

OPENING SHOTS

It's far too early to say right now if a really and truly serious US-Israeli schism is in the making.

Recent history of the past few decades would suggest that such political skirmishes as that now taking place between Tel Aviv and Washington over the Israeli "request" for \$10 billion in loan guarantees is just a passing phase.

Going back to the Nixon administration there have been periodic, almost predictable, "differences" between Israeli governments and American administrations that served various political needs at various times -- the Scranton mission, the "Reassessment", the Carter "Palestinian homeland" speech, the "Reagan Plan", to name just a few episodes of this long-lived political soap opera.

Yet each time, for decades now, no matter what the tension of the moment, the US-Israeli connection has come back stronger than ever. It's all a bit suspicious.

Factor, this time in addition, in the somewhat conspiratorial hypothesis that a bit of publicly played out difficulty right now between the US and Israel seems to serve a particularly useful political purpose.

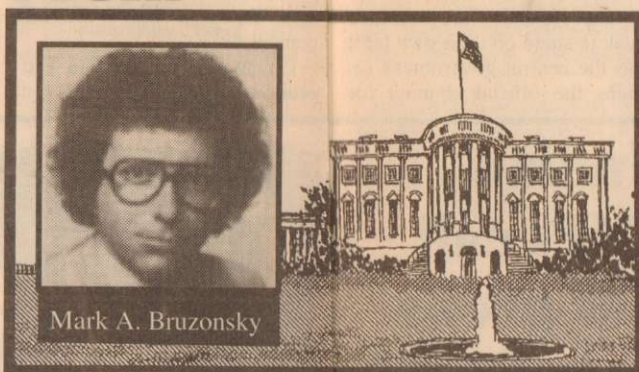
The more supposed tension there is right now between the US and Israel the more convincing a case can be made with the Arabs that they really ought to all eagerly come to the American-inspired "peace conference", even though the anticipated conference appears to lack the very basics necessary to offer much hope of real peace.

Indeed, just a few years ago a conference of the kind now proposed would have been a non-starter. Just consider for a moment the new realities that seem to be in store under the old theme of an "international peace conference" -- the long-established UN role has been side-tracked, Israeli settlements keep gobbling up Arab lands, repression of the Palestinian Intifada remains extreme, Israel's military budget has just been substantially increased, US arms and money pour into Israel in ever-increasing amounts.

Even the very principle of "land for peace" that has always been understood to be the very basis of any possible historic deal between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab World is today denied by the Israeli government.

Thus, in short, one can reasonably speculate that events of recent days serve many pur-

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poses, including providing Bush and Baker with a more plausible and credible case that even-handedness prevails in Washington when in fact today's "peace process", upon closer scrutiny, seems weighted very much in favour of the Israelis -- a subject discussed in this column many times in recent months.

At a time when the basic facts of money and arms show the US more in Israel's corner than ever before, this very kind of public confrontation makes it much easier for the US to portray itself as an intermediary between Israel and the Arabs -- actually a dubious proposition -- rather than as a party who continues to do Israel's bidding -- more the reality whatever the current imagery.

Still, whatever the public theatrics of the moment, George Bush and Yitzhak Shamir are taking each other's measure these days. That's a big part of what's going on within the guise of the "loan guarantees" manoeuvring.

Both Bush and Shamir are well aware they are going to have to dance with each other for some years to come. Both

know that whatever the strength of the alliance that binds their two countries each nation has its own special interests and each politician has his own particular calculations.

And so it is within this overall context that each party continues to jockey for starting position aware that a major diplomatic tete-a-tete, a diplomatic battle if you will, seems to lie unavoidably ahead.

Israel

Israel has no intention of making any deal at this time with the Arabs on the basic issue of Palestinian independence and territorial return. Even if Labour were to return to power -- which is not likely -- this would not be the case, contrary to the fantasies some pursue.

But the Israeli establishment is eager to see what kind of a deal might be possible with Syria, and through Syria with other Arab countries -- and should something of this kind be feasible Israel would indeed likely yield up a demilitarised, internationally guaranteed Golan Heights. If Syrian President Hafez Assad could somehow be manipulated into a

position to make a deal as Anwar Sadat did a decade ago, the Israelis would pounce at the opportunity. For the real prize is not Golan but the West Bank including Jerusalem -- and to ensure this victory the Israelis know very well they need more time and more money.

Furthermore, whatever protestations to the contrary, Israel is actually eager to launch negotiations of the kind that seem to be coming, but *only if* those negotiations can be sufficiently skewed -- as the US has been pushing for -- towards bilateral Israeli talks with individual Arab parties and a long-winded diatribe about "autonomy" for the Palestinians.

For whatever life the Americans, the Israelis, and some of the Arab regimes try to breathe into this "autonomy" concept, the whole notion has become a kind of political quicksand designed as a trap from which Palestinian nationalism is never meant to emerge.

Whatever the theoretical virtues of the term, "autonomy" as it has come to be understood in the Palestinian context is really being put forward at this time in history as a way of encouraging the Palestinians to cooperate in their own demise.

In an admittedly grotesque sense the analogy that comes to mind is that of the orchestra music that welcomed the Jews of a previous generation to the Nazi death camps -- they were asked to play soothing, even uplifting music for their own

genocide.

The Americans

The US is in a bit of a bind these days. After making war against Iraq and taking over security concerns in the Gulf area, and having promised its Arab and Western allies to seriously try to find a way to de-escalate the regional tension being caused by Israeli expansionism and the Palestinian Intifada, the US has simply got to do something.

Even if it can't actually accomplish anything, still it has to be perceived as trying.

America's Arab allies quite understandably need to show they can get Washington to care about their problems and do something about the Palestinians.

And the Europeans, finally coming together economically in 1992, may themselves harbour some desires about stepping up to the bat when it comes to Mid-east diplomacy -- but they can do so only if and when the US falters.

In short, Washington has created expectations that are going to be extremely difficult, maybe impossible, to fulfil. But at the least these expectations have to be kept alive.

Palestinians

The Right-wing of the PLO, which Yasser Arafat's Fatah has become increasingly dominated by in recent years, is itself caught in quite a bind.

With the organisation itself reeling from repeated political shocks, from military defeats, from public relations disasters,

from assassinations of some of its key leaders, and from financial withdrawal of some key benefactors, the PLO is in some ways on the ropes.

Arafat's continuing salvation, of course, is that he has so successfully managed to instil the very concept of the PLO with such political legitimacy, that even most Palestinians who wish him to go remain loyal to the concept of the PLO and to Arafat as the current leader of that concept.

Yet decision-time is coming for Arafat as well. If he ends up not participating in upcoming diplomacy through the limited and questionable proxies acceptable to Israel and the US, then the possibilities of a Camp David II might be furthered even more. Yet if he legitimises the upcoming talks allowing the role of the PLO and the concept of Palestinian nationalism to be further diminished, an autonomy disaster may lie ahead.

Either way the disintegration of the PLO into feuding factions is becoming a larger possibility than at any time since the 1960s; and of course the Israelis are working overtime to bring about just such a fracturing. Some months ago I wrote in this column that a "political blizzard" lies ahead. The blizzard and winter are both approaching.

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