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U.S. Pursues Israeli Connection Anew as Key to Mideast Peace

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No region has confronted President Reagan with more frustrations than the Middle East, where U.S. policy over the past three years has lurched from initial wheel-spinning through a major peace initiative that went awry to deepening involvement in a Lebanese civil war where the toll of U.S. Marine deaths has raised fears about a "new Vietnam."

Now the administration is preparing to try again with a new policy approach centered on the U.S.-Israeli relationship, hoping that it will lead to breakthroughs in three inter-related, top-priority areas: ending bloodshed in Lebanon, resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and safeguarding the vital oil supplies of the Persian Gulf.

Its broad outlines, as described by a number of senior administration officials, envision recasting the relationship in ways that could make Israel an unofficial partner of the United States by greatly increasing American aid and strategic cooperation with the Jewish state. This cooperation would not be codified by

formal treaties, but it would make clear to adversaries like Syria, and its Soviet backers, that the two countries have a confluence of interests and are prepared to collaborate in safeguarding them.

The objective, according to the officials, is to give Israel a long-term sense of security about the permanence of U.S. support and to immunize the relationship from stresses that have characterized it in the recent past.

The new policy is largely the work of Secretary of State George P. Shultz, and it represents what seems outwardly like an about-face for

Shultz, whose earlier service as president of Bechtel, an international construction firm with close ties to Saudi Arabia, originally led some to expect him to turn U.S. policy onto a pro-Arab course.

When Reagan was campaigning for president in 1980, he made a speech to the B'nai B'rith whose strongly pro-Israeli overtones so upset Shultz that he is known to have told close friends that he did not see how he could serve in an ad-

ministration whose Mideast policy he disagreed with so strongly.

More ironic, according to senior administration sources, in June, 1982, at the height of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Shultz, who was leaving on a trip abroad, telephoned William P. Clark, then Reagan's White House foreign policy adviser, to complain that the administration was not doing enough to restrain Israel. Because of this telephone call, Clark was aware of Shultz's views and his whereabouts when Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., suddenly resigned, partly due to disagreement over U.S. posture toward the Israeli invasion.

Since taking office, Shultz, in the view even of the Israelis, has followed a scrupulously evenhanded approach in dealing with both sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Administration sources say his present advocacy of closer ties with Israel results from frustration over U.S. failure to win Syria's cooperation in Lebanon and from his growing conviction that a restructured relationship with Israel eventually might make that nation more amenable to resolving the Palestinian problem, which Shultz regards as the root cause of Mideast tensions.

This latest approach is in an early stage, and its final shape will depend heavily on the outcome of continuing disagreements between Reagan's most senior advisers and of visits here by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir next week and Lebanese President Amin Gemayel a few days later.

But the United States hopes that Israel will reciprocate by showing greater flexibility toward American dealings with the Arab world, first in achieving a Lebanon solution that will permit withdrawal of the Ma-

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rines and then on broader issues like defending the Gulf, where U.S. officials are increasingly concerned that escalation of the Iran-Iraq war could spill over and affect oil production and shipping.

Specifically, that would mean Israeli concessions in Lebanon to help Gemayel consolidate his authority over that divided country and make Syria more amenable to cooperating in the withdrawal of foreign forces. In the longer run, it would require a lessening of Israeli hostility toward U.S. arms supply arrangements with moderate Arab states like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which are seen by Washington as bulwarks against the spread of radical influence in the Gulf.

Even the strongest advocates of this new approach acknowledge that, given the missionary work required to overcome the suspicions of Israel and the Arabs, it probably can be implemented only in gradual stages. Still, they contend, it offers the best hope of getting away from what one calls "the reactive, event-oriented kind of policy swings that frequently made us look like we're riding a roller coaster."

These erratic ups and downs have been most evident in the 14 months since Sept. 1, 1982, when Reagan made what was perhaps his most innovative foreign policy move. He announced an ambitious plan for ending three decades of hostility between Israel and the Arab world by giving the Palestinian-inhabited West Bank and Gaza Strip independence "in association with Jordan."

But the surge of optimism quickly evaporated when the administration failed to win Arab or Israeli backing and was forced instead to give priority attention to the even more urgent situation in Lebanon, where a single bomb attack on Oct. 23 took the lives of 239 American troops.

In the process, Reagan, who had hoped to play the role of peacemaker for the entire Middle East, has had to justify continued U.S. involvement in Lebanon to a suspicious Congress and a worried public.

For a president generally believed to be on the verge of launching a reelection bid, it is not a comfortable situation. Lebanon, with its potential for holding the Marines hostage to prolonged violence that will cost more American lives, looms as a major issue in next year's campaign; and Reagan's advisers are keenly aware that, for political and diplomatic reasons, the administration must prove that its investment there is justified.

Reagan has to find a way to prevent a Syrian takeover of Lebanon without keeping the Marines bogged down there indefinitely. His earlier attempts to do that by relying on moderate Arab help, while holding Israel at arms length, have failed; and in turning to the idea that Israel can help resolve the Lebanon puzzle, the administration is using what one official candidly acknowledged "might well be the last shot in our locker."

"We've learned that 2½ years of turmoil and dis-

tance in our relations with Israel hasn't helped our ability to influence events in the Arab world," he said. "Similarly, we've found that when Israel is unsure of itself and the steadfastness of the U.S. commitment to it, our ability to act effectively in the Middle East is lessened.

"We need to manage our relations so that they're not disrupted by short-term, reactive disputes. We want Israel to feel sufficiently secure and confident about the U.S. tie so that it will cooperate in making it possible for the United States to act as an arbitrator or mediator both in the disputes between radical and moderate Arab states and between the Arabs and Israel."

It is a balancing act that the United States has never managed successfully during the 35 years of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Reagan took office in January, 1981, as the long ordeal of the Iranian hostage crisis was ending with the release of 52 Americans after 444 days of captivity in Tehran. The trauma of Iran was to influence heavily the thinking of the new administration toward the Middle East.

Reagan's Democratic predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had scored a historic breakthrough with the 1978 Camp David summit that led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. But the Camp David process lost its momentum when its planned next-stage talks between Israel and Egypt—on the future status of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip—bogged down.

The outbreak of the Iranian hostage crisis in November, 1979, followed a few weeks later by the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan, shifted the attention of U.S. policy-makers from the Arab-Israeli situation toward the problems of security for the Persian Gulf, which is the oil lifeline for western Europe and Japan.

That concern was shared by Reagan, with his strongly ideological views about checking Soviet pressures on areas vital to U.S. interests, and by Haig, a former general with a tendency to view foreign policy in strategic terms. As a result, the new administration, believing that there was little immediate prospect of breaking the Camp David stalemate, put its emphasis on protecting the Gulf oil-producing states against internal threats from radical Islamic fundamentalists and external pressures from the Soviet Union.

Haig proposed a "consensus of strategic concerns" that would enlist friendly Middle Eastern states in a series of bilateral military ventures with the United States that collectively would form a military shield for the region.

The problem, as Haig was to learn when he visited Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in April, 1981, was that the Arab countries were reluctant to embrace such schemes publicly. Some deals were struck with Arab governments, but they had to be pursued mostly in a cautious, almost covert fashion that had a built-in potential for boomeranging.

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That was made clear by the recent furor over public disclosure of one idea that grew out of the "strategic consensus" concept—the plan for the United States to train and equip a Jordanian strike force that could intervene in Gulf states if they came under attack. After it became known that the administration had tried to hide the funds in a secret section of the defense authorization bill, outraged reaction from supporters of Israel and members of Congress caused the project to be shelved.

Another problem was posed by Israel, where the government of then-prime minister Menachem Begin welcomed the "strategic consensus" idea as a way of tying itself more closely to the United States militarily. However, Israel's enthusiasm was not matched by the Defense Department, which believed that it would make Arab cooperation even more difficult to obtain; and U.S. reluctance to match Begin's eagerness helped to fuel the strains then starting to affect U.S.-Israeli relations.

These strains flowed primarily from what Washington regarded as the overly bellicose attitudes and actions of the Begin government. Throughout 1981, the U.S.-Israeli "special relationship" was buffeted by an almost continuous chain of incidents.

They included Israel's bombing of Iraq's nuclear reactor, a retaliatory U.S. delay in delivering F16 jet fighters to Israel, an increasing Israeli threat of military action against the Palestine Liberation Organization and Syrian forces in Lebanon and, most acrimonious of all, Israel's insistence on forcing Reagan to spend inordinate amounts of time and political capital in an uphill but ultimately successful battle to prevent Congress from blocking the sale of advanced warning and control system (AWACS) radar surveillance planes and equipment to Saudi Arabia.

Despite these tensions, the two governments reached an accord calling for some joint maneuvers, stockpiling of medical equipment in Israel for the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force and limited joint security planning. Then, in December, 1981, the Begin government, brushing aside U.S. objections, annexed the Golan Heights, which Israel had captured from Syria in 1968, and the administration retaliated by scrapping the agreement.

That marked the symbolic end of "strategic consensus" as the centerpiece of Reagan's Mideast policy, and the administration ended its first year with its Mideast policies bogged down in inertia.

Then came June 6, 1982, when the Israeli army invaded Lebanon and quickly drove to the outskirts of Beirut in an effort to destroy the PLO presence in that country. Already strained U.S.-Israeli relations plunged to their lowest point ever as Reagan, outraged by the bombings of Beirut and the heavy civilian casualties, put pressure on Begin for a cease-fire.

It took most of the summer before Reagan's special envoy, Philip C. Habib, was able to work out a plan for the departure of PLO fighters from Beirut. In the meantime, Shultz had taken office with an urgent mandate from Reagan to find a comprehensive new strategy for the region.

The result was the Sept. 1 speech in which Reagan proposed that Palestinian aspirations for a homeland be satisfied by associating the West Bank and Gaza Strip with Jordan in exchange for Arab recognition of Israel. But the boldness of that move quickly gave way to the torturous, slogging process of coming to grips with what Shultz called "the separate but parallel tracks" of ending the conflict in Lebanon and turning the wider Reagan initiative into reality.

And the secretary was soon to learn that high hopes and earnest intentions were insufficient to cut through the ingrained hostilities of the Middle East. Within eight months after the president put forward his peace plan, it fell casualty to these tensions.

Shultz's strategy was predicated on the assumption that Jordan's King Hussein could be enticed into a broadened peace process with a mandate from the Arab world to act as spokesman for the Palestinians. The United States reasoned that if Hussein came forward, Begin, despite his rejection of the plan, would be forced to follow; and with all the parties at the negotiating table, it then would be possible to force them to confront peace issues in a serious fashion.

That hope foundered last April, when PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat, under pressure from Syria and restive PLO elements, failed to anoint Hussein as representative of the Palestinians. The king backed away from the process.

In the meantime, the administration was encountering similarly tough going on the even more urgent Lebanon front. Beginning with a Marine force that went to Lebanon in August, 1982, to join French and Italian troops in overseeing the PLO evacuation, the United States became increasingly engaged, step by step, over the ensuing 15 months in the religious and political strife there.

The multinational force was withdrawn in September, 1982, after the PLO's departure. But a few days later, it had to be sent back in the wake of the massacre of Palestinian civilians in Beirut by Lebanese Christian militiamen.

Since then, Marines participating in the force have become the flesh-and-blood symbol of a U.S. commitment to help Gemayel's embattled government assert its authority over the country. That involves two things: inducing Syria and Israel to withdraw their forces from Lebanon and arranging a peace between Gemayel and the Syrian-supported Druze and Moslem factions fighting against his predominantly Christian government.

Hopes for a breakthrough were stirred last May, when Shultz, in a virtuoso display of shuttle diplomacy, helped to arrange a peace agreement between Israel and Lebanon. However, the May 17 accord since has been virtually scuttled by Syria's refusal to agree to a parallel pullout.

Instead, the United States has been facing a steadily

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deteriorating situation. Israel withdrew its forces from the Beirut area and redeployed them in southern Lebanon. Syria then used the resulting vacuum to incite Druze and Moslem militias into new fighting that raged through Beirut for most of September, bringing the Marines and French forces under attack and forcing the United States to respond with massive firepower from a heavily reinforced naval task force positioned off the Lebanese coast.

Another special U.S. envoy, Robert C. McFarlane, who since has become Reagan's national security affairs adviser, finally won a cease-fire and talks in Geneva between Gemayel and his opponents about revised power-sharing arrangements. But the Oct. 23 bomb attacks against the Marines and French forces have underscored the urgency of Reagan's need to find a new approach.

Against this background Shultz introduced into administration deliberations a detailed proposal prepared by one of his policy planners, Peter Rodman, calling for the United States to make greater use of the Israeli factor in the Middle East equation.

The idea is known to have been opposed by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, a former Shultz colleague at Bechtel. Weinberger was backed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CIA Director William J. Casey. They raised anew the objection that such a move would be perceived as a partisan tilt toward Israel and upset the balance of U.S.-Arab relations.

However, after considerable debate, Reagan came down, at least tentatively, on Shultz's side. Earlier this month, Lawrence S. Eagleburger, undersecretary of state for political affairs, traveled to Jerusalem to invite Shamir, who succeeded Begin last month, to come here and explore the possibilities with Reagan and Shultz.

When Shamir and Defense Minister Moshe Arens sit down with Reagan at the White House next week, U.S. officials say, the administration hopes to get a clearer picture of how far the Israelis are prepared to travel along the "two-way street" envisioned by Shultz.

The officials said there is little doubt about Shamir's appetite for the incentives suggested—reactivation of the joint military ventures dropped after the Golan Heights dispute as well as help for Israel's hard-pressed economy by converting a greater share of U.S. military aid loans into grants that do not have to be repaid.

The big question is whether Shamir will be willing to pay the price that the United States intends to ask of him. U.S. officials want an informal process of consultation and coordination with Israel that will put Syrian President Hafez Assad on notice that the two countries intend to stand fast against Syrian attempts to control Lebanon and that Syria's only hope of satisfying its aspirations there lies in the give and take of negotiation.

Those are aims with which Shamir is likely to agree. Less clear is how he will react to U.S. suggestions that Israel start thinking about making more political concessions in Lebanon, including further withdrawals of its forces and modification of the May 17 Israel-Lebanon agreement to eliminate those features that are a major source of contention between Gemayel and his domestic opponents.

Looking beyond Lebanon, the administration will try to convince Shamir to ease Israel's practice of using its political clout in Congress to oppose U.S. arms relationships with moderate Arab states. In particular, the administration is known to be thinking about Jordan. Hussein is under heavy pressure from his armed forces to obtain advanced American aircraft and mobile air-defense missiles. But Congress thus far has been unwilling to approve the sale of these items; and the administration fears that a prolonged stalemate could undermine Hussein's position with his military.

Since Shamir and Arens are heirs to Begin's hard-line approach to dealing with the Arabs, U.S. officials acknowledge that it won't be easy to convince him that the administration's requests are in Israel's interest. At best, one official said, "this upcoming meeting probably won't get beyond some attempts to soften them up and see whether they're at least willing to think about what we're proposing. Then we'll see whether there's something that's worth pursuing further."

In short, the administration is hoping that, while many points of disagreement with Israel will remain, they can be set aside to work on a restructured U.S.-Israeli relationship. Agreement would cement Israel's confidence in the U.S. support on which its security ultimately depends, while it would help the United States extricate itself from Lebanon and go on to pursue other American interests in the region.