative impact in the Arab world.

The issue of American ties with Israel is already in the limelight with regard to the dispute over the arms package, which unfortunately has been perceived almost solely in the Arab-Israeli context, rather than the more appropriate U.S.-Saudi context. There is little doubt that under present circumstances, the additional hardware for the Saudis poses a threat to Israel and that those concerned about Israel's security are correct to oppose it. But that is only one of many reasons for opposition, which in sum are sufficient to justify the opposition without reference to Israel's security position. It is fair to ask why the deal was considered necessary and desirable at all. The most cogent answers seem to be that the Saudis want AWACS for reasons of pride and prestige and the U.S. is looking for buyers who think that they need the plane and have the cash to pay for it. As for the military value in terms of Western interests, that is problematic.

It is unfortunate that the administration has gone out on a limb in defense of the proposal, because such talk simply raises the stakes. No matter what the outcome, the three main players have already lost in this game, which was really unnecessary. Reagan and his people have lost credibility by their groveling and begging, the Saudis feel humiliated by the process, and the Israelis will be depicted as the heavies even if they lose. Top policy makers in the U.S. must take the responsibility for bungling this issue so badly.

Israel has generally been the object of predictable tirades because it considers itself unwilling to subordinate its vital interest to U.S. needs, including not only opposition to AWACS but also the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor and the bombing of PLO headquarters. These incidents have complicated the mutual desire of the American and Israeli governments to give some operational meaning to the notion of Israel as a strategic asset that is so commonly cited these days. At a minimum Israel must face the reality that strategic allies do not have *carte blanche*, even locally. The price of real strategic cooperation may well be greater sensitivity to American interests. But that price may be worth paying if the Reagan initiative succeeds in shifting the attention of several Arab states away from Israel and toward the threat posed by the Soviets and their radical friends and clients.

What will the changing emphasis in American foreign policy mean to Israel in more general terms? The main advantage is that possibilities for a more sophisticated approach to the problems of the region are now available. The simplistic notion that Israeli "intransigence" has all kinds of ramifications for the Middle East as a whole should be laid to rest. Instead the autonomy negotiations and similar talks which may follow will be seen in a more limited context and not described in the apocalyptic terms to which we have become accustomed. This does not mean, however, that U.S.-Israeli differences over the future of the administered territories have been eliminated. On the contrary, the implicit American position that eventually Israel must be prepared to trade virtually all of the territories for peace remains the prevailing view in the defense and foreign policy establishments, even if Reagan has not stated a clear policy. If anything, the movement within the bureacracy on that issue has been toward a position that somehow Israel must vacate at least the West Bank and Gaza areas, even if full peace is not achieved. Certainly the autonomy plan envisions diminution of Israeli control, which could create a momentum of its own that would carry the autonomy beyond what Begin originally had in mind.

An advantage for Israel that is implicit in the new approach is that the PLO's status with the Americans is likely to be downgraded because it is so obviously tied to the Soviet Union. The PLO's call for statehood is not likely to receive a sympathetic hearing in an administration that would not want another Soviet surrogate state in the region. Consequently the search for non-PLO Palestinian Arab negotiating partners will have to be intensified. In fact, this may be an opportunity for Israel to compensate for the lost chances of a decade ago, when it neglected opportunities to develop an indigenous non-PLO leadership on the West Bank, although Sadat's passing will make potential partners even more reluctant to step forward.

A final consideration as the new diplomatic season gets under way is the status of Prime Minister Begin in the eyes of American officials. It is no secret that many key people in the foreign policy elite would have been happy to see him defeated electorally in June. It is also common knowledge that many of these people find him exasperating. Certainly the adverse reaction to the two key bombing raids last summer had a deleterious impact on his political stature in the U.S. The openness of criticism of Israel and its American supporters by such prominent legislators as Charles Mathias, Pete McCloskey, and Paul Findlay is a troublesome development. Yet a conscious effort by the administration and the Israeli government to paper over those differences met with considerable success. By all accounts the Reagan-Begin meetings went well and were conducted in a cordial atmosphere. Moreover, opposition to AWACS has remained high and is generally regarded, incorrectly, as a primarily Israeli issue. This would not be possible if anti-Israel sentiment were running strongly in the country.

The administration presumably wants to overlook the untidy events of the summer in order to get on with the larger issues of strategic planning. But the potential for serious problems in the American-Israeli relationship remains, especially

when Israel is too vocal in opposition to U.S. policies or positions. Thinly-veiled warnings about the ramifications of defeat of the AWACS package and complaints about Israeli meddling in the U.S. political process by the President himself are indications that all is not well. (Meanwhile the Saudis meddle to their hearts' content.) In the back of everyone's mind is the memory of the *de facto* embargo on the fighter planes that was in effect during the summer. On balance, the erosion of support for Israel that resulted from the bombings has been checked, at least for the moment, but could resume at any time.

The arrival of the new group in Washington has opened some interesting possibilities for innovative policy making with regard to the Middle East. Nevertheless, one must not be overly sanguine, partly because of the belief in the old myths and concepts that have bedeviled American policy makers in the past has not disappeared.

Sadat's untimely demise is a perfect illustration of the unpredictability of Middle East politics. Until a new government is firmly in place and mutual assessments are made, no major moves by anyone are likely. However, the completion of the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai is scheduled for April 1982. Until now the Camp David process has offered the best possibility for settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. The breakdown of that process would be a serious setback. But not until one fully comprehends what the effect of Sadat's death will be on Middle East politics in general can one attempt to predict the future course of Israeli-Egyptian relations.

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Professor Waller is a Fellow of the Center for Jewish Community Studies and Director of the CJCS Montreal office. He teaches political science at McGill University.