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## The Mideast

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# U.S. peace bid could check Soviet gains

by Thierry Lalevée

The possibility of a new U.S.-sponsored peace initiative in the Middle East has become a factional issue among circles in Washington which now want to influence the policy making of an expected new Reagan administration. One faction wants the United States to cut its losses and pull out of the warring region, relying on oil imports from Ibero-America and Asia rather than the embattled Persian Gulf. Others think that a U.S. failure to sponsor peace in the Middle East is as good as consigning the entire region to the Soviet Empire.

It is significant that leaks in the international press on an expected U.S. initiative and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's trip to the Middle East, coincided with the hurried visit to Moscow by Syrian President Hafez al Assad to define a new joint strategy against the "latest American conspiracy." Moscow may fear it could be about to lose ground gained in recent months.

### The Weinberger visit

What would a new U.S. initiative look like? According to a prominent article titled "Reagan's Winner, the Middle East Path Back to the White House" published Oct. 3 by the mass-circulation *Daily Express* of London: "Within weeks of his re-election, President Reagan is pushing forward with an adventurous new peace plan which could lead to a settlement of the Middle East crisis." The article detailed how the "Middle East is high on Washington's list of priorities." According to the *Daily Express*, such a new initiative would rest on four pillars: "Egypt, Jordan, Yasser Arafat's Palestinians, and Israel's new government. . . . This is already causing a storm in the hardline Arab capital," continued the *Daily Express*, "because it brings Egypt back to the center stage of Middle East politics."

The *Daily Express* added that "what is planned is an intricate attempt to bring Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis together with the support of Cairo to resolve the worsening impasse over the future of the West Bank."

In substance, this is what Defense Secretary Weinberger discussed during a tour which took him to Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. Weinberger, a leading opponent of yielding the Middle East to Moscow, arrived in Tunisia directly from the meeting of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group,

where he had successfully defended President Reagan's beam-weapons program (the Strategic Defense Initiative) and stressed Moscow's growing military threat to Europe. In Tunisia, which is receiving increased U.S. military aid, Weinberger stressed the need to "redress the balance of forces in the region because of the new situation," a reference to the Moroccan-Libyan Union which is threatening Tunisia's internal stability.

Weinberger's arrival in Cairo coincided with the signing of a new treaty for military cooperation between Egypt and the Chad government of Hisssein Habré—a decision to reinforce Chad against the political maneuvers of both Libya and the treacherous Socialist government of France. American-Egyptian military cooperation was extensively discussed and the talks were described as "constructive and fruitful" by President Mubarak's adviser Osama al Baz.

But as declarations in Tunis, Cairo, and Jerusalem made clear, military cooperation was not the sole topic of discussion. Israel's new Prime Minister Shimon Peres left Washington Oct. 14 announcing that Israel was committed within the next three weeks to defining a precise calendar for a withdrawal from Lebanon, a declaration which took the Likud members of the government by surprise. But there is little doubt that Peres made such a commitment in discussions with American officials, realizing that this had become a *sine qua non* for ending the "cold peace" with Cairo. Peres's decision was one of Weinberger's main topics of discussion, as he told concerned Arab leaders of the U.S. commitment to see it concretized. Osama al Baz commented with satisfaction on Oct. 15 that "if we reach an acceptable understanding, Israel will withdraw from Lebanon within six months," a declaration which implied that Cairo would then consider returning its ambassador to Israel. This was in the spirit of a communiqué signed by Weinberger on Oct. 14 in Tunisia, on "closer cooperation between the Arab states and the Western countries which, alone, can constructively help a settlement of the Middle East crisis."

In Israel, Weinberger met with Shimon Peres and announced that the United States had agreed to release to Israel the "composite production technology . . . that is essential" to produce the Lavie jet. It was announced that the United States will purchase \$100 million worth of Israeli armaments in the first quarter of fiscal 1985.

The defense secretary ended his trip on Oct. 17 with an unexpected lunch with King Hussein of Jordan, just returned from Baghdad where he had discussed with Saddam Hussein the latest developments of the Jordan-Egyptian reconciliation. A week earlier, Saddam Hussein had made it clear that Baghdad was committed to renewing diplomatic relations with Washington. It is also expected that Baghdad will soon follow the Jordanian move.

However, if Weinberger wants to sponsor a successful peace initiative in the Middle East, he will have to tackle the delicate issue of U.S. negotiations with the PLO. In sub-

stance, this means a direct political confrontation with Henry Kissinger and his current agents in the State Department and the administration. Since 1974, the United States has been committed by Kissinger—then secretary of state—to never negotiate with the PLO, ostensibly at the demand of the Israelis.

### The PLO question and Soviet strategy

On this critical issue will rest the potential success or failure of the administration in preventing the Middle East from falling completely into Moscow's grip. It is essential, not merely to break with Kissinger's previous commitment, but to break as well with his present policies. This issue has been addressed twice in recent weeks. President Mubarak sent a private letter to President Reagan on the subject at the beginning of October, according to the London-based *As Sharq al Awsat* Oct. 7. The day before, Mubarak and Hussein were reported drafting a memorandum to President Reagan on the need to break with Kissinger's policies.

Reports indicate that Kissinger and such associates as Undersecretary of State Richard Murphy are playing the "Syrian card," using Damascus-based PLO-dissident Abu Musa. Murphy is reported to have met with Abu Musa while touring the region at the beginning of October. This was one key topic of discussion during Assad's visit to Moscow. Significantly, the final communiqué by the Soviet leaders and Assad spoke only in general of the "Palestinian people," making no reference to the PLO nor to Arafat. Arafat was told at his Oct. 5 meeting with Gromyko that Moscow is satisfied with Syria's "Palestinian policy" for the time being.

But reports that Assad's visit to Moscow was a failure and that "divergences" had emerged are a ploy by the Soviets, who were taken by surprise by Weinberger's visit to the region, aimed at consolidating gains in moderate Arab capitals like Cairo and Amman. This was necessary after the virulent attack on the Jordan-Egyptian reconciliation published on Oct. 5 in *Izvestia*. Moscow has tried to pull back on the question by not signing any communiqué denouncing the reconciliation, as Assad, for his own reasons, pressed the Soviet leaders to do. Indeed, rather than committing themselves completely to a unique Syrian policy, Moscow is eager to maintain its double-headed policy of backing the hardliners like Assad and Qaddafi while wooing moderates like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, even if this has to be done at the expense of Assad's *amour propre*. Assad, who feels increasingly "encircled by a new American-Israeli conspiracy," has little choice but to stick to Moscow for the time being, which the Soviet leaders know quite well. No one should be surprised if Moscow in coming weeks decides to review its Middle East policy, once again going for a new confrontation to try to test the U.S. administration's real commitment to peace, as well as to test the power and ability of its friends in Washington around Kissinger to use such a confrontation to sabotage a new peace initiative.

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