

March 17, 1978

Mark Siegel Opened a Window

The resignation of Mark Siegel from his post as President Carter's liaison officer with the Jewish community of the United States is an event whose importance extends beyond its immediate implications. It opens an additional window onto a cold and disturbing political landscape. Mr. Siegel is a young man with an impressive record in public life. Before coming to the White House he served as the Executive Secretary of the Democratic Party executive. At the White House he also acted as the liaison officer with the Party.

Speaking at a Jewish rally some days before his resignation, he explained the emotional sources of his outlook. "I am an American," he said, "I am a Jew, and I am a confirmed Zionist." Yet a man who joined the stable of the President of the United States in enthusiastic belief in the man and in his policies, and who had a close personal relationship with him, would not give up his position — and thus also perhaps disrupt his political career — unless he had very weighty reasons.

Siegel resigned with dignity, out of motives that do him honour as a Jew, as an American — and as a person. He resigned in protest against the administration's policy towards Israel as reflected in the United States' part in building up the military power of the Arabs, particularly of Saudi Arabia. His step serves to draw attention to the gradual development of a new and most tangible military danger on Israel's south-eastern border. The public in Israel should open its eyes to the fact that a fourth front is being prepared for us.

Ever since the Yom Kippur War a variegated pattern of arms purchases has become evident in Saudi Arabia. These include hundreds of planes, fighting and transport, hundreds of tanks, thousands of missiles and bombs of different types, artillery and ships. The Saudis do not buy exclusively from the US. They are buying also from France, Italy and Britain. In the past it was widely assumed that Saudi Arabia is acquiring arms mainly as the financier of her sister Arab States and storing them until required. This no doubt is still true, but the accumulating facts point to a new direction and a new purpose: in case of war Saudi Arabia will open a front of her own against Israel.

This is one of the reasons for the sharp opposition aroused in both Houses of the U.S. Congress and in a section of the media by the administration's decision to supply the Saudis and the Egyptians with warplanes parallel with supplies being made to Israel. There is a continuing alertness manifested among public figures in the US to the danger of supplying offensive arms to the Arab states. Among those who vigorously denounced such supplies in the past was Mr. Jimmy Carter.

When the Ford administration sold Saudi Arabia 1650 "Maverick" ground-to-air missiles Mr. Carter (on 30 September 1976 — before he was elected) said some hard things:

"There is no reason to suppose," he said, "that these missiles will add to the security and the stability of the Middle East. There is no reason to suppose that they can be used only for

defensive purposes. No administration sensitive to the climate in the Middle East would allow such a deal to be transacted... When it adds arms to the Arab States in the Middle East without limiting quantity or quality, it undermines our commitment to Israel”.

Now, when the majority on the International Relations Committee of the Senate called for a re-examination of the decision to supply F-15 planes to Saudi Arabia, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance replied:

“Saudi Arabia is of tremendous importance in the promotion of a policy of moderation in connection with the peace process and other initiatives and — in a broader context — in world affairs like monetary and oil policy”.

From other pronouncements in Washington it emerges that the administration has suddenly discovered that supplying offensive arms to Egypt and to Saudi Arabia will only increase stability to the Middle East. It is its passion for this “stability” that has given birth to its pressure on Congress. Flourishing a “package deal” before the eyes of the members of Congress, the administration threatens: “Either arms for all, or none for Israel either”.

The package deal contains two disturbing negative features. First, while Saudi Arabia is to receive the full quantity of planes she ordered — Israel is to receive only something more than half of her order. Far more serious are the implications of the fact that Israel’s order derives from a right which she had acquired earlier — and at a heavy price. In the “partial agreement” of 1975 the Israeli government gave in to American pressure and surrendered her only source of oil in Sinai as well as the strategic Mitla and Gidi passes. In return for the sacrifice made by Israel in order to help Washington improve US relations with Egypt, Washington undertook to fulfill Israel’s requirements in planes.

This adds one more American breach of undertaking to the series of such breaches, all of strategic import to Israel, spread over practically the whole life-span of the State.

In 1950 the US gave Israel an undertaking — together with Britain and France — to guarantee the 1949 Armistice lines. This undertaking turned out to be a dead letter.

In 1957, after the Sinai Campaign, Israel withdrew from Sinai and from the Gaza district under heavy American pressure. In return an undertaking was given Israel by the US (together with other nations) that the closing of the Straits of Tiran would be regarded as an act of aggression, which would be resisted by them all. When Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran in May 1967 (and after Egyptian forces had been concentrated in Sinai, and Syrian forces on the Golan) Washington was even unable to find the document containing the 1957 undertaking.

In 1970 the US initiated an agreement between Israel and Egypt for a cease-fire and a “standstill” of arms which had been brought into action during the War of Attrition. The ink had hardly dried on the agreement when the Egyptians moved their SAM-6 missiles down to the Suez Canal.

The US Government declined for weeks to admit that it knew the missiles had been moved, and subsequently refrained from taking action to have them removed.

Who can measure how much Israeli blood was shed, and what part the missiles played in the success of the Egyptian offensive at the opening, three years later, of the Yom- Kippur War?

Now a further dimension has been revealed of the US administration's indifference, not to say cynicism, towards Israel's security. For example, Secretary of State Vance minimizes the importance of the acquisition of French "Mirage" planes by Egypt; and administration spokesmen, without batting an eyelid, disseminate the expert opinion that the Saudis and the Egyptians will not use against Israel the planes they are buying from the US.

Above all — the administration is actively covering up for the Saudi Arabian military build-up. This is what proved to be the last straw for Mark Siegel. He was hoodwinked. For some time now Saudi Arabia has been building a new airfield at Tabuk. When Siegel inquired whether Hawk missiles had been stationed there, the answer was No; and the airfield, he was told, was altogether of minor importance. Afterwards he learned that what was being built was a sophisticated air-base, and that it housed, *inter alia*, Hawk missiles. Administration spokesmen explained publicly that Saudi Arabia required an airfield at Tabuk in order to provide defence for her oilfields and also against attack from Iraq.

Nobody explained why defence of the oil, or a prospective counter-attack on Bagdad, requires the building of an airfield 1500 kilometres from the oilfields and 1000 kilometres from Bagdad — and precisely, on the other hand, close to the Israeli border, about 200 kilometres from Eilat.

We must therefore take note of the increasing readiness of the US administration to provide misleading information even about specific preparations for aggression against Israel

We have now been treated to another aspect of that readiness: the attempt made by the State Department spokesman, Mr. Hodding Carter to deny the responsibility of the PLO for the barbaric attack on the bus on the Israeli coast road near the Country Club. So important did he find it to defend the good name of Yasser Arafat that he did not realize how foolish and clumsy was his refusal to recognize PLO responsibility when the PLO had already boasted to the whole world of the heroism of its murderous emissaries on the coast road.

The closeness of the two acts of deception — about Tabuk and about the Country Club — is not accidental. The gravity of the prospect that compelled one courageous man in Washington to give up his high office in order to sound the alarm requires a re-assessment, profound and comprehensive, of the ways and means we must adopt in order to conduct the struggle that awaits us in the United States.