

# Carter's offers to Palestinians

## Behind-scenes steps augur Mideast shift

By Mark A. Bruzensky  
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Months of behind-the-scenes diplomacy between the Carter administration and the Palestine Liberation Organization may be resulting in a basic change in the framework of Middle East diplomacy.

If the PLO finally agrees to coexistence with Israel and acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 (with the understanding that Palestinian national rights now are recognized), the United States is prepared to begin direct discussions with the PLO leading to an invitation to a Geneva conference.

Sooner than anyone expected, the Palestinians may be offered a role in Middle East diplomacy, even over the objections of Israel. When and if this does occur, much doubt will be removed about the Carter administration's determination to reach the kind of Middle East settlement the President has outlined and about its seriousness in promoting the establishment of a Palestinian homeland in territories now occupied by Israel.

Before Secretary of State Cyrus Vance left on his recent Middle East trip, President Carter and Mr. Vance took the gigantic step of making an offer that important groups within the divided PLO — with Yasser Arafat in the lead — are finding difficult to refuse.

### Participation broached

At his July 28 press conference, a week after Israeli Premier Menahem Begin's departure from the U.S., President Carter made a statement about the Palestinian issue nearly as important as his March bombshell about the need for a "Palestinian homeland." "The major stumbling block" to reconvening the Geneva conference, President Carter said, "is the participation of the Palestinian representative." Then he emphatically stated, "We will discuss" matters with the Palestinians if they will agree to recognize and coexist with Israel.

The President and other high government officials had already taken the semantic step of often using "PLO" and "Palestinians" interchangeably. Mr. Carter added that if the Palestinians were forthcoming the U.S. would advocate "participation by them at peace negotiations."

The next day, July 29, Mr. Vance underscored the President's offer to the Palestinians. When asked whether he might meet with any members of the PLO during his trip, he purposefully left the door open, saying, "I do not expect that there will be any meeting with the PLO during this trip." The reason, he said, was that "there has yet been no suggestion by the PLO that they are prepared to do the things which President Carter outlined." Without such a Palestinian decision, Mr. Vance noted, the administration felt "constrained" by previous agreements with Israel from bringing the Palestinians into negotiations.

Mr. Carter re-emphasized his offer to the Palestinians in an interview with Time magazine that appeared the day Mr. Vance arrived in Alexandria, Egypt. "If the Palestinian leaders adopted that position [acceptance of Israel's existence] or espoused the UN Resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis for negotiations at Geneva, we would immediately commence plans to begin talks with the Palestinian leaders. I hope Mr. Begin would accept that [the participation of some Palestinian leaders at Geneva] is the way Time quotes the President (with the bracketed phrases included). Mr. Carter concluded, "But I don't have any way to predict what Mr. Begin would do."

But should the Palestinians finally take steps to meet these two conditions (or possibly only one if the President's use of the word "or" instead of "and" in the Time interview is significant), the U.S. now is publicly pledged to bring the PLO into the diplomatic process, no matter what the Israeli position.

What specific measures on the part of the PLO would be sufficient and exactly how the



By R. Norman Matheny, staff photographer

### Israel's Menahem Begin

U.S. would respond are the subjects of intensive behind-the-scenes maneuvering that involved Ambassador William W. Scranton's "unofficial" meeting with PLO leaders in July, a visit by a PLO person to the U.S. just before Mr. Vance's departure, and the intervention of numerous intermediaries explaining to both sides what the other side is demanding.

What is happening now must be credited to shrewd and subtle diplomacy by President Carter and his Middle East team in the National Security Council and the State Department. Though Mr. Begin's recent visit to Washington did establish a cordial atmosphere with Israel, it did not, and could not, alter basic political realities. Previous Israeli governments had insisted on coordinating policy with the U.S. — thrashing out differences when necessary until some compromise position was reached. The price Mr. Begin paid for his Washington "success" was to let the U.S. off this hook of coordination. Now there is a friendly "agreement to disagree." And it is a new situation, which Mr. Carter is acting quickly to exploit.

Some analysts believe the PLO has already sent signals that should be considered satisfactory in response to American urgings. But these gestures have not been sufficient, in American government eyes, to merit the major step under consideration by Washington. Willingness to go to Geneva, as declared in March by the Palestine National Council, and elimination of the "rejection front" representatives from the PLO Executive Committee have been deemed positive but inadequate.

Likewise, circuitous statements by Mr. Arafat to U.S. journalists and congressional representatives have not been adequate, partly because they are insufficient for the American administration to use with the Congress and with public opinion — two areas from which Mr. Carter rightly fears vehement challenges when the U.S. becomes formally involved with the PLO.

### Fahd message helpful

The message Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Fahd brought from Mr. Arafat to Mr. Carter in May — that the PLO understands U.S. policy and is prepared for mutual recognition with Israel when and if the Geneva conference unfolds — also has been helpful, though not decisive.

Yet all these efforts combined have awakened the Carter administration to the possibility (maybe even likelihood) that a more explicit and more definite offer from Washington could tilt the scales within the PLO toward those advocating the historical step of Israeli recognition from those arguing against reliance on the Americans and against the idea of a West Bank-Gaza Strip Palestinian state.

Also, developments during the past few months have resulted in a more flexible position by the Carter administration. The President is not demanding complete PLO acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338, nor immediate revisions in the Palestine National Covenant.



Camerapix

### PLO's Yasser Arafat

Vice-President Walter Mondale, in his important Middle East speech in June, stressed that "Resolution 242 does not by itself provide all that is required." And the President and Secretary of State have been most careful not to specify formal changes in the covenant as the requirement before U.S.-Palestinian discussions can begin — a mistake Mr. Vance was pressured into making back in February during his first visit to Israel.

It is likely a clear statement by the PLO's Executive Committee that coexistence is the goal would get the process started at this point. Such a step on the part of the PLO would be excruciatingly difficult; but then, what the U.S. has in mind has rather serious domestic political risks for Mr. Carter as well.

### 'Homeland' switch

Soon after Mr. Carter's inauguration on Jan. 20, the President, Secretary of State Vance and national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski decided they had to assert a new Palestinian policy quickly.

So, at Clinton, Massachusetts, on March 16, President Carter made a basic change in American Middle East policy by advocating a "Palestinian homeland." The Palestine National Council was meeting the same day in Cairo and Mr. Carter clearly was sending a signal. But it was too late.

Shortly after the presidential election, Mr. Arafat had sent two PLO representatives to attempt to work out an agreement with the U.S. whereby the Palestine National Council meeting in March would make major ideological and political concessions in return for a U.S. commitment to deal with the PLO and to support Palestinian self-determination.

Had Mr. Carter responded to Mr. Arafat's efforts at that time it might have been translated into more moderate attitudes in the 15-point political declaration issued by the Palestine National Council.

But by June, even before Mr. Begin's visit, Mr. Carter had decided to go forward with the offer he now has made to the Palestinians.

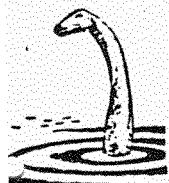
Mr. Begin's mistake was in misjudging the determination of Jimmy Carter. When on his return to Israel he immediately legalized West Bank settlements without even having informed the President, he left himself open to Mr. Carter's doing the same thing with the Palestinian issue.

No longer will American Israeli policies be coordinated. Mr. Begin may well find himself, within a few months, or at most a year, facing international negotiations with all other parties, including the U.S., declaring themselves opposed to the Begin government's positions on at least two of the three crucial issues — territories and Palestinians. As for the third — normalization of relations and lasting peace — it will be up to the Arabs to deliver.

Mark A. Bruzensky is an associate editor of Worldview magazine.

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