

A U.S. Mideast Policy: Ending the Stalemate

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Comment on the column "Washington: Putting It All Together," by Mark A. Bruzonsky, InterChange, April 1976.

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WASHINGTON—Election-year drag notwithstanding, is there such a thing as a U.S. Mideast policy aimed not at stalemate but at settlement—a policy carrying enough bureaucratic thrust and popular consensus to be put into effect after the election, if not before?

Plainly, the Israeli government hopes not. Prime Minister Rabin has made no secret of his judgment that Israel's best bet is to hang on until 1977 and then cope as well as possible. One does not have to suspect he is merely bowing to fierce Israeli domestic political pressures. Given continued Arab unwillingness to make the kind of commitments to peace that could ease Israeli anxieties, there is good reason for Israel just to try to tough it out.

I think, however, that there is such a thing as a U.S. settlement policy, and that the Israelis are going to have to deal with it sooner or later, reluctant as they and many of their U.S. Jewish supporters may be to face up to the fact.

Basic Equation

Everybody knows the basic equation of such a settlement policy: territory for peace. It surfaced as the Rogers Plan in 1970, as the Brookings Institution report a few months ago.

Indeed, according to Mark Bruzonsky, a perceptive young Washington writer who read the Edward Sheehan article in Foreign Policy closer than the rest of us, the United States was heading toward public statement of that basic equation in its Mideast "reassessment" last year.

To get around the expected opposition, Sheehan wrote, "Kissinger's advisers envisioned Ford going to the American people... pleading the necessity for Israeli withdrawal in exchange for the strongest guarantees." But the May pro-Israel letter of 76 senators killed that option. Kissinger decided, according to Sheehan, to put off that option to "some future time when the President is stronger, when his prospects are more auspicious..."

Bruzonsky, writing in Interchange, a publication of a small U.S. Jewish group called Breira (alternative), adds:

"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 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 1973..."

getting all the pressure implicit in option 1, without the benefit of an articulated overall policy to challenge."

Same Conditions

Would the man elected president next November decide to revive that "option 1"? Certainly the same objective conditions—the oil-swollen U.S. economic and political interest in the Arab world, the higher (\$2 billion a year) post-1973 cost of supporting Israel, the interest in Soviet-U.S. détente—will be there pressing on any new president. So will be many of the old bureaucrats. It is wrong to think that only a Republican president, and only a secretary of state of a particular sort, would choose or be compelled to address such conditions.

In my view, there is really only one way Israel can gain some assurance that the United States won't continue leaning on it—in the name of a settlement plan, whether enunciated openly or not—to make concessions it deeply fears to make. That is, of course, for Israel to proclaim the territory it will yield up for peace and on that basis seek to enlist U.S. support for its plan.

I think that Israel is much more likely to regain and hold the firm long-term U.S. support it desperately needs by taking the initiative—on the Palestinians as well as on territory—than by sticking in the cramped shrinking bargaining posture that the Rabin government currently is in. That is the way Israel can best get the United States to demand concessions from Arabs as well as themselves. It is, if you will, the way to put the monkey on the Arabs' back.

Moral Factors

I am not talking strictly about moral factors, although the morality that Americans perceive in Israeli policy is of tremendous importance to a nation like Israel, which seeks U.S. support on the basis of a presumed moral stand. Being a vigorous working democracy, which Israel is, is one aspect of this stand. Treating the Palestinians fairly, if and as they treat Israel fairly, is a second aspect.

But one must acknowledge as well the *realpolitik* of the situation. As long as Israel is not seen to be taking advantage of all the avenues to peace possibly open to it, then the breadth and depth of the U.S. commitment are bound to erode. Israel and many U.S. Jews might like to see the United States accept Israel as "a symbol of American steadfastness," in James Schlesinger's words. But Israelis would be foolish to think that "American steadfastness" will be mobilized regardless of what Israel does on its own.