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From



Washington

Aid to Israel: a dangerous debate

NOT long ago Senator Robert Dole wanted to be President. He certainly was the most substantial challenger to George Bush during the 1988 primary season. And when he took on Bush, Dole wasn't known for his gentleness — he slugged away hoping in the early primaries to either knock Bush out or push him off balance so that Dole could step in and fill the void.

Indeed, at the time commentators were questioning whether after the election Bush and Dole would be able to mend their fences and work together again; or whether a Bush White House and a Dole Senate would be separate and competing fiefdoms.

Dole's unrelenting assault on Bush may have ruled him out of Vice-Presidential consideration. But after elections, life in Washington rather easily overcomes such tussles when there are sound political reasons for co-operation. And now Bob Dole is point man for the Bush administration in putting a bit of pressure on America's closest ally in the Mid-east and the one foreign country that plays a special role in internal American politics — Israel of course.

As I commented, last month, however, no one should see this as a brutal or even antagonistic fight between Washington and the Israelis. The special relationship is not being debated; nor even the strategic alliance put in place during the Reagan years. The marriage has its bumps and spats; but the parties are truly connected.

Rather there is a basic competition for political advantage under way between Israel and the US and Dole has coupled this with the understandable confusion how the money-short American empire can meet the growing list of foreign expectations on its larges.

In general there are people in Washington who would like to be a bit more free to manoeuvre without always having to knuckle under to the Israeli/Jewish lobby. And many of the same people also want to find a way to make the Israelis political heavy-handedness a bit more presentable. And what Bob Dole has suggested on behalf of the Bush administration is thought to be one possible major step in this direction.

More immediately, the debate Dole has unleashed is a major element in the Bush administra-

tion's strategy to get the Israelis to be more flexible in helping Washington, along with Egypt, breathe some life into a rather chicanerous and moribund "peace process" — an illusive and often duplicitous "peace process" which is more a fig leaf for Washington's policy inadequacies than a path likely to lead to Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.

In specific terms Dole has put at stake only a few hundred million dollars, 5 percent of the more than \$3 billion allocated yearly to Israel (actually \$3.7 billion last year as Congress sweetened things a bit for the Israelis). A few hundred million more would come from Egypt's allowance (something worrying to the Egyptians but nevertheless understandable) and that of a few other countries who have received sizeable American assistance.

But in symbolic terms the situation is far more significant, far more pregnant with potentially important political ramifications, and far more directed mainly at Israel.

For the infamous Jewish lobby has been put in a bit of a corner. If it doesn't fight it would appear out of character and encourage more whittling away if for no other reason than to get the occupied Jerusalem to be more compliant with Washington's desires.

But if it does fight it can't risk not winning, for failure would be perceived as weakness. And since both the Jewish lobby and the Israelis have earned for themselves considerable enemies over the years they can't afford to let there be the taste of blood in the water.

In short the Israelis rule Washington through fear even more than money. Few want to talk about this reality in public; but its part of the undertow gossip here. And the fear factor the Israelis and their American Jewish friends have worked so hard to instil would be significantly threatened if Dole isn't made to pay a price for coming out of the closet and if Bush himself weren't made to feel the heat the lobby is famous for generating in these situations.

So fight it will be. And because of the dynamics of how Washington works the dangers are hardly just for Israel and her many supporters.

A clear-cut defeat of the Dole approach actually carries significant dangers for Israel's opponents, for those who have been arguing that only by cutting Israel down to size in Washington is it possible to conceive of an Israeli-Palestinian compromise on the ground in the occupied Holy Land.

For if Israel and its American Jewish lobby win the day and keep the huge amounts of arms and money flowing, the Israeli government will rightly interpret this as further vindication of their policies. For them it will be still a further assurance that the American connection is secure enough to push forward with their intransigent and expansionist policies as American officials are incapable of blocking them.

A Jewish lobby victory then — especially as it would come on top of the still increasing level of funding to Israel in recent years — would symbolise that the Bush administration and the Republican leadership of Congress lack the ability to outmanoeuvre Israel even at home, on their own turf, and even at a time when at least some

elements of public opinion have shifted significantly because of the Intifada.

Truth be told, there really isn't much hope anyway of a significant shift in American policy in the Mid-east without a major war or an earthshaking political crisis, either of which could provoke Washington from its lethargic and cowardly state of affairs. Failure to follow through on Bob Dole's suggestion that the time has come to think of others as well as Israel could well doom this administration to having to do things Israel's way for the indefinite future.

And, of-course, that is the heart of the problem. While many savvy politicians in Washington would like to see some kind of a serious American response to the Palestinian and Arab quest for a peace agreement; few of these persons are willing to lead the fight, and fewer still are determined enough to stick out their necks. If Dole is cut up in the process, or simply if his proposal is sidetracked, Israel's clout will once again be demonstrated.

Hence the conservative *Washington Times* reported a few days ago that "Senate Republicans, fearing the power of the pro-Israel lobby, have sought cover rather than support Senate minority leader Robert Dole's proposed revamping of US foreign aid, including a five percent cut in aid to the Jewish state."

Sadly, the Palestinian Intifada has become an old news in Washington. The Arab side is being placed in a position of either having to admit failure (with a hint at acknowledging incompetent leadership at the highest levels of the PLO) or contemplating accepting terms that were never before thinkable.

In such situations there is sometimes a natural political tendency to begin to think that the formerly unthinkable is no longer so outrageous if only the packaging could be changed and the public presentation altered. The goal subtly shifts to salvaging the political reputation and careers of certain leaders rather than finding a serious strategy for attaining specific goals.

In this sense there's both the public and the private level of discussion going on these days among experts who closely follow Mid-east politics.

For instance, here in Washington, when journalists aren't present and one can speak in confidence without fear of being quoted, there's considerable awareness that Dole's proposal is both important and needed; even if not politically possible.

As Dole himself has put it: "Well, I'm ahead in the cloak room, but on the Senate floor I'm a few votes short." In the Washington vernacular this means that behind-the-scenes where politicians are free to whisper honestly among themselves Dole is admired for his courage and appreciated for his leadership. The Senate cloak room is the private chamber where Senators gather among themselves out of the public eye. But once one comes out onto the Senate floor into the glare of publicity and the morass of lobbying pressures a lot of senators change their tunes.

The same, sadly, has become true regarding support for the PLO. Nearly all the supporters of

Palestinian nationalism publicly line up behind Yasser Arafat as the leader. But behind-the-scenes his policy is drawing criticism. Hence, among Palestinians, while the PLO as an umbrella organisation has great support, the chairman himself is in serious trouble as are his delegated representatives in the occupied homeland including Faisal Husseini, Hanna Seniora, Radwan Abu Ayash, and Sari Nusseibah.

Most recently, the chairman shot himself in the foot even with many of his own supporters in Washington. His most recent appearance on American television was widely seen as a public relations disaster which his enemies couldn't have orchestrated better. Indeed, numerous Palestinians in the US have in recent weeks sent the chairman scathing messages insisting that he change his ways, replace key persons he has sent to the US, prepare himself much better for any further American media appearances.

Political battles, once begun, are dangerous confrontations. Politics at its most brutal levels is, in a very real sense, war through other means.

What Bob Dole has begun, with the quiet support of George Bush himself, will be very tricky and very difficult to achieve in a town where the Israeli lobby seems to have more power with the Congress than the President himself, at least on matters Middle Eastern.

In the end some kind of a compromise is likely, for both the Republican administration and the Israel/Jewish lobby are too powerful to allow for either to be knocked out.

But the parties will also be competing to exhaust their opponents, as well as to defeat them. The Israelis might even be willing to engage in the "peace process" a bit more by Washington's rules so long as they don't have to give on the key issues — no acceptance of Palestinian nationalism as a symmetrical cause to Zionism, no acceptance of the PLO since this is the embodying organisation of Palestinian nationalism, and no Palestinian State on "Israel's side" of the Jordan River.

Everyone involved in this political war should be preparing for a conflict that is likely to extend far into the distant future; and a conflict which will probably have different leaders at the helm on all sides before it is resolved one way or another.

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Dole

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