

**U.S.-Israel split looms on recognition issue**

# Carter offering PLO talks on Geneva role

WHILE Cyrus Vance will not meet the PLO on his current Mid-east swing, the Palestinian issue is never far from his discussions.

The U.S. and the PLO are actually intimately involved in a kind of de facto diplomacy that might sooner than expected result in bringing the Palestinians into the diplomatic process, even over the objections of Israel.

Before Vance departed for Egypt on July 31 the President and the Secretary of State took a gigantic step towards doing just this.

At his July 28 Press conference, a week after Israeli Prime Minister Menachem 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, Carter said, "is the participation of the Palestinian representative."

### Extensive

Then Carter emphatically stated "we will discuss" matters with the Palestinians if they will agree to recognise and co-exist with Israel.

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

The following day, July 29, at his own pre-trip Press conference, the Secretary of State drew attention to and under-scored the President's offer to the Palestinians.

When asked whether he might meet any members of the PLO during his trip, Vance purposefully left the door wide open, saying: "I do not expect that there will be any meeting with the PLO during this trip."

The reason, he added, is that "there has yet been no suggestion by the PLO that they were prepared to do the things which President Carter outlined." Without such a Palestinian decision, Vance noted, the administration felt "constrained" by previous agree-

ments with Israel from bringing the Palestinians into negotiations. Carter then re-emphasised his offer to the Palestinians in an interview with *Time* magazine which appeared the day Vance arrived in Alexandria.

"If the Palestinian leaders adopted that position (acceptance of Israel's existence) or espoused UN Resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis for negotiations at Geneva, we would immediately commence plans to begin talks with the Palestinian leaders," he said.

"I hope Mr. Begin would accept that (the participation of some Palestinian leaders at Geneva)."

Carter concluded: "But I don't have any way to predict what Mr. Begin would do."

Coming just days after his extensive talks with the Israeli Prime Minister in Washington, this statement may be interpreted to mean that just as Begin avoided the controversial issue of legalising West Bank settlements, Carter avoided American differences with Israel on the requirements for PLO participation at Geneva.

In short, the American position — previously stated ambiguously, hesitantly, and usually privately — has now been stated and restated clearly and publicly by the President himself.

### Shrewd

The U.S. will live up to the agreement Henry Kissinger made with Israel in September 1975 not to recognise or negotiate with the PLO as long as the PLO does not recognise Israel's right to exist and does not accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

But should the Palestinians finally take steps to meet these two conditions, the U.S. is now publicly pledged to bring the PLO into the diplomatic process no matter what the Israeli position.

As the generally pro-Israeli *New Republic* weekly warned back in March, "The conflict between Israel and the U.S. could well come over just how much change is to be demanded of the PLO before it is accepted as a party to negotiations."

What specific measures on the



part of the PLO would be sufficient and exactly how the U.S. would respond are the subjects of intensive behind-the-scenes intrigue that involved William Scranton's "unofficial" meeting with PLO leaders last month, a visit by a PLO person to the U.S. just before Vance's departure, and the intervention of numerous intermediaries explaining to both sides what the other side is demanding.

What is now transpiring must be credited to shrewd and subtle diplomacy by Carter and his Mid-east team in the National Security Council and the State Department.

Though Begin's recent visit to Washington did establish a cordial atmosphere with Israel, it did not, and could not, alter basic political realities.

The price Begin paid for his Washington "success" was to let the U.S. off this hook of co-ordination. Now there is a friendly "agreement to disagree." And it is a new situation which Carter is acting quickly to exploit.

Some analysts believe the PLO has already sent signals which 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 Yasser 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 places Carter rightly fears vehement challenges when the U.S. becomes formally involved with the PLO.

### Explicit

The message brought to Carter in May from Arafat that the PLO understands U.S. policy and is prepared for mutual recognition with Israel when and if the Geneva conference unfolds has also 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 towards 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.

Vice-President Walter Mondale, in his important Mid-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 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 co-existence 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 Carter as well.