

Dangerous strategy

By ZALMAN SHOVAL

"THE U.S. would continue to oppose any international conference on the Middle East under UN auspices or with the participation of the Soviet Union," U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz told Yitzhak Rabin during his visit to Washington (as reported in *The Jerusalem Post*). Going one further, Mr. Shultz later told an American senator, though in a different context, that he could not "foresee any development that would lead us to want to come together for some type of condominium (with the Soviet Union) in the Middle East."

The secretary's words of reassurance came after there had been, in preceding weeks, what can only be described as mixed signals from Washington about the possibility of some sort of coalescence between views of the U.S. and of the Soviet Union on the Middle East question. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any official pronouncement on the subject would have been made at all had the matter not come to the attention of the media.

As it was, Robert McFarlane, President Reagan's national security adviser, went on television to announce that Washington and Moscow had agreed to regular meetings to discuss the Middle East, adding that, "We (the U.S.) have for years told the Soviet Union we are interested in talking with them about settling regional disagreements." It may be assumed that "regional" in this context refers to two very specific regions: the Middle East and Central America.

Simplified, the picture is as follows: The Americans, being primarily interested in blocking Communist sorties into what they regard as their own Central American backyard, may, albeit unenthusiastically, be induced to discuss with the Russians areas where the shoe is on the other foot, including, of course, the Middle East.

The somewhat defensive tone that the U.S. Administration adopted in revealing the contacts no doubt had something to do with Defence Minister Rabin's expected visit to Washington; but it could also have been influenced by the unhappy memories of the last time that the U.S. had sought to coordinate with the Soviets policies on the Arab-Israel conflict.

THE AMERICAN attitude towards the Arab-Israel conflict has always been dualistic. On the one hand, there is the approach that sees the Middle East situation in the framework of the general East-West confrontation. On the other hand, there is the view – to quote former U.S. assistant secretary of state Roy Atherton – that U.S. policy in the area "should not be hostage to considerations of U.S. global strategy

vis-a-vis the USSR."

During the initial period of the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the second of the above views very definitely had the upper hand. Contrary to Henry Kissinger's stand under the outgoing Republican administration, namely that the Arab-Israel conflict was indeed part (and perhaps the major part) of the overall global picture, it was now somewhat naively believed that it would be possible for Washington to formulate some sort of coordinated policy with Moscow towards the conflict.

That belief found practical expression in the October 1, 1977 U.S.-Soviet agreement on the Middle East. That "agreement on principles" was intended to govern a possible Arab-Israeli settlement to be discussed at the planned Geneva Conference (of which the USSR and the U.S. were co-chairmen). The joint document not only called on Israel to withdraw from territories occupied in 1967, but also referred to "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" – the code-phrase usually applied to the establishment of a separate Palestinian state.

Though Atherton claims today that the agreement "was done largely for reasons of U.S.-Soviet relations and did not seem illogical in those terms" (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1984), in fact, news of the agreement stunned not only "Israel and its supporters in the U.S." (as Atherton says), but it aroused considerable opposition also in the U.S. press and from foreign-policy experts who could not help being perplexed at a policy-move which obviously threatened to nullify Kissinger's successful efforts, especially after 1973, to limit Soviet influence in the area.

Even more annoyed, however, was President Sadat of Egypt, who, at no small risk to himself, had just managed to eject the Russians from his country – and here they were to be re-admitted to a position of influence through the back door – opened for them by courtesy of the U.S. Government!

The practical reactions of both Israel and Egypt were decisive and imaginative. The "Sadat peace initiative" (which, for the sake of historical accuracy, should perhaps be called the "Begin-Dayan initiative" – for it was they who took the first step in approaching the other side) gathered momentum, culminating in the Egyptian president's visit to Jerusalem. At the same time, Israeli foreign minister Dayan and his aides embarked on an almost unprecedented *hasbara* campaign, appealing directly to U.S. public opinion with regard to the grave risks to Israel inherent in the "joint declaration."

Dayan told President Carter in no

uncertain terms that Israel would not attend the Geneva Conference on the basis of the Soviet-American document. Dayan also enlarged on the prime minister's and his own ideas on the Autonomy Plan, thus convincing Carter that Israel had new and constructive ideas with regard to the Palestinian question.

The Israeli and Egyptian efforts bore fruit. U.S. policy-makers themselves had second thoughts and the "joint declaration" was quietly shelved, and so, in fact, was the whole unpalatable concept of the "Geneva Conference." In their place came Camp David, the all-important U.S.-Israeli "memorandum of understanding," signed by Dayan and Cyrus Vance in March of 1979, cementing the close relationship between the two countries ever since. Moreover, in retrospect, Camp David brought about a significant shift in the balance of power in the Middle East area in America's favour.

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WHAT ARE we to understand from the announcement of impending U.S.-Soviet contacts about "regional problems?" Could it be that the situation is coming full circle and that Washington will once again attempt to coordinate its Middle-Eastern policies with Moscow? Probably not, at least not in the sense of the approach of 1977.

There is a great deal of difference between the political philosophies of the Carter and the Reagan Administrations. Renewed disarmament talks notwithstanding, Reagan and his entourage have not changed their opinion on the Free World versus the Soviet Bloc, that only a militarily and politically strong American-led Western alliance can prevent the Soviet Union from making further inroads on the position of the Free World; and that a strong Israel, as viewed from Washington, both pragmatically and ideologically, is more than just a reliable strategic confederate; it also is a friend (troublesome as this friendship may sometimes be), sharing with America the same moral and democratic values.

No ideological approach can, of course, be devoid of pragmatic considerations. One might add that even from Israel's point of view, the possibility of a closer U.S.-Soviet dialogue on various world problems, including the Middle East, need not, a priori, be viewed as totally negative; there could, for instance, be beneficial effects with regard to Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union; or, on a different level, the Russians could be induced to exert a moderating influence on Syria with regard to a settlement of the Lebanese imbroglio (though this doesn't look probable at present).

But it is the nature of diplomatic

"understandings" that they usually incur some sort of *quid pro quo*, and one can, for instance, imagine the Russians saying to their American counterparts: "It is Nicaragua or El Salvador you wish to discuss? Very well, but why not include in the agenda also the Middle East, about which you have hardly talked with us in the last few years?" In such a case it would be extremely difficult for the U.S. to reply with a categorical "No."

ISRAEL CAN, therefore, not afford to be complacent. U.S. spokesmen have stressed that at this stage there will only be *preliminary* talks, but "preliminary" talks could very well lead towards concrete talks later on (the U.S.-Soviet declaration of 1977 was also preceded by extensive "preliminary" discussion), and the Soviet Union will surely use them to push for an international conference on the Middle East.

Moscow's motivation in this is very clear: the USSR is the only party that stands to gain from such a conference; should it result in far-reaching Israeli concessions, the Soviets will get most of the credit for that from the Arabs (even though, in fact, such concessions would be the result of *American* pressure). If, on the other hand – and this is much more likely – the conference will end in failure, it is the U.S., Israel's friend, who will get the blame! In any case, Moscow will find itself once again in a strong position to curry favour with the Arabs and, in general, to regain the strong vantage-point it previously held in influencing events in the Middle East.

Official U.S. spokesmen, well

aware of this, have so far completely rejected Soviet overtures in this direction, but here and there, there have also been dissenting voices. So we have Judith Kipper of the American Enterprise Institute writing in *The New York Times* that "the agreement by Washington and Moscow to exchange views on the Middle East is an important step," adding that "the eventual goal of such an exchange might or might not be a regional peace conference..."

Though Ms. Kipper does not, of course, speak for the U.S. Government, one may assume that more than one member of the traditional American foreign policy establishment holds to the view that convening an international conference might not be a bad thing – if this will lead to a separation of the Arab-Israel conflict from other Middle Eastern issues, and thus bring about a U.S.-Arab *rapprochement*.

At this time the idea of an international conference still looks rather far-fetched, though the idea is supported, at least verbally, by most Arab states, including Egypt, as well as by some European government, but changing political situations (even if they are related to one area) often engender changed policies in an altogether different area. Israel should thus closely follow events so as not to be taken by surprise.

But this country also should, just as it did in 1977, soon develop new political initiatives of its own with regards to the Palestinian question, so as to pre-empt potentially dangerous ideas from abroad.

The writer, a former Rafi MK, was an aide to the late Moshe Dayan.