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The Chimera of Coordination

One of the persistent charges against the Likud government disseminated by Alignment spokesmen is that its troubles with the United States government began when they abandoned the tradition of coordinating policy with Washington. The latest assertion of this kind was made only last Friday, in a radio interview, by Yitzhak Rabin.

As Mr. Rabin was formerly prime minister and, earlier on, ambassador in Washington, his words might be regarded as important. In fact, they were pure fantasy. There was no such coordination, except perhaps in the minds of the Alignment leaders.

One could treat the statement lightly as a curiosity of history; but it bears implications relating to the present situation. It seems to ascribe a sort of superior wisdom to the Alignment leaders, but, much more significant, it tends to provide justification for American policy during their regime. After all, if there was coordination, American policy must have been reasonably satisfactory (at least to Mr. Rabin and the other Israeli co-ordinators).

Mr. Rabin's own experience illuminates the hollowness of his claim. His last personal contact with the US Administration — in March 1977 ended in a resounding angry disagreement with President Carter. The still new president insisted that setting up a Palestinian homeland was the essential solution to the problem in Eretz Yisrael. Mr. Rabin rejected the idea unequivocally.

Eighteen months earlier, in September 1975, the government had accepted the second disengagement agreement in Sinai. Premier Rabin claimed it as an achievement; and it may be that by some process of his own logic he convinced himself that it was an expression of coordination with the US. That was the agreement by which Israel gave up the oil of Sinai and surrendered control of the Mitla and Gidi passes.

In March that year the Rabin government had refused adamantly to make these concessions, insisting that they would jeopardize Israel's basic security. It was then that Secretary of State Kissinger left in a cloud of anger and, back in Washington, instituted the famous "reappraisal" of policy towards Israel which necessitated the withholding of supplies to us until a suitably contrite government accepted his proposals.

One could, of course, discern an element of coordination in the terms of the disengagement agreement — the kind of coordination that exists between the hijacker and the hijacked.

One need only set Mr. Rabin's coordination claim against events in the Yom Kippur War to recognize its absurdity. American pressure then was applied in threatening and ruthless terms that cowed the Golda Meir government into accepting the cease fire of October 22, and subsequently into saving the Egyptian Third Army on the east bank of the Suez Canal.

This cancelled the effects of the Israel Army's recovery from the fearful opening phase of the war, and converted certain victory into defeat — and into a national disaster of historic proportions.

Mr. Rabin and his colleagues should really think again, and hard, before boasting about their coordination of policy with the US.

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The fact is that there simply could not be coordination of any major policy matter, because Washington's doctrine on fundamental issues in the Middle East, and on the dispute in Eretz Yisrael in particular, has been diametrically opposed to the Israeli outlook.

American policy after 1948, and most emphatically after the Six Day War, embraced a fusion of two elements: "commitment" to Israel's survival, and the proposal of conditions that could only endanger that survival.

Specifically, the US gave Israel arms and financial aid while persistently demanding that Israel should again retire into the "death trap" (in Abba Eban's definition) of the 1949 armistice lines. Since 1973, with America's growing feeling of dependence on Saudi Arabia a distinct tilt against Israel has been manifest.

There is in the US a large body of opinion that rejects the policy and the concepts of the Administration, that has quite a different conception of the importance of a strong, self-confident Israel, with deterrent strategic reach, in the mosaic of America's global stance.

There are many who believe that it is no accident that the decline of American power and influence in the world, and the shifting of the balance against her in the confrontation with the Soviet Union, have coincided with her efforts to reduce and weaken Israel. There are many who believe that every inch of territory, every scintilla of prestige lost by Israel reduces America's own power and influence.

That these views are widely held in the US — they recently found expression in the statement issued by 170 lately-retired military leaders — does not alter the fact, unpleasant and even ominous for Israel, that the Administration has not changed its doctrine or its policy; and talk of "coordination" is both empty of significance and misleading.

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The very fantasies of Alignment spokesmen, however, only emphasize the astonishing short-sightedness of the Likud government in the handling of its relations with Washington. At this very moment there is a resounding chorus of criticism in this country against the unprecedentedly unfriendly behaviour of the Carter Administration.

When the Israel government announces its refusal to be browbeaten into cooperating in making a farce of the peace agreement (by recognizing Egypt's right and obligation to make war on her as

soon as the Arab states are ready), not only does Washington extend to Egypt its unqualified support, but launches an angry propaganda campaign against Israel, not hesitating to stray far from both truth and civility.

Precisely when President Sadat (perhaps through overconfidence) demonstrates that for him the peace treaty is no more than an instrument for bringing about the conditions that will make feasible a renewed attack by the Arab coalition on the existence of Israel — Washington rushes to his support, a loyal and devoted ally.

The consequent anger and sorrow, common to government and people alike, are natural. But why should there be a note of surprise?

Expressions of surprise by government spokesmen at Washington's negative attitude demonstrate the lack of realism, the unbelievable confusion in the policy towards the US since the autumn of 1977. No government has more consistently ignored the facts of Washington's collaboration with the Arabs. The Likud, which promised the people a new, imaginative and sophisticated foreign policy and information service; which would repair the grievous errors of its predecessors; which was so conscious of the need for speed; and which promised to mobilize the best elements in the US for the difficult task of creating a barrier against the application of the pro-Arab policies rampant in Washington — the Likud did not, on taking power, even make a start on fulfilling its undertakings.

On the contrary the government rushed off in the opposite direction, without recourse either to caution or to commonsense, or to the lessons of experience, in its effort to outdo the Alignment.

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That is how it turned its back on one of the central principles of its political credo — that negotiations must take place directly with the Arabs, and only with the Arabs. It agreed, and in fact even proposed, that Washington should serve as mediator; and accepted without comment the astonishing declaration by Mr. Carter that he would in fact be a “full partner” in the negotiations — though his complete identification with the Arabs was being aired repeatedly. If this is the measure of Israeli political wisdom and caution, there seems little point in complaining at American resourcefulness in taking advantage of it.

Predictably, therefore — and as was indeed predicted — at every stage of the negotiations the screw was tightened; and the result was the long list of surrenders and concessions by Israel, subjected to the unrelenting squeeze between Egyptian immovability and American persuasion.

If this were not enough, Israel's representatives did not miss an opportunity of singing the praises of the American President and his assistants — who did the persuading and the coaxing — for the “constructive part” they played in the negotiations.

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Now the bubble has burst. There is no peace, and it is patent that the Arabs have no more intention of making peace with Israel than they had in the past; and the Americans reveal a growing unfriendliness, and an increasing unconcern for Israel's ultimate fate.

Washington's own shortsighted view of their interests in our part of the world is on a par with their shortsightedness in other parts of the world.

Will not our government now grasp the realities of the situation, halt its headlong progress, assess the historic blunder it has been committing, reconsider all the elements of its policy, stop ignoring the fact of a firm alliance between Washington and Cairo, seek the ways and means of consolidating our friends in the US as a barrier to the obviously inimical aims of the Administration?