

Middle East International

No 260

11 October 1985

Fall-out from Tunis

Donald Neff Peretz Kidron Lamis Andoni Jules Verne Simon Ingram

Point of view:
Mark A. Bruzonsky



Point of view

The cost of picking up Israel's tab

by Mark A. Bruzonsky

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 at a huge cost in lives and to little purpose the US desperately tried to appear non involved and certainly non-approving. Yet American marines were soon to find themselves attempting to "keep the peace" only to uncover themselves as Israel's ally in propping up the Christian Phalange government, and Secretary of State George Shultz glowingly portrayed his 17 May [1983] Lebanese-Israeli peace treaty as a triumphant accomplishment. The end result was that hundreds of Americans were killed; the US was forced to withdraw in humiliation; Lebanon was left to burn and now is in the process of becoming just another Arab (and possibly Islamic) state, and one that falls under increasing Syrian dominance.

Before Israel's invasion Americans were still welcome in Lebanon; now most are gone, the few who remain are fearful. Before Israel's invasion there had been for nearly a year a well-kept ceasefire on Israel's northern border; now there is heightened tension and bomb shelters in northern Israel are being refurbished. And yet, since the summer of 1982, Israel has been rewarded by the Reagan administration with the first ever strategic cooperation agreement, the first ever free trade zone, a Voice of America transmitter, participation in "Star Wars" and

submarine construction, special financing for a new Israeli fighter plane, and applauded for the fact that after three years most Israeli troops have left Lebanon and a "scorched earth policy" has been threatened if anybody dares disturb Israel's tranquility again. Most recently, the US acted initially as cheerleader after Israel bombed the PLO headquarters near Tunis, setting an ominous precedent.

For some, there remains talk of a possible peace breakthrough - prospects of the US nudging Israel into some kind of negotiations, this time including some kosherised Palestinians. All this, however, is likely to remain more of a mirage than reality. The US, and this administration in particular, has little credibility left on matters relating to the Middle East. America's dropping of political crumbs to the Arabs can no longer obscure the totally one-sided stance the Reagan administration has nurtured with Israel. Years of duplicity and deceit are not overcome by painted-on smiles and cheap rhetorical flourishes.

Within this overall historical context, it should come as no surprise if further conflict periodically erupts between Israel, Lebanon, and the neighbouring Arab states. Signs are becoming clearer that Jordan is targeted next. Yet now America has its feet firmly planted in the Israeli mud,

endangering itself as Israel's financier, arms merchant and guardian when Israel in fact needs a wise counselor cautioning restraint and reconsideration.

At a time of continuing budget slashing at home, the Reagan administration continually rewards Israel for its record of militarism, its refusal to honour even the Palestinian autonomy provisions of the Camp David agreement, and the continuing annexation – both *de jure* and *de facto* – of Arab territories in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and eastern Jerusalem. Not only is Israel receiving \$3 billion in military assistance and economic aid both this year and next – all now in grants rather than loans as before – but the US is extending to Israel an additional, unprecedented two-year emergency aid package totalling another \$1.5 billion – the second half to be delivered early next year. More than a third of all American foreign assistance now goes to this small nation with less than 4 million people – more than \$1,000 per capita per year – and all as a gift, no strings attached.

How can American policy be so near-sighted, one-sided and absurdly biased? How can Israel get so much from the US while acting so badly? How can the US continually risk its own interests by catering to those of some Israelis? The answers are mostly to be found in the peculiarities of American politics. Having created a lobby of unprecedented strength, a lobby that can twist the fate of any congressman or senator who opposes its will, Israel is in the driver's seat here, even while bitterly divided at home. Saudi Arabia's turn toward the UK for nearly \$4 billion worth of fighter planes without even an attempt to fight it out on Capital Hill is a recent example.

Those who doubt this fearsome power or its persistent abuse should consult *They Dare to Speak Out: people and institutions confront Israel's lobby* by former Illinois Congressman Paul Findley. The result of two years of painstaking research, it documents the influence and tactics of the now far-flung Israeli lobby, spearheaded in Washington by the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), in warping American politics in pursuit of Israeli interests. Findley, Percy, Fulbright, McCloskey, Stevenson – these are among those few politicians who at times attempted to stand up to this lobby in the name of American interests, peace, justice, and basic fairness toward the Palestinians. They all failed to be re-elected, largely as a result of the ever larger amounts of Jewish funds and Jewish activism brought into play to oppose them. The much longer list of politicians beholden to this lobby needs little recitation. Gary Hart's prostitution in front of American Jewish groups during the last presidential campaign prompted many American Jews to question whether they were too publicly pushy in forcing candidates to promise too much to Israel!

Last May, another example of the Israeli lobby's hold on Congress came through the mails. Senator Bob Packwood, chairman of the important Senate finance committee, sent out Israeli shekels soliciting American

dollars. "Like Israel", Packwood wrote, "I'm in a tough fight" and need "committed friends to come to my aid." Why the shekel? "First, it serves as a constant reminder that the security of our nation depends on the survival and future of our democratic ally in the Middle East. Second, because each time I see it, I am reminded that Israel today faces an economic crisis of catastrophic proportions . . ."

The time has come to ask the basic question, however unpalatable the answer. What are the long-term costs when one special interest group has such a stranglehold on issues crucial to American foreign policy considerations? American pluralism is based on the free exchange and debate of ideas and beliefs. That many American Jews wish to put forward their views on matters of special concern is admirable, though their style and tactics are coming under increasing scrutiny. That the Israeli lobby works tirelessly to deprive others of this same right is the inherent contradiction, plainly evident but largely unspoken.

Whereas decisions about America's relationship with Israel are now largely matters of domestic American politics, the results greatly affect American foreign relations. The price America is paying for its excessive one-sidedness in the Middle East is growing alienation throughout the region, a sharp decline in American credibility, and the nurturing of anti-American sentiments which are sure to grow as prospects for the long-sought Arab-Israeli peace dim further and awareness of America's complicity with Israel grows.

The Israeli lobby no longer makes a secret of its ambitions to forge an American-Israeli marriage at whatever cost. In April, at the annual AIPAC policy conference, the executive director, Tom Dine, boldly stated the goal: "Our objective is nothing short of a full-fledged political, economic and military alliance between the US and Israel." That the US during the years of the Reagan presidency has already allowed itself to be pulled further down the road toward this goal casts a pall over the future of American relations with the Arab world – if not with today's fearful Arab rulers, then with the leaders destined to arise out of today's cauldron of contradictions, humiliations and defeats.

America is now taking on the historic burden of being seen not as a peace-maker between Arabs and Jews, but as promoter of the misguided Israeli complex of regional dominance and repression; not as cautious supporter of the right of the Jews to self-determination, but as an imperial power allowing Israel free reign as a military surrogate and regional strongman, and in the process denying the Palestinian people their own self-determination.

This is a burden former American presidents have studiously avoided. It may cost future presidents and all of us very dearly.

Mark A. Bruzonsky, a former Washington associate of the World Jewish Congress, writes on Middle East affairs and US foreign policy from Washington. He is co-editor of Security in the Middle East to be published shortly by Westview Press.

On the record

No, I do not believe Saudi Arabia will ever attack Israel, ever, ever, ever! Saudi Arabia is really quite a bastion for stability in the Middle East . . . I do not believe either Saudi Arabia or Jordan will attack Israel.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher
The Jewish Chronicle 4 October

Only the Soviet Union has the weight to bring Syria quickly to the negotiating table and influence the Syrian negotiating position. Until the United States recognises and acts on this reality, there will be neither peace in the Middle East nor an end to international terror.

Former British Foreign Secretary
David Owen *The Observer* 6 October