

Challenges facing the U.S. administration

A power struggle has erupted in Washington over the Reagan administration's policy following its response to Israel's June 7 bombing of Iraq's nuclear research center near Baghdad. The outcome of the struggle, which will help determine the future of U.S. interests in the Middle East, depends largely on the personal intervention of President Reagan.

Unless Reagan takes it upon himself to hold Israeli Prime Minister Begin to account for the latter's perilous flaunting of international law, and affirms U.S. commitment to cooperation with the moderate Arab states of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan, it is likely that the United States will be entrapped in a joint British intelligence-KGB scenario (in which Begin is a mere pawn) to radicalize the countries of the Middle East.

Begin's election-eve raid on Baghdad may not only ensconce him in power for another term; it also threatens to dramatically increase Soviet and British influence in the region as a result of suspicion in the Arab world that Washington was behind the Israeli strike.

The British in particular are doing their utmost to cultivate these suspicions in order to hasten a rupture between Washington and the Arabs, and prevent Reagan from consolidating relations with the Arab moderates. According to one source, "The Begin government feared the relationship developing between the United States and the Iraqi-Saudi axis in the period since Reagan was sworn into office." The fear, he said, peaked with the AWACS deal with the Saudis. "The Israelis were determined to break up the axis before it was solidified."

Immediately following Israel's attack on Iraq, the British press began churning out the line that the United States was to blame for the Israeli raid. It is "the lack of U.S. policy toward the Middle East," charged the *Financial Times*, that has given Begin "free rein" to escalate the crisis, establishing a new "dangerous precedent" in world politics. Similarly, in a front-page piece entitled "Arab Fury at U.S.," the London *Times* says that the Arab countries are united in their view that the Americans bear primary responsibility for the air strike. "Saudi Arabia in particular is incensed," the *Times* notes.

Britain's efforts to ingratiate itself with the Saudis were to coincide with the arrival in London of Saudi

Arabia's King Khaled for an official state visit. The highest echelon of the British oligarchy turned out to greet the king. Most explicit in her wooing of the Saudis was Prime Minister Thatcher, who, in a grandstand speech to parliament, attacked Israel's action as a "grave breach of international law," and stated that her government "totally and utterly" condemned it.

Despite the eager efforts by Britain and others to urge radical action upon the Arabs, the Arab world has actually shown considerable calmness in its reaction to the Israeli attack.

In the wake of the Israeli hit, the eyes of the world are on Reagan. While it is altogether unlikely that a full-fledged arms cutoff to Israel can be pushed through the U.S. Congress, there are other actions Reagan can take to bring Israel into line, such as slowing down weapons deliveries, refusing to pick up Israel's trade deficit, or treating Israeli intelligence reports as "raw" data rather than reliable, "hard" evaluations, which is the current procedure.

Three days following the raid, the Department of Defense announced that four F-16 jets scheduled for delivery to Israel June 11 would not be shipped out that day. However, when asked to confirm this, Haig's State Department initially refused, indicating the degree to which the administration is divided on how to handle the situation. In the end, delivery of the four F-16s was temporarily suspended—a largely symbolic move that by itself does not mean much, but could serve as a stepping stone in a Reagan operation to rein in, and possibly dump, Begin.

One high-level Washington source, queried about possible divisions in the administration, noted, "The first statement by the State Department expressed only 'deep concern' about the raid, while the next statement, issued two hours later, expressed 'condemnation.' You might possibly want to look for an intervention by the President in the second statement."

Several intelligence insiders have privately pointed to Secretary of State Haig and National Security Adviser Richard Allen for giving the green light to Begin. According to one source, Allen has been deliberately feeding Reagan misinformation over the past months, and may now try to blunt Reagan's response to the crisis. Another source predicted that "Haig may find himself increasingly circumscribed by Reagan and will lose a lot of ground to [presidential counselor] Ed Meese," and to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Weinberger and his deputy Frank Carlucci have reportedly been pushing Reagan to be tough with Begin, and are at odds with Haig, whose June 10 letter to congressional leaders Rep. Tip O'Neill and Sen. Charles Percy was noticeably mild and failed to condemn Israel.