

# interChange

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## WASHINGTON

### Putting it All Together

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Whatever happened to the "reassessment" about which the U.S. State Department was so vocal last March, during the long negotiations which eventually produced the September interim agreement between Israel and Egypt? Over the last year, U.S. policy in the Middle East has not been comprehensively articulated to the public, despite the fact that the events of the period clearly indicate that such an overall policy does exist. An examination of what has been happening during this period reveals that the State Department has refrained from presenting its long-range goals for a Middle East settlement out of fear of pressure from the Israeli lobby in a Presidential election year. Ironically, it has been Israel's cause which has suffered the most from this silence since without public presentation of policy there can be no public debate.

Journalist Edward Sheehan, in a significant article which appeared in the Spring issue of *Foreign Policy* writes that "relations between the United States and Israel which began to erode during October 1973 war have deteriorated to a condition of chronic crisis—dramatized by Kissinger's clashes with Israeli leaders and Israel's American constituency."

The 1975 "reassessment", was in

fact, the starting point for expression of this crisis. It began with President Ford's blunt letter to Prime Minister Rabin in late March insisting the Israel show more flexibility. It continued with Saunders' statement on the Palestinians in November. This last month, there was Ford's rebuff of Jewish leaders over the sale of C-130's for Egypt, the reduction in military aid for Israel for fiscal 1977, and most recently, William Scranton's calculated attack on Israeli settlements in the occupied territories as violations of the Geneva Convention.

Sheehan reconstructs the options which the State Department discussed during its reassessment of its Middle East policy in March, 1975. According to Sheehan's sources, Kissinger concluded that America had three options as to what to aim for in the Arab-Israel conflict: **1) Forceful movement toward a comprehensive settlement; 2) quasi-settlement only with Egypt; 3) revival of "the step by step" process if nothing else proved politically feasible.**

Sheehan writes that practically everyone Kissinger consulted between April till early May favored option #1: "The United States should announce its conception of a final settlement in the Middle East, based on the 1967 frontiers of Israel with minor modifications, and containing strong guarantees for Israel's security. The Geneva Conference should be reconvened; the Soviet Union should be encouraged to cooperate in the quest to resolve all the outstanding questions (including the status of Jerusalem) which should be defined

in appropriate components and addressed in separate subcommittees."

Kissinger knew that he could expect opposition to this plan from all sides, and to get around the Jewish lobby and Israeli's attempt to frustrate implementation of such a policy, Sheehan reports that "Kissinger's advisers envisioned Ford going to the American people. . . . pleading the necessity for Israeli withdrawal in exchange for the strongest guarantees."

But the Israeli lobby beat him to it, bypassing the Administration with a direct appeal to Congress where support for Israeli policies still remains firm. The lobby produced the now famous letter from the 76 Senators expressing overall support of Israel. Especially in an election year in which no one wants Israel to be the issue, this letter succeeded in killing the Administration's articulation of its new policy to the American people. According to Sheehan, Kissinger decided last May after months of maneuvering for an American initiative to break the status quo but that "at some future time when the president is stronger, when his prospects are more auspicious he might go to the people with a plan for peace based upon the first option."

The letter from the 76 Senators may well prove to have been a mistake. While it stopped the verbal articulation of America's conception of a Middle East peace, to the confusion of everyone, it did not stop its implementation. In fact, the letter may have made it

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easier for Kissinger since it prevents Israeli supporters from challenging the fundamentals of American policy, forcing them to focus on the slow and subtle manifestations of pressure which have been growing since March, 1975. In effect, Israel is getting all the pressure implicit in option #1, without the benefit of an articulated overall policy to challenge.

This does not mean to say that there is no overall policy. It is implicit in the events of the past six months. It has been best articulated in a study prepared by the influential Brookings Institute called "Toward Peace in the Middle East" which was issued last December. Largely influenced by former Ambassador Charles Yost, the report was signed by prominent scholars such as Morroe Berger (Princeton), Zbigniew Brezinski (Columbia), John Cambell

(Council on Foreign Relations) Malcom Kerr (UCLA), William Quant (University of Pennsylvania), and Nadav Safran (Harvard); all are known for their close connections to foreign policy making circles. In addition, the report was signed by Philip Klutznik and Rita Hauser, both actively involved in Jewish community affairs.

Their recommendations are remarkably similar to Kissinger's first option: an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders; recognition of the 'principle of Palestinian self-determination'; resolution probably at Geneva, of all outstanding issues including Jerusalem, leading to peace between all parties to the conflict, implementation of the agreement in stages over several years: multilateral and bilateral guarantees with the U.S. playing a unique role.

The Brookings Report received immediate attention in Israel for what it was, a blueprint for American policy in

the Middle East. It received very little notice in this country, which is unfortunate since it signals a future major American initiative should the stalemate in the Middle East continue. What is holding up this initiative is not any particular administration, but the fact that this is an election year. As Wolf Blitzer, editor of *Near East Report*, the weekly newsletter of AIPAC which is generally regarded as the Israeli lobby, recently wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*: "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."

*Mark Bruzonsky is a writer and consultant on international affairs living in Washington D.C. Copies of the Brookings Report on the Middle East are available from the Breira national office in New York for \$.50 to cover handling charges.*