

Some Issues in Ronald Reagan's Middle East Policy

Vasil KACHARAVA^{1*}

Abstract

The paper describes certain elements of Ronald Reagan's administration policy in the Middle East. It reflects fruitful and, at the same time, complicated cooperation with Israel, also Reagan's cooperation with Saudi Arabia in fields of security and oil prices. The final result was dramatic fall of oil prices which influenced the oil export of the Soviet Union which so desperately needed foreign currency to acquire new technologies to successfully compete in the arms industry.

Keywords: AWACS, Israel, oil prices, Ronald Reagan, Saudi Arabia, USSR

¹ Prof. Dr., Head of the Institute of American Studies, Iv. Javakishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
E-mail: vasoamstud@gmail.com

Introduction

The paper describes the very complicated and sophisticated policy of the Reagan Administration in the Middle East. First of all, its target was to achieve a peaceful solution to the regional problems. At the same time, it was to continue the traditional pro-Israel policy. Simultaneously, it was to improve cooperation with Saudi Arabia and try to raise oil production which was necessary for lowering oil prices all around the world. From Reagan's point of view, all these were necessary for peaceful victory in the Cold War.

Ronald Reagan's Middle East Policy

Reagan's policy towards this region is very complex and contradictory. First of all, at least because it is one of the most difficult and controversial regions in the world, and secondly, because Reagan himself did not like to be actively involved in the Middle East politics. On the one hand, it was not the front line of the Cold War, hence less relevant to it (although he eventually used this region very well in his confrontation with the Soviet Union) and, on the other hand, because he had a poor understanding of the details of the religious confrontation. To the famous Conservative William Buckley he wrote: "Bill, the Middle East is a difficult place, not a place, it is a mood, a chaotic mood."

He wrote to another respondent, "Sometimes I doubt that the Middle East is the cradle of the three great religions of the world, since it needs religion more than any other place in the world" (Hayward, 2009, p. 313).

According to the one of the best Reagan's biographers, well-known journalist Lou Cannon, in the summer of 1982, the Reagan administration was drawn into military involvement in Lebanon, a precarious democracy in the Middle East and a cauldron of conflict among competing military and confessional groups, as the various religious and ethnic factions are known. Reagan and his policymakers, including both his secretaries of state, believed that the United States had national security interests in the region to combat the Soviet influence. The United States also had a historic alliance with Israel, supported by every U.S. president since the Jewish state was created in 1948. Reagan himself had been committed to Israel from its inception, which did little to endear him to Arab nations—or Israel's chief adversary, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the same time, Reagan's relations with Israeli leader Menachem Begin were less than harmonious and worsened considerably

early in the President's first term when Reagan watched in horror on White House television as Israeli bombers leveled Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, killing many civilians. Reagan became so angry that on August 12, 1982, he telephoned Begin and told him the bombing had gone too far. "You must stop it," Reagan said. Begin did, but the United States had moved a step closer toward involvement in Lebanon.

Two months earlier, in June 1982, Israel had invaded neighboring Lebanon in the hope of depriving the PLO of a base of operations. The invasion, and particularly the bombing and shelling of Beirut, was globally condemned. Within the Reagan administration, the invasion touched off latent conflicts between the diplomats and the warriors. Secretary of State Haig and Secretary of State Shultz after him believed that the United States should become involved in working out a peace process in Lebanon. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, influenced by the legacy of Vietnam, were reluctant to put U.S. troops in harm's way. Reagan followed a middle course and in August 1982 sent 800 U.S. Marines to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force that also included French and Italian contingents. Their mission was to maintain a cease-fire during which PLO fighters in Lebanon would be allowed passage to neighboring Syria. Once the PLO had departed, Israel would withdraw from Lebanon. After the PLO fighters left, Weinberger withdrew the U.S. troops. But with the international force withdrawn, violence broke out again. Lebanese militia with ties to Israel massacred 700 refugees at two camps in mid-September 1982, including at least three dozen women and children. President Reagan, appalled by the massacre, ordered the U.S. forces back ashore.

The Americans found themselves amid a full-fledged civil war, one in which they unwittingly became targets as Israeli troops withdrew. In April 1983, Lebanese terrorists from a group called Hezbollah—which received financial and logistical support from Iran and Syria—detonated a truck bomb in front of the American Embassy in Beirut; seventeen Americans died, including eight employees of the CIA. American forces continued to come under attack sporadically throughout the summer of 1983. In response to the deaths of six soldiers, Reagan ordered U.S. warships to shell the camps of anti-American militias.

The most deadly attack against the United States occurred on October 23, 1983, when terrorists blew up the Marines' barracks at the Beirut airport, killing 241 U.S. servicemen, most of them Marines. More than 100 others were wounded in the attack, many of whom suffered permanent injuries. Reagan subsequently called it, "the saddest day of

my presidency...the saddest day of my life." Suspecting that Hezbollah was responsible for the attack, Reagan ordered airstrikes against Hezbollah's leadership. The destruction of the Marine barracks forced Reagan to reassess his Lebanon policy. The small remaining U.S. force had no hope of influencing events in Lebanon unless it was substantially reinforced. Against the opposition of the diplomats, Secretary Weinberger and the Joint Chief pushed for the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces. So did White House Chief of Staff James Baker, who feared that Lebanon would become an issue in Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign.

In February 1984, the surviving Marines were withdrawn to U.S. vessels waiting offshore. Reagan described the withdrawal as "redeployment," but he would not again send ground troops into Lebanon or any other place in the Middle East. (Cannon [Online])

Vice President Bush toured the destroyed compound and declared that the administration was «not going to let a bunch of insidious terrorist cowards shape the foreign policy of the United States» (Wilentz, 2008, p. 160). Yet apart from some desultory shelling of Muslim militia positions, the United States undertook no military retaliation. Instead, the marines were moved offshore, out of harm's way. In early February, Reagan ordered the force to begin a withdrawal, and in April the last of the troops departed (Wilentz, 2008).

Reagan, however, did not like the retreat of such pressure from American forces because he looked like an escapee, but he also agreed to do so.

It can be said that to some extent it looked convenient for Israel, since after that it remained the main Western armed force in the region.

At the same time, Islamist terrorists drew the obvious lesson that the US could be successfully coerced through the infliction of American casualties. (Dueck, 2010).

It is generally noteworthy that terrorism in those years came more from Islam than from Marxist groups. So, this struggle took a lot of energy instead of concentrating on fighting the Marxists (Gregg, 2015).

On February 2, 1983, Reagan met with Jewish leaders at the White House to discuss Middle East issues, among other issues. "Let me now turn to a third item that I wanted to discuss with you, the Middle East. America's commitment to Israel remains strong and enduring. And, again, I ask you to focus on deeds.

Since the foundation of the State of Israel, the United States has stood by her and helped her to pursue security, peace, and economic growth. Our friendship is based on historic moral and strategic ties, as well as our shared dedication to democracy. We've had disagreements, as would be expected between friends, even between good friends. Our friendship continues, however, and there should be no doubt that America's commitment to Israel's security remains as it always has been.

The proposals I made to build an enduring peace are strongly rooted in the history of the region and are designed to promote negotiations that will achieve a solution acceptable to all the parties. They're based on a historic U.S. commitment to Israelis' security. They reaffirm the Camp David accords, which deem that peace must bring security to Israel and provide for the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.

Our proposals are founded on the Camp David process and United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which produced the region's first meaningful peace treaty, ending the state of war between Egypt and Israel. Israel and Arab leaders must take the necessary risks for peace to take root and bloom if we're to succeed. It is riskier to do nothing, to let this time pass with no tangible sign of progress" (Reagan, 1983).

The United States and Israel signed a free trade agreement in 1985. As Reagan said. "The Free Trade Area Agreement is the first such agreement entered into by the United States. It fully meets the international rules regarding free trade areas contained in the GATT. When fully implemented in January 1995, the agreement will eliminate restrictions on all trade between the United States and Israel –

a trade which in 1984 amounted to \$3.6 billion. The agreement also contains unprecedented recognition of the increasing importance of trade in services and investment, which will serve to further liberalize our bilateral economic relations.

The United States has a basic commitment to Israel's economic well-being, and we have pledged to continue to help Israel fulfill its great potential. In my discussions with Prime Minister Peres last fall, we explored ways to address Israel's pressing economic problems. We agreed that the Free Trade Area will be instrumental in helping Israel put its economy back on a foundation of vigorous, self-sustaining growth. I am confident that as this agreement is implemented, the U.S.-Israel Free Trade Area will prove to be one of the cornerstones of Israel's future economic development program" (Reagan, 1985).

On every summit with Gorbachev Reagan worked to free the Soviet Jews and was quite successful in this field.

Reagan also approved the CIA-sponsored rescue of 500 Ethiopian Jews in 1985's Operation Joshua. He also was responsible for helping to reform Israel's economy. In 1985, following a severe economic crisis in Israel, which sent inflation rates soaring as high as 445%, the U.S. approved a \$1.5 billion emergency assistance package and helped formulate Israel's successful economic stabilization plan.

Under Reagan, Israel began to receive \$3 billion annually in foreign aid.

In fact, a series of memoranda of understanding were signed during the Reagan administration between U.S. agencies and their Israeli counterparts that promoted cooperation in a range of fields such as education, space research, and health (*Reagan's Legacy on Israel* [Online]).

In particular, the deepening and further formalization of cooperation between the Pentagon and the Israeli Defense Army can be considered. Accordingly, the strengthening of the Israeli army.

Probably one of the most effective steps in the confrontation with the Soviet Union was taken in the Middle East. One of the most effective steps to weaken the Soviet economy was to increase oil production by Saudi Arabia as a result of American attempts, and consequently to lower oil prices, which would make the Soviet Union lose a large amount of hard currency. Reagan was well aware of the real hardships of the Soviet Union and even mentioned it in one of his speeches.

"Soviet efforts in the area of humanitarian relief are virtually nonexistent. I challenge the Kremlin to explain why it refuses to provide anything but weapons of destruction to the underdeveloped world. One explanation, of course, is that the Soviet system is incapable of producing enough food for its own population, much less enough to help others in need. What this points to is the undeniable relationship between free enterprise and material abundance, between freedom and caring" (Frost, 2012, p. 50).

The pressure on the Soviet economy from the very first days of Reagan's presidency began with Reagan's far-sighted policies when he was still implementing the decision made during Carter's presidency.

We emphasize this because such decisions were sometimes made quite slowly and vigorously in life. In particular, talking about improving relations with the Arab world in order to reduce oil prices through them, which in turn would reduce the Soviet Union's foreign exchange earnings very seriously. So

the Reagan factor proved to be extremely important. Reagan's dramatic appeal for popular and congressional support on the sale of **AWACS** airplanes to the Saudi Arabians was absolutely critical in the final tally on that measure (Berman, 1990).

This was not a simple decision, since Israel has been actively protesting it under the pretext that the Saudis could use **AWACS** against Israel in terms of understanding their aviation intentions and actions. Prime Minister Begin protested when the Senate approved the sale act by 52 votes to 48.

As the American researcher Jentleson noted, neither in the Senate itself, where the influence of the Israeli lobby was strong, was it easy to pursue this idea. (Jentleson, 2004, p. 181). So, Reagan, who, in order to get Senate approval of a major 1981 arms sale to Saudi Arabia, doled out funds for a new hospital in the state of one senator, a coal-fired power plant for another, and a US attorney appointment for a friend of another.

To appease the Israeli and Israeli lobbies, Reagan told a news conference on October 1, 1981 the following:

"This morning Congress was notified of our intention to sell AWACS aircraft and F - 15 enhancement items to Saudi Arabia. I have proposed this sale because it significantly enhances our own vital national security interests in the Middle East. By building confidence in the United States as a reliable security partner, the sale will greatly improve the chances of our working constructively with Saudi Arabia and other states of the Middle East toward our common goal -- a just and lasting peace. It poses no threat to Israel, now or in the future. Indeed, by contributing to the security and stability of the region, it serves Israel's long-range interests.

Further, this sale will significantly improve the capability of Saudi Arabia and the United States to defend the oil fields on which the security of the free world depends.

As President, it's my duty to define and defend our broad national security objectives. The Congress, of course, plays an important role in this process. And while we must always take into account the vital interests of our allies, American security interests must remain our internal responsibility. It is not the business of other nations to make American foreign policy. An objective assessment of U.S. national interest must favor the proposed sale. And I say this as one who holds strongly the view that both a secure state of Israel and a stable Mideast peace are essential to our national interests." (Gerstenzang, 1981).

Though Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia were tense, Mr. Sadat is said to have asked the United States to expand

military ties with the Saudis. The recent dispatch of American radar surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia was welcomed here (Tanner, 1981).

For its part, the Saudis were very pleased not only with the acquisition of the latest technology, but also with such a strong and loyal alliance with the United States.

At the same time, however, Reagan was writing a letter of allegiance to the Prime Minister of Israel.

“Recent press reports have presented incorrect and exaggerated commentary regarding U.S. military assistance policies for the Middle East.

I want you to know that America's policy toward Israel has not changed. Our commitments will be kept. I am determined to see that Israel's qualitative technological edge is maintained and am mindful as well of your concerns with respect to quantitative factors and their impact upon Israel's security.

The policy of this government remains as stated publicly by me. Secretary Haig's and Secretary Weinberger's statements on the public record are also clear. There has been no change regarding our military supply relationship with Jordan, and Secretary Weinberger brought me no new request. Any decision on future sales to Jordan or any other country in the region will be made in the context of my Administration's firm commitment to Israel's security and the need to bring peace to the region.

Israel remains America's friend and ally. However, I believe it is in the interest of both our countries for the United States to enhance its influence with other states in the region. I recognize the unique bond between the United States and Israel and the serious responsibilities which this bond imposes on us both” (Reagan, 1982).

That this was a heartfelt letter can also be seen from Reagan's diary, where he basically repeats the same thing. F.M. Rabin of Israel came in. I was able to tell him we are asking Congress for \$1.8 bil. in Foreign Mil. Sales for his country—a sizeable increase. I tried to impress on him why we feel we must sell weapons to the moderate Arab States if we are to ever bring them around to making permanent peace with Israel. It isn't an easy sell even when I tell them we'll never let Israel lose its qualitative edge (Reagan, 2007).

Reagan's benevolent policy toward Saudi Arabia was also evident during King Fahd's visit. In a welcome address on February 11, 1985, Reagan noted:

“King Fahd's visit is in keeping with the warm, personal relations enjoyed between the leaders of our two countries, a tradition which began 40 years ago this week when King Fahd's father and President Franklin Roosevelt met to exchange views. The good will that emerged from that meeting of two great men has enormously benefited both our peoples in the last four decades <...>.

The positive nature of our relations demonstrates that cultural differences, as distinct as our own, need not separate or alienate peoples from one another.

As the guardians of Mecca and the protectors of your faith, you rightfully exert a strong moral influence in the world of Islam, and the people of the United States are proud of their leadership role among the democratic nations.

King Fahd, I hope that we can work together to seek a new rapprochement between the Islamic world and the Western democracies. Destiny has given us different political and social systems, yet with respect and good will, as our two countries have demonstrated, so much can be accomplished <...>.

Already, the bonds of commerce are strong, especially between our two countries. Petroleum from Saudi wells helps drive the engines of progress in the United States, while at the same moment, American technology and know-how help in the construction of Saudi roads, hospitals, and communications systems.

Saudi Arabia has grown into one of America's largest trading partners. The commercial and economic power that we exert in the world spurs enterprise and bolsters stability.

Marxist tyranny already has its grip on the religious freedom of the world's fifth-largest Muslim population. This same grip strangles the prayers of Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. We all worship the same God. Standing up to this onslaught, the people of Afghanistan, with their blood, courage, and faith, are an inspiration to the cause of freedom everywhere.

Afghanistan, of course, is not the only conflict in the region. We're also concerned about the tragic war between two of Saudi Arabia's neighbors -- Iran and Iraq -- a conflict that is raging only a few minutes by air from Saudi territory. This bloodshed has dragged on far too long and threatens peace throughout the region. The United States will do what we can, diplomatically,

to end the fighting. And we will cooperate with Saudi Arabia to ensure the integrity of your borders <...>.

I continue to believe that a just and lasting settlement, based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, is within reach. The security of Israel and other nations of the region and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people can and should be addressed in direct negotiations. It is time to put this tragedy to rest and turn the page to a new and happier chapter." (Reagan, 1985).

Fahd also praised America.

"Permit me, Mr. President, to turn back the pages of history to the period following the First World War, to the time when the majority of the Arab countries were suffering under the yoke of colonialism; when your country affirmed the principles that advocated the right of peoples to freedom, independence, and self-determination.

At that time, when the name of the United States stood for freedom, justice, and independence, the aspirations of the Arab peoples were directed toward your country as the defender of truth and justice. Now we are in a new era in which the United States reaffirms those principles, this time under your leadership, Mr. President. <...>

The Palestinian question is the single problem that is of paramount concern to the whole Arab nation and affects the relations of its peoples and countries with the outside world. It is the one problem that is the root cause of instability and turmoil in the region. I hope, Mr. President, that your administration will support the just cause of the Palestinian people.

We only ask for a just position that conforms with the history and ideals of your great country, a position that is consonant with its role of leadership in the international community. Such a position will earn the United States the respect and appreciation not only of the Arab and Muslim worlds but also of freedom-loving peoples everywhere.

Similarly, the problem of Lebanon needs to be addressed in such a way that would guarantee the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanese territory and the achievement of Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and full independence.

Mr. President, I share your view that Saudi Arabia, with its Islamic beliefs and principles, and the United States, with its ideals and values, can together find a common ground against aggression, injustice, and oppression.

Mr. President, as far as the people of Afghanistan are

concerned, these people who want nothing but freedom against oppression, freedom from killing women and children -- these people deserve our help." (*Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony for King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia*, 1985).

Indeed, the Saudis, helped the Americans in delivering weapons to Afghanistan. The Saudis also financed the contractions at the request of the Americans and handed over about \$ 32 million in total (Hayward, 2009, pp. 313-314).

By the way, Caspar Weinberger was in favor of a more active and positive relationship with Arab countries, for which he was even called an Arabist. He believed that America needed more than one friend (Israel) in the Middle East.

Moreover, not only would giving Israel money and weapons help, but it would also help to create friendly states in its neighborhood (Weinberger, [Online]).

As mentioned, among other things, all these reverences, Reagan needed to fight the Soviet Union. The biggest result was Reagan's insistence on Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production and, indeed, the American demand was fulfilled, and in August 1985 the Saudis significantly increased oil production to 2 million barrels per day by the end of the same year.

Accordingly, in November the price dropped from \$ 30 to \$ 12. This has already greatly annoyed the Kremlin. Who so desperately needed foreign currency to acquire new technologies to successfully compete in the arms industry.

The fall in oil prices has also pushed down the price of gasoline in America, which by 1986 was already worth just 82 cents per gallon. Gold, silver, bronze and many others became cheaper. (Hayward, 2009).

By the way, the fall in oil prices was also conditioned by Reagan's domestic policy. April 19, 1986 Address to the Nation on Oil Prices

"When I first came into office in January of 1981, the price of gas was just about \$1.25 a gallon. The price of a barrel of oil had reached \$36. Americans were understandably frustrated and angry as they cast about for answers. Some people advocated more governmental intervention. Demands for divestitures of oil companies filled the air. Other people demanded gas rationing. Well, we said no. I didn't want to force more limits on people through rationing. I wanted to ease the situation by letting freedom solve the problem through the magic of the marketplace.

One week after I took office, we decontrolled the price

of domestic oil, and we stopped the Government from putting ceilings on its pricing and production. Our action wasn't exactly greeted by rave reviews <...>.

Despite all the scare tactics and dire warnings, decontrol was a success. The price of oil has fallen from \$36 a barrel in 1981 to about \$12 a barrel today. The price of gas has also plummeted from an average of \$1.25 a gallon when I took office to about 82 cents today. In fact, the price of gas is now cheaper in real terms, meaning accounting for inflation, than it's been at any point since the 1950s...

But the oil harvest of the eighties is not just an economic story; it also has implications for our national security. When I came into office the United States was consuming about 17 million barrels of oil a day -- 6 million imported. A big part of that oil came from the Middle East. Today we consume less than 16 million barrels of oil a day, and only 4 million are imported. But what may prove to be even more significant is that we've changed who we buy our imported oil from. Back in 1981, most of it came from the OPEC countries, but now most of it comes from Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Great Britain. As Vice President Bush pointed out recently, we've assured that our supplies won't be as vulnerable to international politics as they've been in the past. We need a strong U.S. energy industry to keep it that way" (Reagan, 1986).

The economic pressure on the Soviet Union had gravely worsened the situation. Saudi Arabia increased oil production dramatically. By one estimate, Moscow just lost \$ 20 billion a year. Gorbachev's backward country suddenly became a lot poorer (Hoffmann, 2009).

It was especially difficult for the Soviets to procure the necessary technologies for modern armaments abroad. Especially since Reagan's, Strategic Defense Initiative hung like a Damocles sword over the USSR.

If the oil prices were boon to the US, they were a bust to the Kremlin. CIA analysts had concluded that for every one dollar drop, in the price of a barrel of oil, Moscow would lose between \$ 500 million and \$1 billion per year in the critical hard currency (Schweizer, 2002, p. 239).

With prices falling by the Saudis, oil pipelines began to flow into Alaska. The combination of these factors greatly pushed the price down and, as Russian scientists acknowledge, halved foreign exchange inflows into the Soviet Union. (B.O. Печатнов, А.С. Маныкин, 2012).

But here, too, other OPEC countries had to be

persuaded, who did not at all like such price reductions. So something should have been an acceptable price for everyone. To the Saudis Schultz, Weinberger, and Casey also talked about these topics, noting that the American economy needed it in the first place and that the problems would have an additional effect on Moscow.

At the same time, they promised all kinds of help. The final, strategic, result was that Moscow became much more accommodating in the negotiations.

So it can be said that Reagan's policy in the Middle East, despite its contradictory nature, despite the great American sacrifice in Lebanon, despite some difficulties in its relations with Israel, ultimately led to some stability in this difficult and ever-exploding region.

Including between Israel and the Arab world. In any case, Reagan has always argued that America's rapprochement with the Arab world was beneficial to Israel as well and that the Americans significantly increased their aid to Israel.

At the same time, they were providing significant assistance to Egypt, thereby increasing the Arab world's confidence in the United States and its mediation in normalizing relations with Israel.

But what turned out to be the most important for the whole world was the drop in oil prices by the Saudis.

The fact that no other Arab country has opposed this, eventually, dramatically reduced the Soviet Union's foreign currency reserve, made it more difficult for it to compete with the Americans in the field of strategic nuclear weapons, and eventually forced it to sign the 1987 Treaty on the Destruction of Medium and Short-Range Missiles and many other concessions, Or in this case in relations with the whole free world.

Conclusion

We cannot say that the Reagan administration dramatically improved the situation in the Middle East. Regional problems still were very painful. But Regan's policy regarding Saudi Arabia and his request to this country to grow up oil production to provoke a drop in oil prices were very successful. Finally, it reduced Soviet Union's income from oil export and reduced its hard currency reserve which was so necessary for arms production.

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