

UNDER COVER

Taking the Middle East Seriously

"The violence of Lebanon shall cover thee"; Habakkuk (2:17) speaks to us, if we have the wit to realize it. The violence of Lebanon does cover us as well as the perpetrators and abettors. American errors and follies, especially the policies of the Reagan administration, helped to produce the disasters in Lebanon. We have no right to be self-righteous; we are too much implicated in Lebanon's calamity.

Any government of Israel knows that the strategic interests of the United States are at odds with those of Israel. Oil is only a part of the story. In the rivalry between the superpowers, Israel has no bargaining power; it is hopelessly committed to the West, and the United States can take Israel more or less for granted. The more that an American administration emphasizes our conflict with the Soviet Union, the more it is bound to attend to Arab and Islamic regimes where Soviet influence is either already evident or always possible. The Reagan administration's hawkishness, consequently, necessarily made Israel apprehensive, alert for the scent of betrayal. (Mr. Carter's stress on human rights, by contrast, often annoyed the Begin government but made it feel less hopeless.)

From the beginning the Reagan administration has confirmed and strengthened these anxieties, especially in our increasing closeness to Saudi Arabia. Our insensitivity to Israel's fears does not help: Incredibly, the administration communicated the president's peace proposals to various Arab regimes before it informed the Israelis. William Safire has chronicled our apparent tilt toward the Arabs, and Safire's bitter desperation probably mirrors Israel's sense of vulnerability.

To be sure, Mr. Reagan reassures Israel from time to time, but Reagan's firmness is less than Roman. Israel notices that this administration is addicted to tough talk—especially for domestic consumption—and feeble action. Mr. Reagan imposed sanctions against companies that provide technology to the Soviet pipeline, for example, but successive rulings have limited the terms of those sanctions and exempted one company after another. Even Mr. Reagan's friendship emphasizes that his words cannot be trusted: At a time when the State Department was protesting Israel's occupation of West Beirut, Mr. Reagan was telling a New Jersey audience that Israel had acted only because its troops had come under fire, a claim Mr. Sharon himself had not made.

Against American unreliability, Israel can set only two assets: its armed forces and American affinity for Israel. The Labor party historically has cultivated the second, and Mr. Peres continues in that tradition. Begin and his allies have never trusted that strategy. They were bound to feel, moreover, that the Reagan administration proves how foolish it is to put trust in sympathy and opinion. Mr. Reagan shamelessly ap-

pealed to American supporters of Israel in 1980 and veered away as soon as he was in office. To Begin, that disillusionment was another proof—one among so many—that Israel can rely only on itself, and that all that really matters is the combination of ruthlessness and force which can "create facts."

The administration has compounded its errors with an almost unbelievable failure to understand Middle Eastern politics. We dispatched the Marines to Beirut the first time around apparently under the hallucinatory belief that a peaceful Lebanon needed only a face-saving formula for extracting the PLO. American policy-makers passed over the bitterness inevitably created by years of a civil war in which both sides have become accustomed to appeals to foreigners, each convicting itself of treason in the other's eyes. The massacre in West Beirut, moreover, is only one incident in the pattern of terrorism. From Begin at Deir Yasin to Arafat and the PLO, the lesson is that terrorism succeeds, and both Lebanese factions have conned that teaching.

Congress' reluctance to commit American forces is no excuse for our premature withdrawal. The president is willing enough to confront Congress on the budget. Are we to conclude that he values frugality more than Lebanese lives? It is ironic that an administration which is urging American voters to "stay the course" should have been so eager to leave Beirut to its fate.

Mr. Reagan and his advisors, like so many American leaders, seem to attribute to others our own secular pragmatism. Mr. Reagan responded to the Israeli Government's indignant rejection of his peace plan by suggesting that Begin was trying to establish a negotiating position. Mr. Carter understood what *Eretz Israel* means to Begin. Because he took Begin's religion seriously, Carter was able to achieve the minor miracle of Camp David. Mr. Reagan, by contrast, makes matters worse when he treats Mr. Begin's words and convictions as no more serious than his own.

Americans used to speak of the Lebanese as pragmatic folks, more concerned with profits than with prophets. In fact, the complex balances of traditional Lebanese politics suggest that nothing is possible until one's state and one's community are secure. Israel obviously shares that conviction, even when Israelis speak in softer tones than Mr. Begin's. Until we can make our assurances and our understanding credible enough to give real security to Israel and its neighbors we will continue to be implicated in the terrible consequences.

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