MANDATE FOR LEADERSHIP II

Continuing the Conservative Revolution

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THE MIDDLE EAST

by
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The Reagan Administration came to office with an overall foreign policy mandate to strengthen pro-American forces, counter Soviet expansion, and promote free trade. It soon found that these principles translate most readily into policy in regions where local issues are subordinated to the East-West conflict, such as Grenada and El Salvador. It found them hardest to apply in regions where, while there are also Soviet efforts to destabilize, local issues often predominate—most notably in the Middle East. The Administration failed to develop a clear policy on the Arab-Israeli, Lebanese, and Iraq-Iran conflicts, or on relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Persistent confusion in policy has been the result. Policy toward Libya has been clearer, but has been difficult to implement.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

The U.S. seeks a full and just peace in the Middle East—but will settle for stability, as it often does elsewhere. The Koreas are not at peace, nor are India and Pakistan, but they do enjoy more stable relations than the Arab states and Israel. Without losing sight of the ultimate goal of peace, Washington should adjust its sights to stability. Stabilization of the Middle East represents a realistic goal for U.S. diplomacy.

Lines are clearly drawn in the Middle East: The United States gives strongest support to the area's most democratic and pro-Western country—Israel; the Soviet Union gives strongest support to states and organizations that sponsor terrorism against the West—especially Libya, Syria, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Other states of the region fit between these poles.

Although Israel explicitly aligns with the West against the USSR, some have feared that close U.S.-Israeli ties could come at the expense of weakened U.S. bonds with the less pro-Western but more numerous Arab states. Yet the U.S. can enjoy healthy relations with both the Israelis and moderate Arabs. For example, although the U.S. signed a military cooperation agreement with Israel in November 1983, it paid no significant price for this with the Arabs, especially not in U.S. relations with the Persian Gulf states threatened by Iran. To the

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contrary, relations with Israel and the Arabs improved simultaneously. An anti-Soviet "strategic consensus" among the U.S., Israel, and strongly anti-Soviet Arab nations can be attained, if approached carefully.

Israel offers special advantages as an American ally. As the only consistently democratic state in the Middle East, it enjoys the most stable system of government in the region. Israel's political continuity sets it apart from neighboring states, many of whose regimes can be overthrown by a coup or a bullet. Israel's freedom of expression and its moral principles make it possible for the U.S., through its support for Israel, to combine geopolitical advantage with morality in its foreign policy.

A strong and secure Israel is in the American interest because it reduces the chances of destabilizing wars in the Middle East and constrains the expansion of Soviet influence. A powerful Israel forces Arab leaders to see the futility of armed struggle and induces them to see the benefits of a negotiated settlement. In having to choose between pursuing their conflict with Israel militarily with Moscow's support or diplomatically with Washington's assistance, one Arab leader after another has chosen the latter and foregone the Soviet route for the American one. Anwar Sadat summed up the situation when he noted that "the United States has 99 percent of the cards." Israel's strength also helps defend Western supplies of Persian Gulf oil. Israel potentially provides the finest military infrastructure in the area, or it could, as the local state most capable of projecting power, act on its own.

The Iraq-Iran War

American policy has been consistent through four years of war: condemn both sides' aggression, maintain strict political neutrality, and quietly give military help to whichever side is losing. This stance is proper in a conflict where both belligerents are governed by anti-Western regimes. The U.S. interest continues to be that neither side wins but that the parties negotiate a settlement and eventually return to their old borders.

In the long term, good relations with Iran remain far more important than with Iraq. With a population of 45 million and borders on the Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf, Iran undeniably is a strategic prize. Yet, an Iranian victory over Iraq would have very serious consequences. It probably would lead to a fundamentalist regime in Baghdad, which could threaten Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, an Iraqi victory would be even more

troublesome; Iraqi dominance of the region not only would endanger those same countries, but could lead to the dismemberment of Iran and this could prompt Soviet intervention.

Lebanon

The U.S. military effort in Lebanon from August 1982 to February 1984 was probably the darkest foreign policy experience of the Reagan Administration. Washington's policy in Lebanon was hamstrung by: 1) uncertain domestic political backing for an ambitious military assignment; 2) deployment of troops without a specific mission; 3) inadequate understanding of the factions within Lebanon and the reasons for their conflict, as well as the goals of the Syrian government; and 4) re-orientation of interest away from Lebanon at the moment of greatest opportunity in September 1982. The Reagan Initiative on the West Bank and Gaza was proposed exactly when a breakthrough in Lebanon might have been within reach.

However unfortunate the U.S. experience there, Lebanon remains an important battleground where Washington must continue an active political involvement. Lebanon historically has had a key role in the intellectual, political, and economic life of the Middle East; its population includes some of the region's most pro-Western elements, and its location makes it an important concern of the United States. There is much yet to be won or lost in Lebanon and the U.S. must not abdicate its role there.

U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia

Relations with Riyadh bear a striking resemblance to those with Peking. In both cases, America goes out of its way to prove sincere friendship in a relationship that both sides know to be purely expedient. Unnecessary gestures to retain good will characterize relations with Saudi Arabia. This explains why the U.S. has sold sophisticated arms to Riyadh that the Saudis are incapable of maintaining by themselves, why it bowed to the Saudi request and held back on filling the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and why it has not pressed the Saudis for greater military cooperation.

Although the U.S. often looks to the Saudi government to exert political influence in the region on such matters as the peace process, Syria, and Lebanon, it is in fact a defensive and weak regime. Expecting Saudi help not only is wishful thinking, but it also puts pressures on the Saudi government for actions that sometimes cannot be taken, thereby possibly endangering the regime.

Libya

Libya, led by the obsessively anti-American Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, continues to sponsor terrorism on a worldwide scale. While Libya is a weak military power, its growing strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union greatly concerns its neighbors and the West. American attempts to isolate Libya have been undermined by West Europe's eagerness for trade and by the August 1984 announcement of a "union" between Libya and Morocco, an important American ally. While it remains to be seen how durable this "union" will prove to be, Washington should make it clear to the Moroccans that closer Libyan-Moroccan relations will threaten seriously the harmony of American-Moroccan relations.

THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

Arab-Israeli Conflict

Refrain from imposing solutions: Neither the U.S. nor any combination of outside powers can on their own solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is beyond any outside power's capacity, and incautious optimistic rhetoric can raise dangerous expectations and lead to unhealthy dependence. Instead, the U.S. should respond to local initiatives by facilitating communication, serving as an honest broker, and helping to ease the burden of those Middle East nations that take risks for peace.

Maintain Israeli military superiority: Provide Israel with the arms necessary to assure its military predominance over Syrian forces in particular and any likely combination of Arab forces in general. Make clear to all states of the region that the U.S. does not intend to arm both sides of a conflict. This means providing only strictly defensive weapons to governments in a state of war with Israel (such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia).

U.S. Relations With Israel

Deepen and extend the strategic relationship with Israel as it relates to the Soviet Union and its proxies: The U.S. should consider the prepositioning of material, coordination of battle plans, joint maneuvers, and shared intelligence.

Deemphasize the West Bank: While the disposition of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are of great importance to the Arabs and to Israel—indeed it may have mortal significance for Israel—it is not an issue central to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it is not a vital issue for the U.S. It thus need not overly concern Washington. Arabs and Israelis fought for many years before the West Bank and Gaza came under Israeli rule in 1967; there is no reason to assume that return of these territories to the Arabs would end the conflict. Settling the status of the West Bank and Gaza, often referred to as solving the "Palestinian problem," while important, is in reality but a minor aspect of the overall Arab-Israeli relationship.

Encourage recognition of Israel: The essence of the Arab-Israeli problem lies in the Arab refusal to recognize Israel. On this issue the U.S. can most effectively marshall its influence. Of the Arab League's 21 member states, only the four bordering on Israel—Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt—can make war on Israel. Three of these four have resigned themselves to come to terms with Israel's existence: Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979, Lebanon tried to sign one in 1983, and Jordan has often signaled to Israel its willingness to co-exist. Syria alone continues pursuing policies aimed at destroying Israel by force. Not only does Damascus prepare for war against Israel, but exerts great pressure on other Arab nations—including Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and the PLO—to prevent them from accommodating to Israel's existence.

For the U.S. fruitfully to address the Arab-Israeli conflict, it must deal, through measures described below, with the problem of Syrian intransigence. Otherwise, Syria will try to block progress on a U.S.-backed settlement by intimidating Israel's Arab negotiating partners.

Lebanon

Encourage political reform: The U.S. should press the Lebanese government to enfranchise those elements that have until now been excluded—especially the Shi'ites.

The Iraq-Iran War

Assist the side in danger of losing: The U.S. should stay out of the conflict except for discreet and minimal support to whichever side is in danger of losing. It should also open backdoor channels to the Iranian government, and take advantage of the Iranian threat to other

states of the region by improving U.S. ties with them, particularly the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia

Seek quid pro quos: The U.S. should stipulate that facilities for U.S. land-based air power be made available in Saudi Arabia in return for U.S. military protection. The situation that exists today brings all of the problems of a U.S. presence without the advantages of control; this must be changed.

Keep relationships informal: The U.S. should not define the American role in Saudi Arabia in formal statements. Instead, it must take full advantage of the de facto influence that the U.S. currently enjoys, which follows from on-the-ground military involvement.

Libya

Quarantine Libya: The West cannot afford "business as usual" with Colonel Qadhafi. The U.S. should pressure its allies, particularly France, to help contain Libyan adventurism. Military and economic aid to North African states may make them less vulnerable to Libyan subversion. This would reduce Libya's mischief-making capabilities and underscore to the Libyan people the costs of Qadhafi's erratic aggressions.

INITIATIVES FOR 1985

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

1) Encourage quiet discussions between Jordan and Israel.

Practical matters (water rights, currency regulations, and Jordanian influence on the West Bank) can be dealt with more easily with an American offer of help.

2) Take steps to isolate Syria and reduce its influence on the Arab states.

This might involve helping Syria's Arab opponents coordinate policies, taking preventive anti-terrorist action, aiding the anti-regime forces in Syria, or pressuring the Soviet Union to reduce its military aid to Syria.

Lebanon

3) Assist the central government's army generously.

This makes it possible for the U.S. to maintain links to a key power center in Lebanon—and to prevent the country from possibly falling under Soviet influence.

4) Help with the negotiation of security agreements in South Lebanon to expedite a full Israeli withdrawal.

The Iraq-Iran War

5) Maintain a fleet outside the Persian Gulf to protect shipping, to respond in local emergencies, and to counter potential Soviet intervention.

6) Urge the Western allies to coordinate with Washington their policies toward the belligerents, especially with regard to ending arms sales and oil purchases.

U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia

7) Do not sell weapons to Saudi Arabia that allow it to threaten its neighbors.

In case of emergencies in the Persian Gulf, lease whatever is needed on a provisional basis (as has been the case with the AWACS) to the threatened nation.

8) Do not pressure Saudi Arabia to exert political influence on other states; conversely, do not resort to wholesale appeasement to accommodate its wishes.

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