

interChange

february 1976

WASHINGTON

After Saunders

MARK A. BRUZONSKY

Since the Saunders testimony of November 12 (see *interChange*, January 1976), a number of events have transpired in Washington that seem to confirm Don Peretz's prognosis that the Saunders' testimony represents the "writing on the wall" as far as future American policy in the Middle East is concerned.

Saunders' testimony to the Near East subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee brought forth an immediate and vehement reaction from the Israeli government.

Significantly, the State Department refused to budge, in spite of the Israeli reaction and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's futile attempts to underplay the significance of the Saunders' testimony. The Department even took the unusual step of underscoring the significance of the testimony by releasing it as an official statement of "Current Policy." And then under the title "Department Gives Position on Palestinian Issue," the statement was included in the Department of State *Bulletin*, the official weekly record of United States foreign policy. The Israelis were indeed correct in interpreting the testimony as more than just the ideas of a minor State Department functionary.

Thus, when Aharon Yariv, a member of Knesset from Rabin's party and former Minister of Information, recently returned from a visit to the United States, he warned of "United States pressures for an overall settlement which would involve maximal territorial concessions but would be weak on the content of peace. . . . They are getting fed up," he said bluntly. "One day they might just lay it on the line to us: take it or leave it."

And yet, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin came to Washington in late January apparently intent on "stonewalling." He told Congress that "You cannot achieve peace but from a standpoint of strength. It cannot be done from a standpoint of weakness. With a weak

Israel no one will negotiate. Only in a strong Israel can there be a hope for peace." Of all people, Rabin, an ex-general, should know how weak Israel has become in recent months. Now the U.S. cut in aid (clearly another American warning of changes to come), coupled with unprecedented Arab political, military, and economic strength is putting Israel in the kind of position where another Arab attack becomes more likely and highly dangerous to an already demoralized Israel.

It would be bad for all of us if the Presidents' Conference is thought of exclusively as an arm of the Israeli government. We must follow a policy whereby the Presidents' Conference will tell Israel the truth as it thinks Israel wants to hear it. American Jewish leaders tell Israel nice things which are very different from what they say in internal discussions in the United States. I do not think we are serving Israel well by deceiving her. Israel has the right to tell American Jews what she thinks. But listening to Israel's opinion on matters does not obligate American Jews to ignore other considerations. American Jews, for instance are entitled to oppose American involvement in Angola in spite of what the Israeli government's position might be.

Alex Schindler, new Chairperson of Conference of Presidents' of Major Jewish Organizations, in an interview in Haaretz January 16, 1976.

Already, support in this country is growing for increased American determination to push forward to a comprehensive settlement including some solution to the Palestinian problem.

The reaction of the American press to the Saunders' testimony, for example, was quite favorable. The only major American newspaper to criticize it was the *Wall Street Journal* which counseled that "the United States is moving too quickly." But even the *Wall Street Journal* noted that it is "indeed true" as Saunders testified that "in many ways the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the heart of the conflict."

Even within the American Jewish community, support for such an Israeli policy of "stonewalling" is waning. A number of Jewish leaders have already begun discussing the need for increased pressure on an Israeli government paralyzed by domestic politics and a myopic vision of Arab and Palestinian attitudes. One such leader is Rabbi Henry Seigman, Executive Director of

the Synagogue Council of America. In an article published in the January 1976 issue of *Moment* magazine, Seigman boldly asserts that Israeli attempts to maintain current political positions "may contain the seeds of disaster."

In spite of the American veto of the Security Council's resolution calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state and P.L.O. representation in the negotiating process, American policy on the Palestinians is moving away from support for Palestinian "interests" and

towards support of Palestinian "national rights."

The U.S. appears to be intent on Palestinian-Israeli negotiations based on *de facto* if not *de jure* recognition. At least this is how one highly influential person in the State Department recently explained the U.S. position to a group of visiting scholars.

It is a losing battle to try and deny Palestinian national rights or P.L.O. representation at the peace table. Israel's real battle should be over mutual recognition and the conditions under which a Palestinian state would be created. Unless Rabin recognizes the line-up of political as well as military forces and realizes the necessity of establishing more defensible political battle lines, he may lack the strength and forces to do so later. Then, movement toward an imposed settlement would become the only option open to the United States.

Mark A. Bruzonsky is a writer and consultant on international affairs living in Washington, D.C.