



Viewpoint

Israeli cooperation needed

While Geneva dominated the world's attention, negotiations proceeded quietly for the release of American and French hostages held in Beirut. A gentle, giant Englishman succeeded where all other Westerners failed; 6-foot-7 Terry Waite held conversations with the kidnapers.

Washington finally broke silence on Waite's efforts. Senior Reagan administration officials conceded the validity of the Brit's contacts. In London, Waite met at the American Embassy with a U.S. State Department team; he received an outline of how far this country is prepared to go to resolve the problem.

Obviously, Washington backtracked on its public statements; it is up to its official hips in the negotiations. It's about time. This nation is responsible for those held hostage; it can not refuse to discuss their fate. Four American captives sent identical letters two weeks ago; one copy reached the White House which fed back its standard line: "no negotiations."

Fortunately, the second copy went to England's Archbishop of Canterbury, who dispatched Terry Waite to Lebanon immediately. What the kidnapers said in those first meetings prompted a cautious optimism; some observers now expect the hostages' release.

Boosting this positive view, when Locke returned Tuesday to Beirut, he was accompanied by a Lebanese-born French heart specialist; he is standing by to treat a captive countryman reported gravely ill by the hostage takers.

However, Waite does nothing to encourage this cheery outlook for an early resolution. He continues to caution that his mission remains both delicate and dangerous. On that basis, media based in Beirut have shown themselves remarkably responsible: after some initial lashing about, reporters and TV crews are holding back. Waite does not have to play cat-and-mouse games with the media as he goes about his appointed rounds.

The government of Israel has not been as cooperative; it continues to send its jets freely over Lebanon in violation of international law. Not surprisingly, each flight raises tensions; the possibility of falling bombs always exists for frequently attacked Lebanon. Then there is the Syrian concern that the Israeli planes could turn their way. It happened this week, as Waite was returning to Beirut.

The Israelis report they shot down two Syrian migs over Syrian soil. Tel Aviv issued a near-apology based on where the "kills" took place; by implication, it would have felt no need for explanation if the Syrian jets had been down over Lebanon.

The Israeli over-flights can not be justified under any circumstances; but when they continue while efforts are under way to free the American hostages, they present a callous flaunting of concern for the best interest of Tel Aviv's principal ally, the United States.

Simple humanity demands full precautions attend upon Terry Waite's delicate mission. Lebanon's record for volatility has not been matched in modern times; however, the kidnapers rate as particularly erratic, even by Beirut standards. Obviously, they resolved to end their waiting. Why else would they permit the hostages to send those letters?

Of course, there is another possibility; but it also militates against provocations by the Israelis. The theory has been advanced that Damascus agreed to resume its efforts to free the Americans. Syria had angrily withdrawn good offices in response to the earlier Israeli attack on Tunis. Some sources think Jordan's King Hussein convinced Syrian President Hafez al-Asad that helping to secure freedom for the Americans would work to Damascus' advantage. The two countries recently patched up their differences after years of hostility.

Syria has always considered Israel and the United States as two faces on the same body politic. Washington's first, confused reaction to the attack on Tunis confirmed that view. Hussein's renewed relationship with Al-Adad could mitigate Damascus' reaction to this latest incident. But why take the chance of losing any potential Syrian influence in Terry Waite's negotiations?

The gentle, giant Englishman offers the best — maybe the last — hope to bring out the American and French hostages. Washington accepted that fact. The United States backed off its former hardnosed, no-win position. Some cooperation from Tel Aviv now seems appropriate.