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## THE POLITICS OF BEGIN'S BAGHDAD RAID

by

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There have been numerous dramatic developments in the Middle East during the past year. Although 1981 will not be remembered as a year that contained events with the significance of those in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1977, it will nonetheless be recalled as a turbulent and intense year in the history of this most dynamic area. It saw an intensification of the trauma and agony in Lebanon; a clash between Israel and Syria over the legitimacy of the political "turf" controlled by each around the Litani River basin; the reelection of Menachem Begin and the appointment of a more nationalist, ideologically doctrinaire Israeli cabinet; an escalating confrontation between the United States and Libya in ways that sometimes went beyond the verbal; the brutal murder of Anwar Sadat; and the effective annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights by the Israeli Government. The year revealed the scope of the increasingly strained relations between the United States and Israel as the divergent interests of the two countries became more apparent to Washington if not to Jerusalem. The year just prior also saw demands in the United States for a fundamental reconsideration of the American-Israeli association, a phenomenon best illustrated by calls for negotiations with the Palestine Liberation

Organization made by two ex-Presidents and a former national security advisor.

But of all the Middle Eastern drama which 1981 provided, perhaps the most significant in terms of its long-range impact was the 7 June destruction of the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak by the Israeli Air Force. Coming at a time when the new Reagan administration was just beginning the formulation of a comprehensive Middle Eastern policy, and following the laborious efforts of the President's special envoy, Philip Habib, to control and defuse the seemingly explosive confrontation between Israel and Syria in southern Lebanon, this provocative, unilateral action by the Begin government created perceptions in the United States and elsewhere from which Begin's Likud party leadership will have difficulty recovering.

In addition to antagonizing the Reagan administration, the raid has illustrated quite clearly that the interests of the United States and Israel in the Middle East are in many ways very distinct, and it has initiated a reappraisal of American-Israeli relations that has found favorable response in the American press and with the American public.<sup>1</sup> All of these developments are extremely serious for Israel's long-term interests particularly if the cooling

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effect on American-Israeli relations that the raid initiated continues. Should the evolving judgment about the raid's justification indicate that Israel acted for reasons not totally related to immediate security concerns, then the American connection to Israel may never completely return to its previous condition. The current evidence (and trends) indicate that this development is very likely.

The raid came as a complete surprise to the U.S. Government and sent American officials scrambling to distance Washington from the Israeli action. Despite the claims made by Jerusalem that the action was required because of the belligerent attitude of the Iraqi regime and its intention to use the facility for the production of nuclear weapons to be used against Israel, the State Department condemned the raid on 9 June and on the following day announced the suspension of the delivery of four F-16 fighter-bombers, the type used for the attack.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after that public and relatively harsh treatment of a major ally, Secretary of State Alexander Haig sent a letter to Congress, pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act, stating that a substantial violation of the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement of 23 July 1952, under which the terms of the sale of American military equipment to Israel are determined, "may have occurred."<sup>3</sup>

The American criticism of the Israeli attack continued unabated into the United Nations. It was inevitable and unavoidable that the Iraqi government would ask for some sort of UN action against Israel. What came as a surprise to many was that the U.S. Ambassador in the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick, openly negotiated the wording of a Security Council Resolution acceptable to the U.S. with the Iraqi representative, Foreign Minister Saadun Hamadi. The fact that such contacts were being made at all (since the United States and Iraq have had no diplomatic relations since

the 1967 Arab-Israeli war) added additional weight to the U.S. vote to condemn the Israeli action.<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem probably expected that the United States would block any Arab attempt to condemn the raid, forcing the Arabs to take the case to the General Assembly where the proceedings would be much more lengthy and the results much easier for Israel to disregard considering its contention that the Third World states compromising that body are hostages to Arab oil and financial power. Indeed, Iraq continued to press the case and did succeed on 12 November 1981 in having the General Assembly vote a condemnation of the Israeli action, terming it a "serious threat" to the efforts of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor nuclear power worldwide. The United States voted against the General Assembly resolution but claimed it did so largely on procedural grounds.<sup>5</sup>

The reaction of the U.S. Government and the American people must have come as something of a shock to the Israeli Government. Many key supporters of Israel in Congress were highly critical of the attack and openly stated that the United States was faced with a dilemma whose solution was not necessarily favorable to the Israeli position. Several Congressmen, skeptical of the justifications offered by Israel, noted that whereas Iraq was a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Israel quite pointedly was not. It was also observed that the operations of the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona had never been subjected to the inspection of the IAEA whereas the Osirak reactor had been regularly inspected.<sup>6</sup> In response to this, the Israelis and their supporters in the United States challenged the effectiveness of the IAEA inspection program, claiming that the inspections were announced in advance, that the host country could control the times of the inspections through manipulation of the inspectors' visas, and that

the last time the Iraqi facility had been inspected the previous January, the inspectors had been a Ukrainian and a Hungarian.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the adverse actions of the American government, the response of the American and Western press to the Osirak raid was surprisingly negative. Many editorial pages, accustomed to carrying pieces supporting Israel in its struggle for peace and recognition, turned a decidedly hostile face toward this specific action. Some were quick to raise the curious connection in timing that existed between the raid and the upcoming Israeli elections only three weeks away.<sup>8</sup> Because the scientific explanations for the raid offered by Jerusalem were quickly amended with alternative analytical arguments, the action did not allow for a clear or easy determination of the veracity of the Israeli claims about the ultimate uses of the Osirak reactor. After the Israelis further alienated public opinion in the West with their 16 July raid on downtown Beirut, polls began to reflect that a majority of Americans believed the Israelis should not receive more military aircraft and that Washington should put more pressure on Israel to seek peace.<sup>9</sup>

The Israeli defense of the bombing was in itself a significant contributing factor to the rough treatment Jerusalem received at the hands of the Western press. Prime Minister Begin had declared at a news conference on 9 June that the military option was exercised because of the threatening rhetoric which had emanated from the Iraqi leadership through its controlled press. Begin specifically cited a 4 October editorial from the Baghdad daily *al-Thawra* as declaring that the Iraqi nuclear reactor was intended for use "against the Zionist enemy." However, a review of the paper revealed no such quote. In testimony before Congress, two State Department officials, Nicholas A. Velonis, the Assistant

Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, and Ronald I. Spiers, the Director of Intelligence and Research, stated that a thorough search had failed to locate the quotes attributed by Prime Minister Begin to the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein. Secretary Velities summarized this situation by noting that, "Each such article that has been brought to our attention, we have found did not exist."<sup>10</sup> The Israeli case was further eroded by Prime Minister Begin's fantastic assertion that the Iraqis had constructed a weapons assembly plant 130 feet beneath the reactor to avoid detection from the IAEA inspectors. He later changed the depth of the bomb factory to a less incredible 13 feet.<sup>11</sup>

The Israeli government could clearly have predicted many of the responses that the raid on Osirak drew from the American government—even to some extent from the American press and public. They obviously knew that the action would be sharply denounced in the United States and that the result would be strained relations (at least in the short term). It is arguable that they understood or anticipated the full dimensions of the adverse response that actually developed in the wake of the action. But accepting that Jerusalem understood there to be some risks, why did they decide to execute the raid when they did?

It is, of course, quite possible that the rationale for Prime Minister Begin's decision was as he stated it: the Iraqi nuclear program was a danger and it had to be dealt with because of the specific realities of Israel's geographic size and demography. The Israeli government had openly been attempting to draw international attention to the weapons potential of Osirak since shortly after the 1976 agreement between Iraq and France to build the facility. In the summer of 1980, Prime Minister Begin and Deputy Prime Minister Yadin had made it quite clear that Israel considered

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Osirak to be a danger. In addition, Jerusalem was very angry over a decision by Italy to sell Iraq a "hot cell," which could be used to extract plutonium, and by the French decision to provide highly enriched uranium. In August 1980, Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Mordecai Zipori stated that if international pressure on Iraq didn't produce results, then Israel would have "to consider other means."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the efforts of Israel's supporters in the United States to have the U.S. Government bring pressure on the French and Italians over their treaty association with the Iraqi nuclear program, the State Department made no concerted effort to influence the European nuclear connection with Iraq. But neither did the Begin government exert itself to elevate the visibility of the issue. When Secretary of State Alexander Haig visited Israel during his April 1981 trip to the Middle East, Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir raised the topic, but admittedly did not "go into details."<sup>13</sup> The record, therefore, is clear in reflecting that the Begin government was concerned about Osirak; the record, however, is unclear about the actual nature and the immediacy of the Iraqi "threat."

Jerusalem claimed that it had to act when it did because the Osirak reactor was going into operation on 1 July (the day after the Israeli general election) and that the facility would give the Hussein regime the capability of producing nuclear weapons within a year. Prime Minister Begin insisted that this technical situation, when matched with the provocative statements attributed to Hussein, left him no choice but to act as he did to neutralize the threat. But the evidence of the actual capability of Osirak is far from conclusive.

During the congressional hearings held after the attack by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, it quickly became apparent that the judgments of

within and beyond the U.S. Government were extraordinarily different. In sifting through the testimony, however, a loose consensus seems to emerge around several points: potentially the Iraqis could produce nuclear weapons from the facility, but it was unlikely that they would be able to do so in less than five years; although the inspection procedures of the IAEA were less than optimal, they were probably sufficient to detect any significant violation on the scale necessary to produce uranium or plutonium weapons; and that on balance the Iraqis would probably have elected to site a weapons assembly facility away from the reactor if constructing a bomb was their primary motivation. As for Baghdad's intentions, the analysis of Professor Albert Carnesale of Harvard's School of Government seems quite balanced: "that their intention was . . . to violate all of their international agreements to produce bombs as fast as they could, and to take the risk of being detected. That I find unlikely. That they wanted a weapons option, I find likely."<sup>14</sup>

A second aspect of the rationale offered by the Israelis for the timing of the raid concerned the dangers inherent in bombing a functioning nuclear facility. The contention was that bombing the facility after the reactor core had gone "hot" would have exposed the population of Baghdad to possibly lethal doses of radioactivity. Like all of the other technical aspects, this one is also in dispute. A study conducted by the Congressional Research Service stated that an exact determination of the effects of an attack by conventional weapons on a nuclear reactor is difficult to produce because of the numerous variables involved, such as weather conditions and the scale of the damage. However, based on the available information, the CRS concluded that it would be "most unlikely for an attack with conventional bombs" to expose people beyond the immediate area to lethal doses of radiation.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear from the analyses that the technical evidence is somewhat cloudy—in fact, quite cloudy. Shortly after the attack, it became widely known that the U.S. government was far from satisfied with the intelligence analysis used to justify the attack. Shortly after the raid, the Israeli press was reporting that U.S. Intelligence had "rejected" the Israeli assessments and that Israel was sending its information to Washington for consideration.<sup>16</sup> If the United States were skeptical, it certainly had good reason.

Although it is widely described in the American press as the best in the world, the fact is that Israeli intelligence does not have a laudable record over the last few years. In the 1973 war, Israel was caught unprepared largely because of intelligence failures. In his recently published memoirs, former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman reports that on the eve of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, his intelligence chiefs were predicting war!<sup>17</sup> Since 1973, the Israeli intelligence effort has reflected a clear propensity for overstatement. Whether this was the circumstance before the Baghdad raid is uncertain; but the possibility exists that if the decision to attack was made because of the intelligence judgment, the Begin government "safe-sided" the estimates to a significant degree.

The question has been asked as to whether the timing of the raid reflects a bureaucratic coup by the Israeli military-intelligence establishment. Evidently they were the ones most concerned about Osirak as well as the possessors of the means for most expeditiously meeting the threat. Since Labor Leader Shimon Peres is widely regarded in Israel as something of an intellectual "dove," and was in fact very critical of the raid after its execution, it is possible that Begin was sold the faulty goods displayed at his 9 June press conference because the Israeli military realized that the chances of having such an operation

approved if Peres became Prime Minister were zero—hence the need for hasty action.<sup>18</sup>

There is substantial doubt that the Israeli attack was executed primarily from fear that after 1 July Saddam Hussein was planning to chart a course of reckless nuclear adventurism. Shai Feldman, a noted Israeli scholar, has questioned the veracity of the Begin government's initial justification for the raid. He suggests that Jerusalem was not concerned about any immediate Iraqi nuclear attack or effort at nuclear blackmail, but rather about the future dangers of a nuclear Middle East with the salient aspects of the Arab-Israeli dispute still unresolved. The judgment that an immediate threat to Israel is an insufficient explanation for the raid is, therefore, not an isolated opinion. The weight of evidence indicates that the concerns Menachem Begin had about Osirak were likely centered on another point of time. This leads to the conclusion that the decision was not made because of the *immediate* threat, but because of the long-term threat which was not distant enough for the current conditions and immediate prospects.<sup>19</sup>

Even this thesis, however, is too gentle. Considering all of the unsettled technical arguments, the possibility cannot be dismissed that the raid was undertaken for largely political reasons—not, as some have suggested, Israeli domestic politics<sup>20</sup> (although the favorable side-effects there cannot be wholly discounted), but rather in terms of international politics.

There has been too little made of the significance of the late President Sadat's visit with Begin at Ophira in southern Sinai just three days before the Osirak attack. Sadat had gone to Ophira in an effort to influence Begin to exercise restraint in the Syrian crisis that had arisen over the placement by Damascus of ground-to-air missiles in southern Lebanon. Begin had declared this move to be a threat to peace and had even

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announced that he had been prepared to destroy the missiles on 30 April, but had waited in response to an American request. Sadat was concerned that a prolonged crisis between Syria and Israel would indefinitely delay the Palestinian autonomy talks that were the major second feature to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the Camp David process.<sup>21</sup> Sadat must have also been concerned about the possibility of being dragged into a new war because of Israeli and Syrian intransigence, although the side with which he would cast his fortune was not clear. Despite the fact that the Egyptian press had in general been critical of both sides,<sup>22</sup> there was at least one report that indicated Sadat was considering a tactical alliance of some type with the Syrians in the event of hostilities.<sup>23</sup>

It was obvious to everyone that Sadat was growing increasingly uncomfortable with his isolation within the Arab world. Egypt has been the centerpiece of the Arab movement since Nasser so enthusiastically embraced the Pan-Arab theme in the mid-1950s. Since late 1980, Sadat had been taking some circumscribed steps to move Egypt back into the backwaters, if not the mainstream, of the Arab world. He had offered assistance to Iraq in its simmering war against Iran, and he had initiated an effort to warm Cairo's relations with Saudi Arabia. In February he had begun to broaden the legitimacy of the PLO by encouraging that organization to form a government-in-exile in cooperation with the West Bank Arab mayors. All of these efforts reflected a keen interest in reentering Arab politics and reasserting Egypt's Arab interests.<sup>24</sup>

An end of Sadat's isolation in the Arab world in advance of other Arab states joining in the peace process was a disturbing prospect for the Begin government. There were numerous voices in Israel asking the nature of the control that Israel would exercise over Egypt after Cairo had secured the return of the

Sinai scheduled for April 1982. In addition to that abstract consideration, there was the more concrete concern about the difficulties anticipated when the Israeli government moved, as agreed, to break up the settlements such as Yamit which had grown in the northern Sinai during the post-1967 years.<sup>25</sup> Sadat and the Egyptian peace were the only substantive achievements that the Likud leaders could reference in the heated election struggle against the Labor Alignment led by Shimon Peres; should the certainty of those historic facts become dubious, then both the election and the immediate Israeli future would become questionable.<sup>26</sup> Begin had to do something that would indisputably demonstrate, to the Israeli electorate, to the hostile Arab governments, and to himself, that the intentions of Sadat were precisely as the Egyptian leader had stated them in Jerusalem in 1977, and at Camp David in 1978.

The raid need not have been launched three days after Sadat and Begin had met in Israeli-controlled territory. By Jerusalem's own admission and argument, the reactor was not scheduled to go on line for nearly a month. The concern may have been that canceling the meeting would blow the strategic "cover" of the mission, but surely an easily justifiable excuse could have been found to keep Sadat in Cairo: Begin could have simply checked into a hospital and claimed that the rigors of the campaign had aggravated his well-documented heart condition, or taken the high principled approach by arguing that the immediacy of the election made it inappropriate to conduct the meeting at the summit level. Jerusalem understands the significance of timing in international politics. This was just recently demonstrated when the Begin cabinet decided to push the Golan Heights bill through the Knesset so that the deed would be done before Secretary Haig rescheduled his Middle Eastern trip previously scheduled for late

December.<sup>27</sup> That Jerusalem made the decision to go ahead with the Sadat meeting as scheduled clearly indicates that Sadat himself was at least a target if not *the* target of the whole exercise. The timing of his trip with the raid left Sadat wide open to charges of collusion from his severest Arab critics. The rebuttals open to him were limited to claims that he was totally uninformed (which most Arabs would elect not to believe) or that he was used and duped (which few statesmen would readily admit).

That the intention of the Osirak raid was to maintain and reinforce the isolation of Egypt within the Arab world is, of course, arguable and speculative; unquestionably many of the factors cited by Jerusalem were significant concerns. Nonetheless, this thesis does seem to be consistent with the other actions Israel took during the course of the year: the 16 July bombing of Beirut which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians and heightened the antagonistic passions of the PLO; the Israeli opposition to the American sale of AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia and the later provocative overflights of the Saudis' Tabuk airbase by the Israeli Air Force which have served to annoy the rulers of Riyadh;<sup>28</sup> and lastly, the December annexation of the Golan Heights, clearly a development which Syria would hardly view

with indifference. Through all of these actions, Egypt has stood calmly by, making meek protests while being condemned by fellow Arabs for its Israeli connection. Further evidence indicating that the Osirak nuclear pile was not the primary target in June can be gleaned from the mild Israeli response to the refusal of French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson during his recent visit to Jerusalem to refuse unequivocally future nuclear assistance to Iraq—in fact, the Israeli government made every effort to term the visit a spectacular success.<sup>29</sup> Although the truth remains elusive, the questions remain substantial. If it is the goal of Israel to keep Egypt suspended in Arab purgatory, then enormous doubts arise over the feasibility of the Reagan administration's desire to create a regional "strategic consensus." Under the present conditions, such a creature would have to be built around allies who are hostile at worst and devious at best. The evidence indicates that this dichotomy is the core of the current contentious nature of the American-Israeli condition.

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Capt. Davis is currently assigned to the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and serves as the Assistant Professor for Middle Eastern Studies.

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### NOTES

1. Examples of this criticism are numerous and easy to document, but for just a few examples see: Anthony Lewis, "Living by the Sword," *The New York Times*, 18 June 1981, p. 31; Richard Wilson, "Using Treaties Not Air Strikes to Halt Nuclear Spread," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 1981, p. 12; Reginald Dale, "Bloodshed Strains U.S. Friendship," *Financial Times*, 29 July 1981, p. 3; Terrence Smith, "For the U.S. and Israel, Rude Awakening," *The New York Times*, 26 July 1981, p. 1E. For a severely circumscribed endorsement of the raid, see "After the Israeli Strike," *Commonweal*, 3 July 1981, pp. 387-388. A recent example of the tone of the broadcast media on the status of U.S.-Israeli relations would be the comments of Bill Moyers delivered on the CBS Evening News, 21 December 1981.

2. Richard Whittle, "Israeli Raid Raises Arms Cut-Off Issue," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 13 June 1981, p. 1035. Also see Philip Taubman, "U.S. Supplied Weapons Play Key Role in the Mideast," *The New York Times*, 14 June 1981, p. 21.

3. U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Sub-Committee on International Security and Scientific Affairs on Europe and the Middle East, *Hearings: Israeli Attack on Iraqi Nuclear Facility*, 97th Cong., 1st Sess., 1981, pp. 3-4. Also see the criticism directed at the State Department by Rep. Benjamin Rosenthal, pp. 39-41. Hereafter cited as *Hearings*.



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4. Bernard D. Nossiter, "Look Who's Talking to Whom," *The New York Times*, 21 June 1981, p. E2.
5. Bernard D. Nossiter, "U.N. Condemns Israeli Raid on Reactor," *The New York Times*, 12 November 1981, p. A3.
6. In addition to the previously referenced Wilson piece, see Trudy Rubin, "That Israeli Raid on the Iraqi Reactor: the Facts and Deeper Issues," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 1981, pp. 12-13.
7. Hearings, pp. 53 and 80.
8. A surprisingly curt and critical editorial is Flora Lewis, "Decision for Israelis," *The New York Times*, 22 June 1981, p. A17. Also see Stephen S. Rosenthal, "Israel's Aloneness," *The Washington Post*, 12 June 1981, p. 17.
9. See the polls cited by Dale.
10. Hearings, p. 25. Also see pp. 31-33. Also see "Israel, Strung by Erroneous Quotations, Cites Others to Depict Peril from Iraq," *The New York Times*, 21 June 1981, p. 3.
11. See Rubin.
12. See letter from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, dated 16 June 1981, contained in Hearings, pp. 102-110.
13. See "Shamir Interviewed on U.S. Strategy, Other Topics," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*, 13 April 1981, p. 14.
14. Hearings, p. 80. The full statement of Dr. Carnesale is available on pp. 47-51. Page 48 contains the thesis of his comments.
15. Hearings, p. 95.
16. See "Israel to Provide Facts to U.S. Congress," *FBIS*, 17 June 1981, p. 12.
17. Ezer Weizman, *The Battle For Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), pp. 17-35.
18. See Peres' article, "A Strategy for Peace in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1980, pp. 887-901; also see the article by Abba Eban, the probable Labor Foreign Minister had the June elections gone the other way, "Camp David—The Unfinished Business," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1978-9, pp. 343-354. A representative Likud critique of these labor positions can be seen in Likud's campaign ad run in *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 June 1981, p. 9.
19. Shai Feldman, "The Raid on Osirak: A Preliminary Assessment," Tel Aviv University, Center for Strategic Studies, CSS memorandum #5, August 1981.
20. See Flora Lewis.
21. The actual discussions at Ophira were not disclosed. See the *Middle East Journal*, Autumn 1981, Chronology on p. 596.
22. See for example, "Foreign Ministry Issues Statement on Lebanon," *FBIS*, 30 April 1981, p. D3.
23. "Playing with Fire," *Time*, 11 May 1981, p. 28.
24. See *Middle East Journal*, Summer 1981, Chronology p. 364.
25. For a peripheral discussion of this issue and how it relates to the December annexation of the Golan Heights, see Nadav Safran, "Begin's Heights of Risk," *The New York Times*, 16 December 1981, p. A31. Also see Weizman, chaps. 10 and 11.
26. The economic conditions of Israel under the Likud government have been steadily deteriorating. See Ann Crittenden, "Israel's Economic Plight," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1979, pp. 1005-1016. Also see David K. Willis, "Letter from Israel," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 December 1981, pp. B16-18.
27. "Begin's Brash Blitz," *Time*, 28 December 1981, p. 54.
28. Don Oberdorfer, "Saudi Arabia Claims Violation of Airspace by Israeli Jets," *The Washington Post*, 10 November 1981, p. 13. For a discussion of other Saudi concerns, see William Quandt, "Riyadh Between the Superpowers," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1981, p. 55.
29. "Details of Cheysson-Shamir News Conference," and "Cheysson on European Initiatives; Arens Comments," *FBIS*, 9 December 1981, p. 13.