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ANTI-SEMITISM AND INTIMIDATION

There is a big rumor going around. The rumor is that a wave of anti-semitism was set off during the AWACS debate, and is rising because of American/Israeli tensions.

There is no solid evidence on which to definitely accept this rumor or reject it. There are only signs. And the signs have to be assessed carefully lest we be guided down the garden path.

On the one hand, we don't want to under-estimate the signs which undergird the rumor. That would take us off the alert, a mistake we should never make. On the other hand, we don't want to exaggerate or misread the rumor. That would directly serve the purpose of some of our antagonists.

For make no mistake: the rumor of rising anti-semitism around American/Israeli issues is a weapon against Israel. It has sometimes been deliberately created as such. Before AWACS, while calling for stronger American pressure on Israel, a California Congressman said that he feared the possibility of anti-semitism among his constituents if the oil flow were to be cut off from the U.S. because of Israeli "intransigency" - and if the American Jewish community continued to support the "intransigency."

There it is: the embryonic rumor, used as a political weapon; used

to try to intimidate American Jews to frighten them away from supporting Israel on the political scene. That same rumor was floated during the AWACS debate. "Do you think that anti-semitism will be created if the AWACS sale is defeated?", Senator Baker was asked during the debate. "Gee, I hope not," he replied, in effect, "that would be unfortunate."

A number of Senators, and a bipartisan couple of ex-Presidents, stated their belief that a choice had to be made between "Begin and Reagan;" that America's foreign policy should not be governed by another country's needs. (The "other country" was of course, Israel, not Saudi Arabia.) In that connection, there was much mention of the "American Jewish lobby." And then the link: "Gosh, it would be too bad if a defeat of America's needs by the American Jews would cause anti-semitism."

Aside from being a political weapon of intimidation, that rumor of mass anti-semitism could be self-fulfilling. That is why it is so dangerous. If enough high-ranking public officials say that anti-semitism is or might well be on the rise ("unfortunately") because of American Jewish activity on behalf of Israel - then it is easier for Americans to deduce that American support of Israel is the result of American Jewish "lobbying", rather than because of American national interests. That in itself would be harmful to Israel, but could also stimulate hostility towards American Jews.

However, there is as yet no real evidence that the rumor is either

true or has had this effect. Once before there was a similar rumor, after the 1973 war when the Arab oil embargo created long gas lines in America. "Anti-semitism is going to rise, is rising," said the rumor. It just did not happen. The angry Americans blamed the oil companies. They blamed the Arabs. They blamed the American government. They did not blame the Jews and the level of popular anti-semitic beliefs continued to slowly decline, according to all surveys.

As long as the American public is overwhelmingly more sympathetic to Israel than to the Arabs - as they have consistently been for the last 15 years - then they will not be hostile towards Jews for supporting Israel. It's as simple as that. And it should be remembered that the majority of the American public was opposed to the AWACS sale. Of course, if highly placed American public officials consistently erode Israel's image as America's ally - or if they persist in using the rumor of rising anti-semitism as a political weapon of intimidation against American Jewry - then the situation could tragically change.

American Jewry will not be intimidated in any case. We are past intimidation. We will exercise our rights fully. We will support the cause of Israel, America's ally, as we see fit. We will insist that public officials speak responsibly. And we will not aid or abet their efforts to use the rumor of anti-semitism as a weapon of intimidation against us.