

Letter from Washington



"Why is he coming here?" "Doesn't he realise he's being used by the Americans?" "At most he'll get more promises, a few arms, and meaningless gestures à la Reagan Plan." "Fahd's coming here is a serious blunder. It's not dignified, I don't know how his advisers justify it." This is what the more sceptical Middle East journalists and specialists are privately saying in Washington today.

King Fahd's impending visit to Washington, his first since becoming king of Saudi Arabia and the first in eight years for a Saudi monarch, is highly controversial, both back home in Riyadh and in the US capital where pro-Arab constituencies wonder how long Arab leaders will kowtow to an administration which has turned even-handedness, which it never really was, into an unabashed pro-Israeli posture. The US green light for the rape of Lebanon, the pro-Phalange intervention by US forces, the aborted 17 May Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement and the security pact, and now a free trade zone, between the US and Israel are what the Arabs have received from Ronald Reagan's Washington.

The great irony is that even in the face of repeated humiliations most of the Arab regimes favoured Reagan's re-election. They did so with a combination of naïveté and false hopes. Naïveté in thinking that a second-term president would be freer to act in the Middle East and that anyway Walter Mondale would be even worse; naïveté in thinking that the Israeli operatives and pro-Israeli conduits who are intimately involved in Reagan's Washington – and there are more than ever scattered throughout this administration – would allow the president to change the plotted course. And false hope in thinking that this Wizard of Oz president has any serious comprehension of why his embassies are being attacked, why there is growing alienation from the US among the Arab masses as well as the intellectuals, and why his stance toward Israel has totally bankrupted the embryonic peace process begun at Camp David in 1978.

The last time the Arab world faced a US administration possessing anywhere near this degree of blindness about the imperative for movement towards a just peace was back in 1971. It was Anwar Sadat who understood that only the shock therapy of military action could possibly force the US to change course and take Arab concerns seriously. Sadat then conducted himself brilliantly in forcing Washington to confront his own agenda, only to trip in a fatal fall when Jimmy Carter whispered in his ear that if only Egypt would sign the separate peace all would work out in Jimmy's second term. Also standing up to be counted was King Feisal of Saudi Arabia who after President Nixon upped aid to Israel to \$2.2 billion ordered an oil embargo against the US.

Now in 1985, when there has never been such a pro-Israeli and anti-Arab president if Reagan is judged by what he does rather than what he says, the current king of Saudi Arabia is coming to Washington. The fear is that his visit may unwittingly buttress the US course. No doubt there will be the pro forma statements about Palestinians, resolution 242, peace and stability; no doubt the king will remain dignified no matter how much he is slighted; no doubt Reagan will throw out a few bones about reviving his Reagan Plan in the hope that he can slip through the next few years by feeding the Arabs scraps of illusory hope. But a visit of this kind at this time cannot produce anything but drama. Words without realpolitik actions will only result in more words from this administration. If the Saudis have not learned this much in the past few years they are more than naïve.

And now the Arab Hajj season has begun, to quote another of the sceptical Arab journalists in Washington. The city is about to become the political Mecca for Arab leaders making their pilgrimage to the seat of the empire to be dined (but not wined), pampered, and ceremoniously given just about everything except justice, hope, and a future they can live with.

The Saudis are doing all they can to emphasise the regional issues that will be discussed by Fahd and Reagan – stability in the Gulf, containment of Iran, something for the Palestinians. But the Americans and the pro-Israeli manipulators of opinion are pulling in the opposite direction, doing all they can to put roadblocks in Fahd's way, to make him focus on strictly bilateral issues, even to force him to beg for a few weapons – which in the case of Saudi Arabia are actually paid for by someone other than the American taxpayer. It appears Reagan's handlers are manipulating things so that if some arms sales do go forward sometime this year the Saudis will be relieved. It is the old game of "we want to help you, but Congress won't approve". And behind the scenes it is the Israelis who are doing the most to orchestrate events, to get more aid for themselves from a captive Washington.

"Saudi king may cancel trip if US refuses arms sales", headlines The Washington Times on 29 January. "The king will look like a fool if he comes . . . they'll pat him on the head, say a few nice things about his anti-communism and send him off empty-handed", said one former diplomat quoted by the paper. But most Washington analysts think the trip is on, for good or bad, come what may, and that once again the Americans will humble the Arabs while festing them.

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