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The Next President's Mideast Policy

Election-year drag notwithstanding, is there such a thing as an American Mideast policy aimed not at stalemate but at settlement—a policy carrying enough bureaucratic thrust and popular consensus to be put into effect after the election, if not before?

Plainly, the Israeli government hopes not. Prime Minister Rabin has made no secret of his judgment that Israel's best bet is to hang on until 1977 and then cope as well as possible. One does not have to suspect he is merely bowing to fierce Israeli domestic political pressures. Given continued Arab unwillingness to make the kind of commitments to peace that could ease Israeli anxieties, there is good reason for Israel just to try to tough it out.

I think, however, that there is such a thing as an American settlement policy, and that the Israelis are going to have to deal with it sooner or later, reluctant as they and many of their American Jewish supporters may be to face up to the fact.

Everybody knows the basic equation of such a settlement policy: territory for peace. It surfaced as the Rogers Plan in 1970, as the Brookings Institution report a few months ago.

Indeed, according to Mark Bruzonsky, a perceptive young Washington writer who read the Edward Sheehan "Foreign Policy" article closer than the rest of us, the United States was heading toward public statement of that basic equation in its Mideast "reassessment" last year.

To get around the expected opposition, Sheehan wrote, "Kissinger's advisers envisioned Ford going to the American people . . . pleading the necessity for Israeli withdrawal in exchange for the strongest guarantees." But the May pro-Israel letter of 76 senators killed that option. Kissinger decided, according to Sheehan, to put off that option to "some future time when the President is stronger, when his prospects are more auspicious . . ."

Bruzonsky, writing in *Interchange*, a publication of a small American Jewish group called Breira (alternative), adds:

"The letter from the 76 Senators may well prove to have been a mistake. While it stopped the verbal articulation of America's conception of a Middle East peace, to the confusion of everyone, it did not stop its implementation. In fact, the letter may have made it easier for Kissinger since it prevents Israeli supporters from challenging the fundamentals of American policy, forcing them to focus on the slow and subtle manifestations of pressure which have been growing since 1975. In effect, Israel is getting all the pressure implicit in option 1, without the benefit of an articulated overall policy to challenge."

Would the man elected President next November decide to revive that "option 1"? Certainly the same objective conditions—the oil-swollen American economic and political interest in the Arab world, the higher (\$2 billion a year) post-1975 cost of supporting Israel, the interest in Soviet-American detente—will be there pressing on any new President. So will be many of the old bureaucrats. It is wrong to think that only a Republican President, and only a Secretary of State of a particular sort, would choose or be compelled to address such conditions.

In my view, there is really only one way Israel can gain some assurance that the United States won't continue leaning on it—in the name of a settlement plan, whether enunciated openly or not—to make concessions it deeply fears to make. That is, of course, for Israel to proclaim the territory it will yield up for peace and on that basis

seek to enlist American support for its plan.

I think that Israel is much more likely to regain and hold the firm long-term American support it desperately needs by taking the initiative—on the Palestinians as well as on territory—than by sticking in the cramped shrinking bargaining posture that the Rabin government currently is in. That is the way Israel can best get the United States to demand concessions from Arabs as well as themselves. It is, if you will, the way to put the monkey on the Arabs' back.

I am not talking strictly about moral factors, although the morality that Americans perceive in Israeli policy is of tremendous importance to a nation like Israel, which seeks American support on the basis of a presumed moral stand. Being a vigorous working democracy, which Israel is, is one aspect of this stand. Treating the Palestinians fairly, if and as they treat Israel fairly, is a second aspect.

But one must acknowledge as well the realpolitik of the situation. As long as Israel is not seen to be taking advantage of all the avenues to peace possibly open to it, then the breadth and depth of the American commitment are bound to erode. Israel and many American Jews might like to see the United States accept Israel as "a symbol of American steadfastness," in James Schlesinger's words. But Israelis would be foolish to think that "American steadfastness" will be mobilized regardless of what Israel does on its own.

Washington Report

On the Way to '77

Stephen S. Rosenfeld

The Ford administration's Middle East diplomacy all but expired as the 1976 political campaign progressed. The slowdown came not merely out of the presidential candidates' expected reluctance to risk alienating Jewish voters, organizers and contributors by confronting issues on which American and Israeli perceptions do not always coincide. President Ford's whole foreign policy had slowed for a variety of reasons, not least the erosion of the internal power and external credibility of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The Israel government, eager for a respite from the rigors of American diplomacy, and the various Arab governments, preoccupied by such complications of their own as the war in Lebanon, shared a willingness to let some time slip by. There was no consensus anyway on the step or even the forum needed to continue the process which had produced the Israel-Egyptian disengagement agreement of September 1975. Clearly only a new American administration, with a mandate and purpose of its own, could move on.

This did not mean, however, that nothing of importance was happening in Washington, or for that matter in the country, bearing on the American approach to the Middle East. Quite the contrary. By mid-1976 extremely important stirrings in the American political outlook and specifically in American Jewish opinion were evident. Difficult as they were to analyze, difficult as they were for many to accept, they nonetheless constituted a major political fact almost sure to affect the Middle East policy of the administration that will take office in January 1977. In brief, the prospects were that a new administration would be under more pressure from the general public, and under less restraint by American Jews, to push more vigorously for a comprehensive Middle East settlement—

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despite the certainty that such a push would severely tax the complex relationship between Israel and the United States.

The fact essential to understanding these new possibilities is that in 1975 the Ford administration, without ever explicitly saying so, took a bold decision to try to promote a Middle East solution. This decision was based on a particular reading of the lessons of the 1973 war. Previously the United States government had believed—wrongly, I would contend in hindsight—that it could afford indefinitely and fairly cheaply to support the Israel government in its post-1967 posture of holding on to the war-won territories until the Arabs met Israel's terms for entering negotiations.

After the 1973 war, the U.S. government came to the conclusion that its policy had to change—for economic reasons (oil, arms sales, trade, investment), for strategic reasons (to moderate if not to reduce or eliminate the Soviet role) and for political reasons (no Middle East settlement was possible without Arab cooperation). The "reassessment" of American policy announced with some fanfare early in 1975 was the key signal, though a deliberately muted one. This was made clear in Edward Sheehan's controversial and authoritative article in *Foreign Policy* magazine.

By early 1975, the State Department was leaning toward public announcement of an American concept of a final settlement based on the 1967 frontiers with minor modifications, and on new security guarantees for Israel. To get around the strong opposition to such an "imposed" solution that could be expected from Israel and its American Jewish supporters, Sheehan wrote, "Kissinger's advisers envisioned Ford going to the American people . . . pleading the necessity for Israeli withdrawal in exchange for the strongest guarantees." But the May 1976 pro-Israel letter of seventy-six senators seems to have scuttled that plan.

As Washington writer Mark Bruzonsky concluded in a recent article in *Interchange*, "While [the letter] stopped the verbal articulation of

America's conception of a Middle East peace, to the confusion of everyone, it did not stop its implementation. In fact, the letter may have made it easier for Kissinger since it prevents Israeli supporters from challenging the fundamentals of American policy, forcing them to focus on the slow and subtle manifestations of pressure which have been growing since March 1975. In effect, Israel is getting all the pressure . . . without the benefit of an articulated overall policy to challenge."

These "manifestations of pressure" included: Ford's and Kissinger's public criticism of Israel for not accepting the first version of the Egyptian disengagement accord; the State Department's "Saunders statement" of November 1975, giving prominence to the Palestinian question; Ford's rebuff of Jewish leaders who demanded that he not sell C-130 airplanes to Egypt; the veto of an aid bill including the extra "fifth quarter" sum of \$550 million for Israel for 1976, and the reduction of the aid requested for Israel in 1977; the statement by United States Ambassador William Scranton criticizing Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, and so on. Thus the baseline on which the next administration will start building its Middle East policy represents a considerably greater diminution of traditional down-the-line American support for Israeli policy than either the general public or the Jewish community may yet have recognized.

These and other "manifestations of pressure" have been vigorously protested by the organizations which generally speak in the name of American Jewry. Chief among them are the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, an umbrella group including thirty-odd national organizations, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Washington-based domestic lobby that concentrates on influencing Congress, which it regards as generally more sympathetic to Israeli interests than the bureaucrats of the Executive branch "downtown."

But it is perfectly obvious to everyone but the most obtuse Washington observer that the broad polit-