

'Hypocritical' policy on terrorism said to hurt US credibility

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The United States is facing charges of hypocrisy in its approach to terrorism as details continue to emerge about covert White House negotiations with Iran to swap military spare parts for the freedom of individual Americans held hostage in Lebanon.

President Reagan has repeatedly proclaimed a policy of not granting concessions to terrorists or their state sponsors. Administration officials have also worked to encourage US allies in Europe to stand united in their opposition and response to terrorist tactics.

Because the secret dealings with Iran appear to undercut, if not directly contravene, the stated policy, the disclosures are proving highly embarrassing to the White House.

The Reagan administration is said to be sharply split over the issue. There were reports over the weekend that Secretary of State George Shultz is considering resigning over what many are construing as a violation of the US's announced antiterrorism policy.

Mideast experts say that in addition to hurting the administration's credibility at home and abroad, the Iran negotiations case raises serious questions about the competence of White House Mideast advisers.

They stress that while working toward improved relations with Iran is a sound and desirable goal - with potential long-term gains of reducing militant Islamic-inspired terrorism in the Mideast - the administration seems to have badly bungled the effort.

"It is management by people who don't know what they are doing and who don't understand the Middle East," says Robert G. Neumann, a former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Afghanistan who is now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Under the secret plan, US officials reportedly arranged to have spare parts shipped to Iran with the assistance of Israeli middlemen. The purpose was to gain the release of Americans held hostage by the militant pro-Iranian Muslim group Islamic Jihad. The plan was allegedly carried out by members of the President's National Security Council (NSC) and former national security adviser Robert McFarlane.

The swaps are reported to have brought about the release of David Jacobson last week; the Rev. Lawrence Jenco last July; and the Rev. Benjamin Weir in September 1985.

Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee have called for an investigation to determine if the White House deliberately tried to deceive Congress in conducting the covert mission through the NSC rather than involving the State Department, Defense Department, or the Central Intelligence Agency, which must

report such activities to Congress.

Middle East specialists and critics within the administration argue that negotiations to swap US spare parts for hostages will only encourage terrorists to take more hostages in the future.

They add that the secret negotiations undermine the stated US policy of strict neutrality in the Gulf War between Iran and Iraq and could tip the balance of power in the oil-rich Gulf in favor of Iran. Clumsy contacts with moderates within the Iranian regime may also have boomeranged against the US by undermining the standing of top Iranian officials involved in the secret hostage deals.

Critics also note that the secret plan violates a US arms embargo of Iran first enacted by President Carter in the wake of the Tehran hostage crisis in 1979.

In recent years, several cases have been prosecuted in US courts involving would-be arms dealers working with Israelis who claimed in court that shipments of banned military spare parts to Iran had been secretly approved by the US government. One such case, involving an estimated \$2 billion in arms, is now pending in US District Court in New York.

Mideast experts say the administration's actions are short-sighted. They emphasize that the five Americans, six French citizens, and others who remain hostages in Lebanon are not all being held by the same group. They say that while senior Iranian officials may be able to use their influence in Lebanon to gain the release of hostages held by Islamic Jihad, it remains to be seen if Iran or Syria have any influence over a growing number of terrorist groups who seem to be following their own agendas in Lebanon.

Experts note that with an estimated 1,000 Americans still in Lebanon, it remains relatively easy for freelance terrorists to abduct Westerners on the streets of Beirut and hold them with little fear of being either thwarted or discovered.

"I am not persuaded that Iran has the capacity to get them all released," says Lt. Col. Augustus R. Norton, an expert on the Lebanese Shia who teaches at the US Military Academy at West Point. "There is a lot of anarchy in Lebanon," Colonel Norton adds.

"There is no doubt that as long as terrorism pays it will continue," says Roger Edde, a prominent Maronite Christian in Lebanon. "Terrorism is used now for many purposes by many players. . . . Some are interested not in what is crucial to Iran but what is crucial to them - which is to throw out of Lebanon any Western presence," Mr. Edde says.

"It is a ruthless game," says Ambassador Neumann. "They take us, they take what they need, and they let out one hostage or another." He adds, "I don't think this kind of dealing works."