

Israel should be urged to reverse its military course

By Michael A. Weinstein

The Israeli government, which has staked its regional policy on a delusive myth of military security, is suddenly being pulled beyond its depth by the currents of change in the Middle East. The Israeli people, sorely taxed by weariness from decades of military confrontation with their neighbors, confront an exasperated subject population—Palestinians on the West Bank and in the Gaza strip—whose patience has been strained to the breaking point. The stage is set for a rapid shift in the balance of power, posing difficult choices for American foreign policy.

The American public, and Jewish Americans in particular, can only look with horror at the sight of young Palestinians being lashed to military vehicles for use as shields against stone-throwing crowds. The images of the brutality of the Israeli occupation give the lie to Israel's claim that the riots are simply the work of Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists. Such extreme measures are only undertaken when conflict has gotten out of hand and has spread to the general, normally peaceable population. United Nations observers, journalists and diplomats contradict the Israeli story and warn of worse troubles to come.

It will not help to search for excuses for the misconduct of Israel's government and military. We

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may have traveled far beyond the point at which we expect or even hope for Israel to be a beacon of civility in the Middle East, but we need not sit passively by and condone its descent into barbarism. A great deal of sympathy can still be marshaled for a small country struggling to maintain democracy in a hostile environment, but sympathy should be tempered with judgment when the struggle perverts the ideal. The time has long passed for Americans and their government to take a clear moral stand against the means the Israeli regime has employed to achieve a spurious military security.

The Reagan administration has spoken very softly about the recent developments in the occupied territories, hoping not to offend its ally and American supporters of Israel as an election year begins. Yet administration spokesmen have at least acknowledged that Israel has violated well-established norms of international conduct. Our government should do far more than simply note the abuses of the occupation, not only so that our country presents a clear moral profile in a world swept by the winds of democracy and self-determination, but to preserve our vital interests in a key area of the world.

Painful as it may be after long years of anchoring our policy in the Middle East on trust in Israel's friendship and, far more important, in its rationality and prudence, we must finally admit that our ally has embarked on a self-defeating strategy that brings moral discredit on itself and practical failure in its wake.

Powerful movements toward democracy and self-determination throughout the world have ushered in a new era of global politics in which those who stand against the popular will, however halting and fragile it may appear to be, are destined to be the losers.

We must ask ourselves how long Israel will be able to resist the massive changes in process as suppressed populations make their bids for self-government. Will Israel be able to exploit its strategy of divide and rule indefinitely in the face of an Islamic awakening? Will it succeed over the long haul in meeting profound popular aspirations with brute force?

The greatest danger the United States faces in the Middle East is that Israel's persistence in choosing quick-fix military solutions over diplomacy and conciliation will result in its collapse as a power, leaving us without a strong ally in the region. The choices that lie ahead for American policy are so difficult because there is no other state in the Middle East that can replace Israel as our close ally: We are bound to Israel for better or worse.

In light of our predicament, we must use all of our moral, political and economic suasion to reverse Israel's disastrous military course and put it on the path of negotiation with both its external adversaries and its occupied populations. A forthright American stance will find support within Israel and will put our country in alignment with the present direction of world history.