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**ARREN CHRISTOPHER**, Clinton's lacklustre choice as secretary of state, has now made his obligatory first visit to the Mid-east — his first "peace" trip as the establishment press likes to call these visits.

It was a journey that included a variety of not so subtle yet carefully-couched diplomatic threats — just about at every stop along the way — that if the players there don't want to cooperate maybe he won't come back for awhile and maybe President Clinton has other things to worry about.

It's all part of a script that anyone familiar with the history of US Mid-east diplomacy can write at this point in time without any inside information of any kind.

For it's all part of the predictable American approach — whether that of the Republicans or Democrats — to the Arab-Israeli "dispute" and to the region in general.

The Clinton administration, seriously beholden to Israel and it's powerful friends, much worried about its bona fides when it comes to international affairs, desperately concerned not to have another foreign crisis, is doing just what was to be expected.

In short, it's called, "taking the course of least resistance".

And in doing so President Clinton is pretty lucky for the last administration left him being able to simply say that he just wants to continue what's already started, the much-hyped "peace talks".

Doing so makes it possible for the Clinton team to avoid — unless something should change in the region — having to do anything other than advocate more talk in these early months of their reign.

And at the same time it gives the impression of a broadly supported, bipartisan, foreign policy in the Mid-east at a time when Clinton and his people have their plate very full with matters domestic.

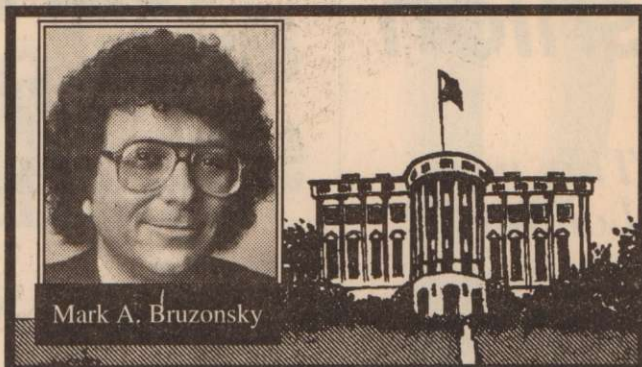
Furthermore, of course, who can be against the idea of "peace talks" anyway?

Especially to a gullible and confused American public, advocating other positions than this has become a difficult road to travel even though the experts are well-aware there are reasons aplenty to be sceptical at best of the path things are on — a path that should be traced back at least to the step-by-step diplomacy in the 1970s of Henry Kissinger.

Most importantly for the Clinton people — who have in their midst key Israeli operatives that the new president has allowed to come into the National Security Council, the State Department, and the White House itself — the very notion of ongoing talks, or even of talks that simply need to be restarted, takes a great deal of pressure off Washington's back.

Since there are "talks" going on, so the argument implicitly goes, then there's no need to come up with new policies or any kind of new framework; there's no need to take any new positions at all; and consequently there's no need to have to deal with any torrent of political pressures or press scrutiny that would surely ac-

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The

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company any new moves of consequence.

Instead, the easy way out, the course of least resistance, is to simply say, in effect: "Let's get back to these talks, these very important 'peace talks', and if you don't then it's all your fault and we've got other things on our plate that we have to pay attention to".

And this line, in short, is indeed the basic message coming from the Clinton White House and one of the very reasons which brought Christopher to the region for his recent "peace mission".

Such, anyway, is the public manifestation, the political theatre, of the current moment. Deeper realities, of course, are far more complex.

In short, these realities can be summarised as follows:

■ The Americans, while exceedingly biased towards Israel, have managed to portray themselves, once again, as "even-handed"; and in their eyes this lets them off the hook, especially after events of recent years.

■ The "peace talks" themselves, while always hyped as a major political breakthrough, are pretty much negotiations being held on Israeli terms in the capital of their major benefactor and without any significant UN involvement or time pressure.

■ The basic framework for the talks — "autonomy" or "self-rule" for the Palestinians and peace treaties between each Arab country and Israel — are in themselves a negation of the previous gains made by the Palestinians in moving towards self-determination and statehood.

It is a framework that has also succeeded in seriously crippling the effects of the Intifada while considerably increasing the potential within Palestinian society for civil warfare. Gone is the concept of a united Arab delegation; gone is the international community, the UN framework, Security Council resolutions and international law; gone is the very notion of a comprehensive peace; and once again the issue of Palestinian statehood is put off into the distant haze while the military occupation of Palestine continues.

Furthermore, on most, if not

all important matters, the Israelis are getting their way — and they are well aware of this:

□ Unprecedentedly huge US "loan guarantees" — another American subsidy for Israel — have been forthcoming right in the midst of the Intifada and immigrants continue to pour into Israel while Palestinian society continues to crumble.

□ Settlements in the occupied territories continue — somewhat altered in location and slower in pace — with the gradual incorporation of the crucial West Bank into "Greater Israel" remaining Israel's goal.

□ US-Israel relations are extremely strong with the Clinton administration quite literally infiltrated at all levels with persons looking out for Israeli interests.

□ The Arab parties remain bewildered and uncertain of what steps to take — paralysed and immobilised by their own divisions while continuing to allow the divide and rule strategy of past decades to prevail.

□ Demoralisation within Palestinian ranks has reached unprecedented proportions; and the growth of the Hamas as an alternative to the leadership of Al-Fatah — and its negotiating delegation from the occupied territories — is putting the "hardliners" within striking distance.

The Madrid conference that inaugurated the current diplomatic phase in history was itself arranged in such a way that the Israelis could publicly protest but privately delight.

That proceeding itself conveyed de facto recognition upon Israel without the Israelis having to give anything substantial, it denied the Palestinians a role for the PLO and thus for the specific concept of independent statehood, gave the impression that the Intifada was winding down, it pushed the UN out of the picture completely, and it sublimated the very notion of a comprehensive regional peace for that of individual state-by-state negotiations and eventual treaties.

It was all foreseeable then, at the time of Madrid. And it's all quite foreseeable now. But as the Americans have grown fond of saying — and unfortunately too many have accepted this as truth — this is the only game in town.