

Perspective

WAITING ON WASHINGTON

Mark Bruzonsky

Wait-and-see:

Whether it be Carter or Ford for the next four years, they will be tough years for Israel and years of strain between Israel and the United States. Even Prime Minister Rabin (on Israel Independence Day in May) warned his nation of American "tendencies to concessions" and of "erosion in the U.S. position on the Palestinian issue in the Geneva peace talks."

It is true that the Lebanese blood-bath and Palestinian disarray have greatly confused Middle East prospects in both Jerusalem and Washington. And continuing uncertainty about the President-Secretary of State combination has created an atmosphere of wait-and-see.

But there remains in both capitals considerable quiet agreement with Wolf Blitzer, editor of the Israel lobby's Washington newsletter, that "The real crunch for Israel will probably come during 1977 if Ford is elected—it will be delayed by only a few months if a Democratic candidate wins."

And as preparation for the difficult year ahead the Israel lobby in Washington has gone on the offensive, urging rethinking of the "Jordanian option" (the West Bank still might find a place in the Hashemite Kingdom, it is said), attempting to block most U.S.-Arab arms agreements (which now seem part of a lame-duck Secretary of State's *Weltanschauung*), resuming the crusade against the PLO and "Palestinian national rights," (code words, it is said, for Palestinian determination to remove Israel from the map), and challenging even the contemporary wisdom that at least Sadat's Egypt is truly moderate and wants to reach a lasting Middle East settlement.

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Collision course?

As the November election approaches, the assertion by Ari Rathi (editor of the *Jerusalem Post*) following his recent American tour that "Washington and Jerusalem are . . . headed toward an inevitable collision" is far too simplistic. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Alfred Atherton, probably spoke for most U.S. Middle East policy-makers when he told a B'nai B'rith audience in June that "Simple logic requires us—indeed impels us—to persevere in the search for a comprehensive settlement." Fortunately, Washington is increasingly aware that there are many in Israel who accept this logic for either tactical (public opinion) or strategic (the real possibility of achieving a gradual peace) reasons. A "collision" is not inevitable, although it surely has become possible.

Closer observation of the American scene would reveal that just as Arab concessions will now largely determine the magnitude of American pressures on Israel (the Arabs must first, of course, resolve the Lebanese nightmare), Israeli policies and attitudes will determine the degree to which the U.S.-Israel schism widens or fades.

The reservoir of American support for the Jewish state remains nearly filled, though some leaks are detectable. Senator McGovern's assurance last month that "Israel is one country I'd have no trouble fighting to defend . . . (but) Israel's own interests depend on moving toward an overall settlement" pretty well sums up the friendly-but-critical attitude now emerging even from previously quiet quarters. For instance, Senator Javits told the American Jewish Committee in May that "It is my view that the American Jewish community can and must play a forceful role in assisting the Israelis to emulate in the search for peace the bold risks that they have

so successfully assumed in war. For it is time to offer new alternatives, new perspectives, and new possibilities. . . . I believe that open discussion of alternatives to eternal hostilities needs to begin." And even such stalwarts as Senator Humphrey are now said to be expressing, albeit in private, a more flexible attitude on what role the U.S. should play in trying to bring about some kind of settlement to at least defuse the Middle East bombshell.

In fact, both at the State Department and on Capitol Hill the summer was a time of preparation and rethinking. But few in Washington see anything as inevitable, except continuing preparations for war if the new stalemate in the Middle East is allowed to harden.

State Department thinking:

Assistant Secretary Atherton summed up where we are and where we are going in that June speech to the B'nai B'rith. "Sometime in the months and years ahead the Middle East will come to the crossroad where all concerned—both within and outside the region—must make the hard decision on whether they will this time take the road toward peace or the road toward yet another Arab-Israeli war," he prophesied. And then he issued something of a veiled warning: "It would be tragic if the world community despaired of the hope that Arabs and Israelis could find the answers to their own destiny and concluded that peace should be imposed on the nations of that troubled region."

Atherton underscored his prognosis by repeating a basic theme that has emerged in government, academic and journalistic circles here: "Whatever the risk of moving toward peace, the risks of not doing so are infinitely greater."

Last May, Secretary Kissinger

(also before a Jewish audience) painted much the same picture. What lies ahead "is almost certainly more difficult—but nonetheless inescapable—then the steps we have taken so far," Kissinger noted. "We do not prove our friendship by ignoring the realities we both face.... We do not underestimate the dilemmas and risks that Israel faces in a negotiation. But they are dwarfed by a continuation of the *status quo*."

The State Department is partially suffering from the effects of the Kissinger years of top-heavy policy-making. There is some demoralization, and some key personnel who have been intensely involved with Middle East affairs are gone or may go with Kissinger—most important, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco and Policy Planning chief Winston Lord.

But even if Kissinger departs, Assistant Secretary Atherton and Intelligence and Research Director Harold Saunders will probably remain, along with Bob Oakley at the National Security Council. Philip Habib, who has replaced Sisco as Under Secretary, may emerge as a real power, but on Middle East matters cannot fill Sisco's shoes.

Other men at lower levels will continue to exert their influence—among them "Red" Austin in Policy Planning and Research and Phil Stoddard in Intelligence and Research where a young scholar, Sam Roberts—whose book, *Israel: Survival or Hegemony?*, deserves a wider audience—has recently been taken on to follow developments in Israel.

The State Department is likely to make a major attempt to maintain or surpass the momentum of the Kissinger step-by-step diplomacy. And whoever becomes President and Secretary of State will listen, probably more so than in previous years when the Middle East was less explosive. In fact, it needs to be impressed on the Israelis that it has not just been Kissinger and Ford who have been backing Israel into a corner. There is a real and growing divergence in interests and perceptions between the two countries and no election results will alter these realities for long.

Capitol Hill "reassessment":

On Capitol Hill, something of a Congressional "reassessment" may be emerging. This could prove to be one of the most important political developments in years, since the Con-

gress has been something of a roadblock to new American policy initiatives in the Middle East. Kissinger found this out back in May 1975, at the time of his "reassessment," when 76 Senators informed the President, at the Israel lobby's behest, that they fully backed the Israeli government positions. It was a successful threat of Jewish political warfare largely credited at the time to Morris Amitay, then in his first year as successor to Sy Kenen as head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC—the umbrella organization which in Washington circles is the "Israel lobby"). And it largely blocked what Kissinger now says was to be a major initiative beyond step-by-step.

This political maneuver of a year and a half ago has determined much that has followed. It not only prevented the more bold American policy initiatives Kissinger was considering, but also halted further articulation of American Middle East policy for the American public. The consequence has been a period during which Israel's supporters have been constantly on the defensive. And the result has been a series of mini-battles. The Administration, claiming no alternative, has resorted to a pressure-by-pressure approach when what is called for is American-Israeli cooperation and a joint peace initiative. But there is increased doubt now throughout Washington that the fragile Rabin coalition is capable of such a partnership—and few expect the Israeli election late next year to resolve this situation. That is why the arguments for progressive pressure have begun to find ready listeners.

Resentment at Israel lobby tactics:

Today, indications are that AIPAC could at best gather 65 Senators in a showdown similar to that of 1975—some believe not even a majority would sign on. As one Senatorial aid puts it, "AIPAC often does with a sledgehammer what should be done with a stiletto," and the result is that "many Senators damn well resent the methods used." The constant skirmishes on aid and arms during the past year may yet prove to be Pyrrhic victories since the political price (often for little benefit in the end) has been a continual erosion of influence of the lobby.

In fact, the question has arisen in the minds of some of the most knowledgeable of Israel's friends whether the new aggressiveness adopted by AIPAC since its change of leadership

a couple of years ago is beneficial to Israeli and American Jewish interests in the long run. The style and organizational personality of AIPAC have become political issues in themselves. This was never the case when AIPAC was headed by its founder, Sy Kenen, who built a position of immense but subtle influence in Washington.

Once the very symbol of effective, low-key lobbying, with the near-unanimous backing of the entire American Jewish community, AIPAC today is increasingly seen as an aggressive and at times ruthless organization, antagonizing members of its Jewish constituency as well as some of those it attempts to convince. One knowledgeable professor in Washington, often consulted by the Israeli embassy on political matters, sadly indicates that "In the past two years I've heard more anti-lobby sentiment than in all the years before. No matter what one's view of proper Israeli policies, this development should cause considerable anxiety."

Congressional endorsement of the Brookings Report:

The primary focus during this past summer of Congressional rethinking has been the series of hearings of the McGovern Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Six days of testimony on "Prospects for Peace in the Middle East" were attended by 26 expert witnesses. The record of these hearings, according to Senator McGovern, will provide "sound advice to the Senate as a whole and to the executive branch on future initiatives in U.S. policy."

Endorsement of the findings and conclusions of the Brookings Report "Toward Peace in the Middle East" proved to be the main thrust. Without major exception, this report was fully supported by all eight witnesses who testified on future U.S. policy options—several with profound links to the Jewish community. Thus a U.S. role as advocate for a settlement including recognition of "the principle of Palestinian self-determination," return to approximately the 1967 boundaries, guarantees for Israeli security, and phased implementation of a settlement over a number of years were widely endorsed. Currently, an organization known as Members of Congress for Peace Through Law—which has a diverse membership from both parties and of many political outlooks—is seeking Congressional endorsement for the Brookings Report

from the entire Congress.

New leeway for next administration:

Congress's new openness may allow the next Administration the leeway to put forward some initiatives along the lines of the Brookings Report—largely an up-dating of the Rogers Plan of 1969. If so, the Congress's "reassessment" is a major political development. Using the leverage the U.S. now has with all parties it might be possible to induce and, if necessary, gently to coerce important concessions from both sides that could result in a resumed Geneva Conference. The chairman of the Presidents' Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations, Alexander Schindler, made a statement recently summarizing the basic rationales behind pressuring Israel in an attempt to buttress the forces of moderation there. Israeli leaders "would almost be more comfortable, for domestic political reasons," he remarked after his most recent Israeli visit, "if the decisions were imposed rather than articulated and accepted from within."

But State Department spokesmen are exceedingly careful to belittle all talk of actual imposition. There will in all probability be progressively stronger pressures for concessions, but if for no other reason than domestic American politics, there will not be an American attempt to order Israel to retreat, as was done in 1957. Arab concessions will probably have more to do with determining American pressures. And Arab concessions will first require a Lebanese solution, coupled to a political climate in which Syria and Egypt can coordinate their diplomacy and work out some form of Palestinian participation at a resumed Geneva Conference.

In short, after years of divisiveness in Washington, the State Department and an increasingly independent Congress are getting ready for what many in Washington are convinced may be a crucial year of decision regarding the future of Arab-Israeli relations, and, by implication, of American-Israeli relations. Certainly a Democratic administration will further the possibility of a coordinated White House-State Department-Congressional approach. Such a coalition would clearly require very careful consideration by the Jewish community. It cannot easily stand outside it.

The simple truth is that the situation in the Middle East will necessarily be one of the major priorities for the next occupant of the White House. There

are many reasons for this: The most sobering is suggested in the lead article of the latest issue of Israel's most important journal of international affairs: "Observers with different opinions on the substance and process of the conflict are coming to agree that nuclearization could happen very suddenly, if indeed it has not already happened."

It is this danger, coupled with the anxiety that the parties themselves simply will not be able to make progress toward a settlement, that could even lead to some form of imposed settlement—all the denials notwithstanding. In May, a former Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, chastened by a recent American visit, wrote that while "Formerly, any talk of an 'imposed settlement' was taboo; today such a solution is regarded by most (Americans) as likely, and by many as the only way out of the impasse. It is taken for granted that whoever is elected President this November ... will not let matters drift as they have for so many years in the past."

Senator Adlai Stevenson has probably captured the mood which many fear to articulate: "The hour is late.... Israel has not been well served by those who hide from reality, or by those who, perceiving the truth, have whispered their warnings. Continued stalemate in the Middle East sooner or later will lead to another outbreak of war.... A way must be found to overcome the provocations on all sides and it could be. If a direct Arab-Israeli negotiation is not feasible ... then outside powers with important stakes in the Middle Eastern peace must facilitate negotiation, at Geneva or in another forum." *

