

Israel needs to walk softly

Israel is going to be in for a very rough ride over the next few months. That's what sources within the new Bush Administration are saying—and not in whispers, either. The Bush team's thinking runs as follows:

First, now is the time to force a Mideast settlement. Israel is utterly isolated and is being scolded by the entire world, including its best friends.

Second, even in Congress, the bedrock of Israel's support, there is growing, if discreet, unease over continued support of Israeli policies.

Third, U.S. allies are pressing Washington hard to do something to end the Mideast impasse. People everywhere are fed up with the Arab-Israeli squabble and want to see it ended.

A key factor that changed the Bush team's thinking about the Mideast was this year's huge Saudi arms deal. The Saudis wanted to order jets, munitions and missiles from the U.S. The Israel lobby in Congress blocked the deal. So the angry Saudis gave the entire order to Britain. According to the Saudis, the deal, with its follow-up services and spare parts, will come to nearly \$60 billion—the biggest military contract in memory.

California and Texas, the centres of Republican power, also happen to be the centres of the U.S. military aircraft industry. This past fall, Defence Secretary Frank Carlucci, who is usually a soft-spoken bureaucrat, blasted the Israel lobby for costing the U.S. "billions of dollars in jobs."

Powerful California and Texas Republicans, among them George Bush and new Defence Secretary John Tower, were furious when the deal was blocked. U.S. aerospace experts claim that as many as 600,000 American jobs were lost when the contract went to England. In the words of one powerful senator, "we are ready to cut the Israel lobby down to size and to push Israel into a peace agreement—but we can't act until the president takes the first step. Once he does, we will follow."

It's worth noting that the American Jewish Congress warned of exactly this turn of events three years ago when it cautioned the Israel lobby not to go too far: It did and the backlash is now beginning to be felt. The new administration, I am told, will take advantage of the unhappiness with Israel

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in Washington to push hard for a Mideast settlement, one that will mean trading land for peace.

Bush will have 18 months before the next congressional elections to act. So far, Bush and his new Secretary of State, James Baker, have said nothing publicly. But important U.S. spokesmen, such as Gen. Vernon Walters and the newly named UN ambassador Thomas Pickering have made it clear that Israel will have to bend and make a deal with the PLO.

The right-wing ideologues who used to run U.S. foreign policy under Reagan—and who were ardent backers of Israel's own right wing, have been sent packing. The Republican old guard of moderates is back in office and they are demanding a Mideast settlement.

Will Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir be able to weather this coming storm? Probably. But it's also clear that his extreme policies and brutal repression of the Palestinians have caused Israel to become isolated and friendless. In one short year, the ruling Likud party has managed to lose all the international goodwill that Israel had so painstakingly built up over 40 years. If Labor leader Shimon Peres had won the election, he might have been able to avert this mess. He did not and has meekly gone into another do-nothing coalition with Likud.

Political leadership seems to have vanished from Israel, a land where, ironically, just about everyone thinks himself a politician. There is one bright thought, however. The Mideast is the land of surprises. Shamir might just stun everyone by coming up with a genuine, workable peace plan. Not just a rehash of the bogus Camp David plan for Palestinian "autonomy" that no one took seriously, but a daring settlement that will manage to assure Israel of its security needs while giving the Palestinians a place to call home.

Only the right-wing Likud party will be able to make such a bold attempt. The moderate to left Labor coalition lacks the political muscle to forge a real peace with the Palestinians and other Arabs. Labor would be accused by the right of a sellout. So, ironically, Shamir is both the man who has gotten Israel into its current jam and probably the only one who can get it back out.

Whether he can drag the religious fanatics on Israel's far right into a peace accord remains, however, a daunting challenge. For Israel and its backers, the most pressing menace to Israel does not come from either the Arabs or even a feeble Palestinian state—which would threaten Israel about as much as Hong Kong threatens China. The current danger is in Washington where Israel's main benefactor and best friend is becoming fed up, bored and even angered by Israel's stubborn refusal to give an inch.

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