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AROUND WASHINGTON

JOINT ECONOMIC COMMISSIONS. "This joint Commission is the mortar which binds our two governments together"—Treasury Secretary Blumenthal's words as he opened the third annual meeting of the "United States-Saudi Arabian Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation." Created in 1974 and jointly administered by our Treasury Department and the Saudi Ministry of Finance and National Economy, the Commission is becoming an important mechanism for transferring our technology and expertise for their petrodollars. There are, as well, rather subtle political linkages involved.

In addition to Treasury, no fewer than seven other government departments are involved in projects amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars—such things as desalinization, electrification, vocational training, highway planning. Dr. Mansour al-Turki coordinates the commission in his role as deputy minister of finance and national economy. In an interview he estimated that as much as \$5 billion in projects may have already resulted indirectly from the commission's work.

This U.S.-Saudi affair is only one of seven Joint Economic Commissions established during 1974 and 1975. An eighth was contemplated by Kissinger and Nixon with Vietnam (Nixon promised it as a means of transferring aid) but it never materialized. Those that do exist are with Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Iran, Tunisia, and India—but only the Saudi endeavor has taken off as yet.

Stephen D. Hayes, an officer in the Treasury office staffing the Saudi commission, notes that the concept of commissions is "an innovative instrument of U.S. foreign policy." Writing in the Winter, 1977, issue of the *Middle East Journal*, Hayes asked the relevant question: "Twenty or 30 years from now will history look back and see the Joint Commissions as harbingers of a new and important approach in U.S. foreign policy or will it only vaguely remember them as some plans which were created in the mid-1970s and then faded away?" Too early to tell. But too important to overlook.

WHITE HOUSE FOOLERY. Cousin Hugh Carter keeps pennypinching away. Many television sets have been lifted from White House offices, and rumor has it that he has cut back on "extraneous" magazines, newspapers, etc. For instance, members of the National Security Council have been deprived of such items as *The Christian Science Monitor* and other journals whose foreign affairs and domestic opinion coverage are no luxury.

Cousin Carter has also made it known that, in the interest of efficiency, the president himself will handle the scheduling for the White House tennis court. Actually, appointments secretary Tim Kraft has taken charge of this vital matter, but it is apparent that everything in the Carter White House goes to the top...though it probably won't work that way for long. Remember when President Carter ordered every Cabinet officer to read and approve personally all directives issued by his or her department?

AND NOW THE ARAB LOBBY. "The Israeli lobby is the most powerful and persuasive foreign

influence that exists in American politics," Senator James Abourezk (D.-S.D.) stated before the recent annual fund-raising dinner of Colorado Democrats. Although Abourezk was originally invited to speak on topics unrelated to the Middle East, tremendous pressure was put on the organizers to cancel his appearance because of his pro-Arab leanings. Abourezk claims he can prove the Jewish lobby in Washington was behind the blackball effort. Still, Abourezk was able to exploit the opportunity and received a standing ovation from the large dinner crowd.

The powerful Jewish-Israeli lobby, now headed by the controversial (but, many insist, effective) Morris Amitay, may have some competition. The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) held its fifth annual convention at Washington's Shoreham-Americana and emerged more determined than ever to balance American policies in the Middle East.

NAAA's newly elected president, Joseph Baroody, told me: "I hope we are becoming known as *the* Arab lobby....The Arab-American lobby, that is." The organization, still small and uncertain of itself, may soon register as a lobbying group and begin more extensive activities on Capitol Hill—bastion of pro-Israeli sentiments.

One scholar who has studied the influence-battle on the Hill concludes: "If the NAAA succeeds in drawing together the different Arab groupings and molding them into a unified force, this may well present a future threat to the 'influence gap' that AIPAC and the Jewish-American community have created over the years." AIPAC, of course, is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee run by Amitay.

STATE DEPARTMENT PR. Foggy Bottom still has no effective "American desk"—but it keeps on trying. Leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were invited in mid-May to a "National Foreign Policy Conference" run by the Bureau of Public Affairs, the Department's PR arm.

Attempts to restructure the Department's way of dealing with those on the "outside" in the aftermath of the Vietnam experience have largely failed. Former deputy assistant secretary for public affairs, Charles Bray, made a mighty try. But he's now gone to USIA. Neither conceptually nor pragmatically has an effective way been found to bring outside views into the Department in a systematic way.

The Foreign Policy Conference brought together many of the old, tired faces. The NGOs too desperately need a face lift. Maybe their sorry state is one reason so little has been accomplished.

MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY. Weeks before the Israeli election, high administration officials began putting flesh on the skeletal Carter plan for an Arab-Israeli settlement. Criticism that these efforts further weakened the Labor party's bid in the election seems partly valid. Why these efforts could not

have been delayed a bit remains an unanswered question.

But the big question now is whether Carter will continue what he has begun, Likud and Begin notwithstanding. This is the way one official outlined the situation to a Washington audience in early May:

As a result of our discussions to date we believe, sincerely, that the Arabs are ready to accept Israel in the Middle East, that our Arab friends are not just seeking tactical advantage for the next round of hostilities. There's certainly no reason to believe that the Arabs would be any readier 5, 10 or 15 years from now. On the contrary, a good case can be made that the trend will be away from moderation, away from compromise, if we don't make some progress in the near future.

We understand the Israeli concern. We believe that balanced peace including some sort of beginning of relations amongst the parties can make it safe enough for all of them to take the risks that moving toward peace entail for all of them, as they see it. The bottom line is it's by far the safest option given the other alternatives that exist.

How do we see our ultimate role? As a mediator: draw the sides together, delineate the issues, suggest common ground, and ultimately suggest ways to bridge the gaps if that would be useful and appropriate and will work. Obviously, as the process proceeds and negotiations are enjoined, we will have views to offer on what we consider to be appropriate compromises on the issues.

The "suggestions" Carter and Vance have spoken of will in all likelihood become a plan. And if so, a rather brutal political confrontation could disrupt the special U.S.-Israeli relationship, with unforeseen consequences for the American Jewish community, which will find itself right in the middle.

CITIZEN EDUCATION: "FOCUS ON THE PUBLIC ISSUES NETWORK." Now showing on cable television is a public issues series called "Focus." Three organizations—The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Brookings Institution, and Resources for the Future—have linked up to create a Public Issues Network with monthly programs and a weekly version edited for radio. Each hour-long program probes an issue of public concern, using experts for a discussion and to provide background material when appropriate.

Among the Focus subjects so far have been China, South Africa, the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire, U.S.-Soviet relations, attitudes toward foreign policy, national health insurance, energy, the environment, and national priorities.

David Biltchik of the Carnegie Endowment is in charge. Apparently he is laying a solid foundation for using to good advantage the still expanding cable outlets.

—MAB