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<i>Contents</i>		<i>Page</i>
Australia's New Government (Part Two)	KEITH D. SUTER	57
The PLO and Israel	MARK A. BRUZONSKY	64
Mixing Oil With Politics: The Case of Iran	KEITH M. HENDERSON	72
Two Poems: Al-Ukhaidir and Kuwait	RAYMOND TONG	76
The Disintegration of English Society Since The Middle Ages	LORD SUDELEY	77
West Germany Comes of Age	WOLFGANG J. KOSCHNICK	84
The Sisters Return	ROSALIND WADE	91
L. S. Lowry (1887-1976)	ERNLE MONEY	93
Fair Sailing in Rough Waters	JOHN BEASANT	95
Kissing	JOHN B. FOLEY	99
Quarterly Record Review	DAVID FINGLETON	101
LITERARY SUPPLEMENT		105
Paul Rose, M.P., Kenneth Lindsay, David Fingleton, R. F. Mullen, Desmond Hawkins, Betty Abel, Trevor Allen.		
SHORTER REVIEWS		111

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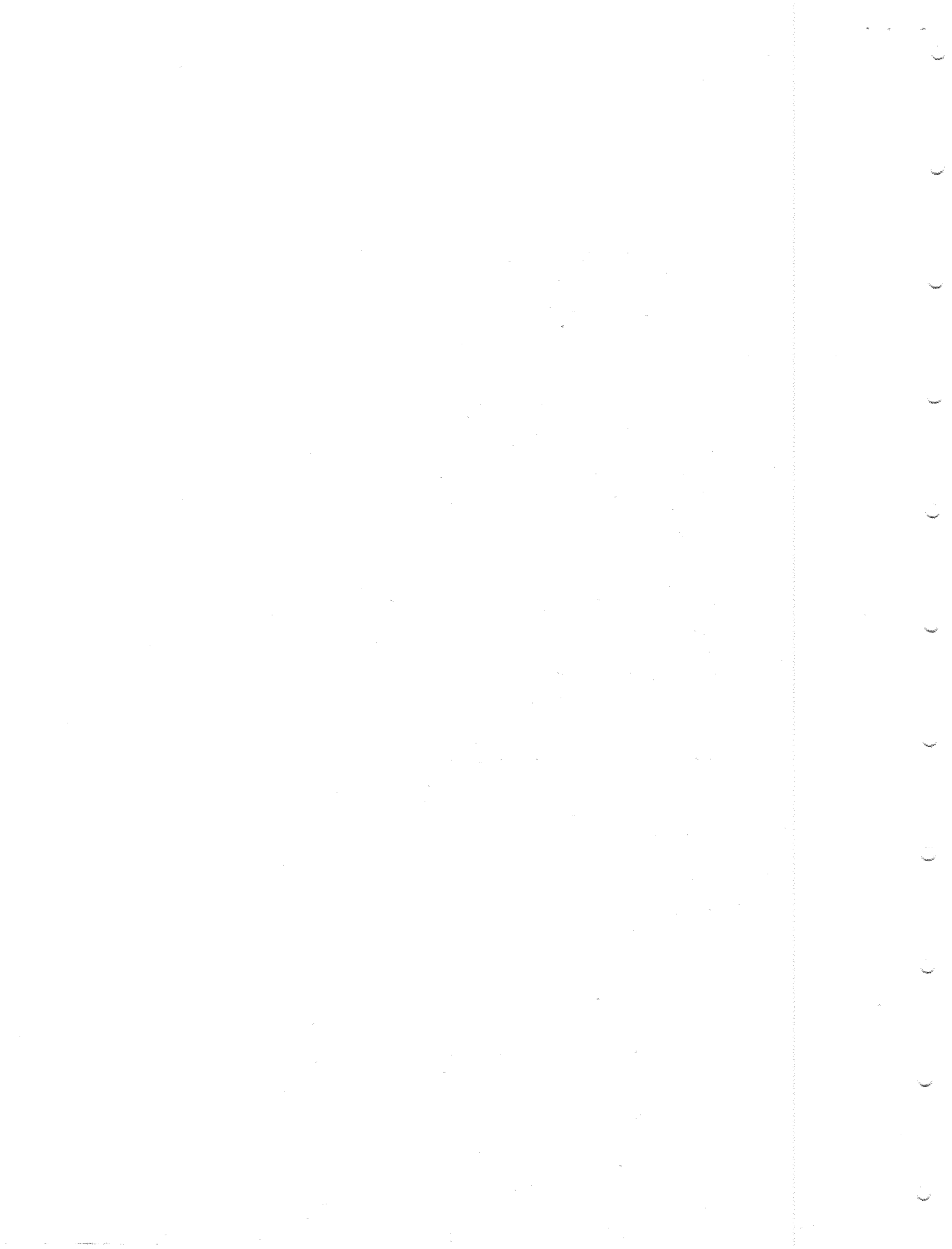
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THE PLO AND ISRAEL

by Mark A. Bruzonsky

NOT for 20 years, since 1956, have there been such apparent strains in the United States-Israel friendship. Prime Minister Rabin during his recent American visit was reduced to telling Jewish audiences in New York that he believes the U.S. will continue to support Israel. Newspapers are filled with reports indicating that 'rarely have Israelis felt more frustrated and alone'—this one from *The New York Times* last December 2nd.

What is in question is not a U.S. reversal of her traditional policy of aid and sympathy for the Jewish State—the reservoir of support remains nearly filled even though some leaks are detectable. Reduction in the amount of that aid and the pressures for territorial and political concessions which might accompany further aid are the primary sources of today's apprehensions and anxieties.

Beleaguered Israel has never before been so utterly dependent upon the United States. And American Middle East policy is at this very time attempting a lasting alliance with moderate Arab regimes as well as with Israel. How this geopolitical development of major world importance will affect the U.S.-Israel relationship in coming years, and how it will colour U.S. perceptions of her own vital interests in coming months are the basic questions troubling Israeli strategists and planners.

Current concerns nearly all focus on U.S. thinking about attempting to resolve 'the Palestinian problem' and consequently on the U.S. flirtation with the PLO. This problem now occupies centre stage in the overall confusion of various national policies, interests and strategies. The fear among many of Israel's supporters is not simply that the U.S. will one day soon recognise Palestinian 'national rights', going beyond today's acknowledgement of Palestinian 'legitimate interests'. After all, nearly the entire world has already legitimised such a formulation of the problem.

The real difficulty for those concerned about Israel's future is that this step might be taken without an unwavering insistence by the United States that the PLO acknowledge co-existence with Israel as an acceptable aim. Recent developments do in fact add up to reasons for fearing that the perceived U.S. need for at least the appearance of diplomatic movement might result in a watering down of this most basic condition. There are as well, fortunately, reasons to hope that Kissinger's State Department is aware how crucial and uncompromisable this PLO concession really is. This realisation then will continue to necessitate unswerving insistence that the moderates in the PLO take the plunge toward mutual recognition in exchange for the likelihood of a Palestinian state.

The Saunders statement must be the starting point of any attempt to comprehend what is really going on. If there are still those who think the Saunders statement anything less than a new American policy on 'the

Palestinian problem', subsequent events since November 12, 1975, should have dispelled such doubts.

Israeli protests when the statement was first made before a subcommittee of the Congress were immediate and vehement. Indeed, Israel's over-reaction elevated the cautious American change of position to front-page news in the U.S. as well as in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the State Department refused to budge in the face of repeated Israeli challenges.

In fact, the department took the unusual step of underscoring the significance of then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Harold Saunders' statement by releasing it as an official statement of 'Current Policy'. (Saunders has since been promoted to direct the department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research). And then under the title *Department of State Bulletin*, 'the official weekly record of United States foreign policy'.

Since these publications occurred a number of weeks after the initial furor, it became clearer in December that the department had finally decided to begin the process which might result in acceptance of the PLO along with the formula of 'national rights'. This might lead to discussion of a West Bank plus Gaza Strip Palestinian State. U.S. toleration at the end of last year of the Syrian gambit to link PLO participation in a Security Council Middle East debate with renewal of the mandate for U.N. forces in the Golan Heights became the next red flag for cautious Israelis. And then in January the *London Financial Times* reported the U.S. to be involved in 'clandestine diplomacy' with the PLO through Connecticut State College. As was to be expected, the State Department's perfunctory denial did not prevent this story too from becoming front-page news in Israel.

January's Security Council veto of a resolution which would have actually sanctioned a Palestinian state has not altered this now fundamental U.S. course. American policy continues to be an attempt to influence the PLO toward a position which can be said to warrant some form of U.S. recognition. Then the next step would be to bring about some form of actual negotiations, if necessary, by dragging both the Israelis and the PLO moderates down the road of possible co-existence.

In the ranks of the PLO the debate over a response to U.S. probings has not yet yielded any clearly recognisable response. When the conflict in Lebanon is finally stabilised, though, it is certain that various factions of the PLO will continue to assess the possible implications of U.S. flirtatiousness. The result remains obscured by the considerable disarray within the PLO and by tremendous ideological, political and historical barriers all but preventing any unambiguous concessions which would imply a willingness to accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

Some observers have concluded that the PLO's role at the January Security Council debate was influenced by U.S. overtures. *The Washington Post* points out that 'The resolution endorsed an "independent" state, not a secular one; and a state "in Palestine" as opposed to "of Palestine"—a formulation meant to leave room for pre-1967 Israel'. According to the

Post's analysts, 'The resolution was perhaps the most constructive pro-Palestinian resolution ever to come out of the United Nations'. And the *Jordan Times* implies that the vetoed resolution was actually an attempt to reach out toward a position acceptable to the U.S. if not Israel. 'The Palestinians have taken a major step forward', said the paper which reflects official Jordanian thinking. By accepting the clause that every nation in the region has the right to 'sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence', the paper feels the Palestinians have shown 'an implicit recognition of the right of an Israeli state to exist'.

All this remains, however, highly debatable. The PLO fought the inclusion of the clause on guarantees. And lacking the necessity to vote on the final resolution the PLO cannot be said to have approved of it. Certainly most of the writings by political spokesmen as well as Security Council representative Khadoumi's verbal utterances can reasonably be said to lead to the opposite conclusion, as proclaimed by Abuiyyad.

Even if the more optimistic interpretations of what has been taking place have some merit, the PLO and the U.S. are not anywhere near being satisfied with each other. All that can be said for sure is that the courtship is continuing and may clear a path to Geneva.

Many in Israel are not blind to this U.S.-PLO romance. There was a report in *The Jerusalem Post* a few days after the Saunders earthquake indicating that his boss, Assistant Secretary Alfred Atherton, had told Jewish leaders in Washington that Saunders had 'erred'. Yet more seasoned American watchers know which way the wind is really blowing.

One of the best, M. K. Aharon Yariv, former Minister of Information, recently returned from a U.S. mission to warn Israelis of 'U.S. pressure 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 bluntly told Israelis. One day they might just lay down the line to us: take it or leave it'.

What is not agreed upon by even the pro-Palestinian moderates in Israel is how best to respond to all of these developments. Should there be continuing attacks on the PLO, possibly coupled with renewed overtures to West Bank moderates; or maybe quiet diplomacy with the Americans coupled with a more positive Israeli attitude; or an Israeli peace initiative which could turn the U.S.-PLO game of mutual testing into a three-sided affair?

There remains widespread scepticism in Israel that there really are PLO 'moderates' when it comes to the possibility of a lasting and peaceful co-existence with Israel. Still various factions even within the ruling Labour coalition have competing ideas about how to proceed. There is near universal agreement that Israel must make sure the U.S. holds true to the promise, given when Israel agreed to the second Sinai disengagement, that the U.S. will coordinate its Palestinian policy with the Israelis. But how, in view of the Saunders beginning and the likelihood that the U.S. will keep on probing?

More and more within Israel there is support for what is now known as

the Yariv-Shemtov policy toward the PLO. This approach basically offers the PLO a role as representative of the Palestinians at Geneva in exchange for recognition of Israel, renunciation of terrorism, and acceptance of resolutions 242 and 338 as the basis for negotiations.

But anyone familiar with internal Israeli politics and with the generally shared Israeli misgivings about any and everything involving the PLO knows that even this seemingly reasonable policy would be one fraught with political traps, domestically and internationally. Movement toward such a policy—and there have been cautious efforts by some since the initial recovery from the Yom Kippur War—is akin to feeling one's way through a minefield. Rabin's coalition has approximately reached the point of no return—there's no going back to the old Golda approach (i.e., 'The Palestinians . . . who are the Palestinians?') but there is no agreement on how to proceed forward either. Domestically the country might explode should Rabin accept the liberal-dovish approach. And internationally Rabin is risking a real tear in the fabric of U.S.-Israeli relations should he hold fast. Then on top of everything else there are basic diplomatic considerations. Once Israel says 'Yes, if' to the PLO, what leverage will the U.S. have if she then maintains her present stance and demands the same concessions as Israel? The U.S. is now supposed to be 'even-handed'. If Israel says one thing the U.S. is at least expected to be more moderate. And finally there are the realpolitik considerations. Once Israel says 'Yes, if' how can she make sure the PLO and the Soviet Union will not force themselves through the open door with waves of diplomatic hot air? Israel might then find herself unable to hold the door only slightly ajar and unable to achieve the minimum conditions thought necessary to risk giving up the territories and contemplating a neighbouring Palestinian state.

While many in Israel quietly acknowledge all these dilemmas and risks, support for easing forward through the political minefield does appear to be growing. And much of this support is traceable to a belief that Israel should be firm but not unreasonable. The Yariv-Shemtov formula has become for many the test of reasonableness. It may as well be the test which Foggy Bottom will use to determine if Rabin's government has the necessary flexibility to continue as a partner in U.S. efforts or if Israel is so paralysed that imposition of terms may be the only way to make progress. This was, after all, the case just last year when the 'reassessment' brought about a more conciliatory Israel after a few months of arm twisting.

Even Chaim Herzog, currently Israel's U.N. Ambassador, and a pre-Yom Kippur War advocate of policies in accord with the Yariv-Shemtov approach, continues to be in favour of an Israeli effort to make the U.S.-PLO dalliance triangular. 'I am not free today', Herzog recently said rather coyly, 'to express my opinion on this issue. But I can mention a recent article by Shafiq al-Hut, a top PLO official in Beirut. In it he wrote that Yariv's proposal came as a thunderbolt to the PLO and caused deep rifts within their ranks. The removal of the proposal, al-Hut added, came as a blessing from heaven'.

To sum it all up, the heat is on in Israel because Yariv is essentially correct in his realisation that the U.S. might soon seriously consider attempts to impose some kind of negotiations upon Israel. Such a day might not be that distant unless Israel shows some signs of being able to take some initiatives of her own.

In Washington meanwhile the previous complete solidarity within the American Jewish community is recognised to be dissolving and this gives the Administration more domestic leeway than ever before. Even a number of Jewish leaders, most of whom seek anonymity, have begun discussing the need for increasing pressure on an Israeli government paralysed by domestic politics and a somewhat myopic vision of Arab and Palestinian attitudes.

One such leader who has publicly spoken out is Rabbi Henry Seigman, Executive Vice-President of the Synagogue Council of America. Writing in *Moment* magazine, Seigman boldly asserts that Israeli attempts to maintain current political positions 'may contain the seeds of disaster'. And he terms as 'mindless dogmatism' the way in which the American Jewish community has traditionally 'suspend[ed] its own critical judgement entirely when it comes to Israeli foreign policy'. There is, according to Seigman, an 'irrational unwillingness to look at new realities'.

Clearly the new realities are becoming impossible to overlook. To many Americans Rabin appears simply to be attempting to 'tough it out'—to use a phrase reminiscent of his 1972 choice for the American Presidency. His coalition is too fragile for any bold policy changes and the November American election makes increased American pressure unlikely, he has probably concluded. Even if pressures do build, both Kissinger and Ford may not be around in a few months.

Yet, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that Rabin will manage to avoid a major debate within his own country, this time with a serious challenge from the doves. And it is increasingly doubtful that the U.S. will tolerate continuing stalemate. Ford and Kissinger mean what they say on this issue. Moreover, the new perception of U.S. interests goes beyond this Administration—a new President and Secretary of State will find the same coalition of forces, pressures and interests.

In Israel, with the Committee for an Israeli-Palestinian Peace (Eliav, Pa'il and Avneri among others) openly advocating a Palestinian State on the West Bank and in Gaza and negotiations even with the PLO 'on the basis of mutual recognition, the Rabin coalition plan to at least wait until 1977 (if not the passing of the 'seven lean years' the Prime Minister used to discuss) is under the greatest internal challenge ever. Even Abba Eban and Itzhak Navon, Chairman of the Knesset's important Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee, are increasingly speaking out for policy changes toward the PLO similar to those advocated by then Minister Yariv in 1974.

And while within Israel those pushing for an overall peace initiative remain rather isolated, no matter how articulate, in the U.S., those supporting American determination to push forward are growing in numbers. Returning from a two-week visit to Israel sponsored by the pro-Israeli

American Professors for Peace in the Middle East, Georgetown University's Government Department Chairman, Dr. William O'Brien, recently summed-up American sentiment. 'I'm afraid we're just stuck with the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians', he told a gathering of Jewish students at his university. 'Israel simply has to negotiate even though the odds are against her.'

In short, Yariv did read American attitudes rather well during his visit. The U.S. is moving towards some form of PLO recognition. The State Department has made itself clear that what the U.S. requires is a less ambiguous willingness by PLO moderates to accept a Palestinian State solution. Put diplomatically, this means just what Saunders testified in November. 'What is needed as a first step', he then asserted, 'is a diplomatic process which will help bring forth a reasonable definition of Palestinian interests—a position from which negotiations on a solution of the Palestinian aspects of the problem might begin. . . . It is obvious', he continued, 'that thinking on the Palestinian aspects of the problem must evolve on all sides'. Read together with what the Israelis consider Saunders' greatest blunder—his opening assertion that 'In many ways the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the heart of the conflict'—American willingness to entertain the possibility of a Palestinian State is reasonably beyond doubt. Kissinger's way of preventing a Palestinian state from coming under Soviet domination might be to offer the Palestinians American sponsorship under the right conditions.

Both Kissinger and Ford have been pressuring Rabin hard to allow some form of separate Palestinian presence at Geneva. Rabin's firm 'no' represents his coalition's determination not to open the door to any possibility of a Soviet-backed Palestinian state on Israel's eastern borders. U.S. policy nonetheless appears to be willing to push a process through which both the PLO and Israel would eventually agree to some kind of negotiations that might lead to mutual recognition, *de facto* if not *de jure*—the U.S. stands willing to take credit for any progress. At least this is how one highly influential person in the State Department recently explained it to a group of visiting scholars. Rabin's absolute unwillingness to consider any such scheme is thought to be more and more only a facade attempting to mask how fragile Israel's 'under no circumstances' policy has become.

The recently revealed cut in military aid to Israel is undoubtedly another American way of telling Rabin what's up. This is true regardless whether the premature announcement of the cut was purposeful or by error—recalling Kissinger's back and forths about the Saunders document it's a good bet that the aid cut announcement was more than a printer's goof. And Congressional efforts to restore the aid cannot remove the ever-increasing issue of Israeli dependency.

One reason for the aid cuts and the relentless pressure, beyond Israel's dependency, is that the State Department is reasonably pleased with American reactions to the Saunders approach. Only *The Wall Street Journal* of the major newspapers counselled that 'The U.S. is moving too quickly'.

And even so, the *Journal* noted that Saunders' assertion that the Palestinian dimension is the heart of the conflict is 'indeed true' while correctly adding that it is also true, as Israel insists, that 'the real crux is Arab refusal to acknowledge their state's right to exist'.

What the Israelis have not perceived as yet is that in this election year it may well prove popular to give an appearance at least of strong efforts to force negotiations. *The Washington Post* recently added up the risks and came to the conclusion that 'This new policy emphasis of cautious hospitality to Palestinian moderates holds out considerable diplomatic and political risk to the Ford Administration. So central is the Palestinian question, however, that we think the risk prudent, even essential to take'. Whether there actually are Palestinian moderates and whether they will respond to U.S. overtures, it does seem likely the Ford-Kissinger Administration or its successor will continue the dance, applying ever more pressure upon Israel for similar flexibility.

Amid all this manoeuvring, Rabin came to Washington in late January insisting that 'You cannot achieve peace but from the 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'. Yet strength is undebatably more than military might and 'defensible borders'. Politically, Rabin should know better than anyone else how weakened Israel has become in recent months. Now the U.S. cut in aid coupled with unprecedented Arab political, military and economic strength is putting Israel in the kind of position where another Arab attack is thinkable. Since another war would seriously further damage Israel's political, economic and psychological health, this is just the kind of situation which might make war rational in the Arab perspective. Consequently, a major peace initiative designed to improve Israel's overall posture of strength (as well as to test Arab intentions) seems no more risky than continuation of present policies. Support for such a peace initiative has begun coming from those whose preoccupation is realpolitik as well as from the optimists. Such a coalition will have a rather difficult time deciding just what to say, but at least there might soon be enough support to say something new.

Even without a comprehensive initiative, Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and the PLO may not be maintainable much longer. Rabin keeps trying to prop up his sinking policies but he often alienates at least as many as he convinces. Shimon Shamir, head of Tel Aviv University's history department, recently wrote that 'Some of Rabin's statements seem so divorced from the present realities in the Middle East that it was difficult to believe that he meant what he said'.

It is a losing battle continuing to try to deny Palestinian national rights and some legitimacy to PLO claims to representativeness. A new battle, after a tactical political retreat, can however be successfully fought over the absolute necessity for mutual recognition and over what reasonable conditions Israel can rightly expect to be agreed upon during negotiations which could lead to a Palestinian state. Unless ex-General Rabin recognises the

line-up of political as well as military forces and realises the necessity of retreat to more defensible political battle lines, he may lack the strength and forces to do so later.

The greatest danger facing Israel is not internal dissension nor is it possible future discussions with the PLO. More important than everything else is U.S. determination to insist that the PLO acknowledge the aim of co-existence with Israel and consequently be willing to recognise Israel's legitimacy in exchange for discussions about a Palestinian state and Israeli acceptance of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian Arab people. Shamir's warning is the most crucial one for Rabin. 'It may be', Shamir insists, 'that this is the last chance Israel will have to consolidate a position with the US which would exchange PLO participation for meaningful and concrete concessions'. Unfortunately the strain in U.S.-Israel relations may make this consolidation impossible. Already the U.S. is thinking of a formula of conditional PLO participation at Geneva where the PLO would only have to agree that a *possible outcome* of indirect negotiations might be recognition of Israel. To prevent the U.S. from going too far, Israel must make sure, as previously mentioned, to be both firm and reasonable. It is the reasonableness of current Israeli policy which is under challenge and the Yariv-Shemtov formula would do much to undo the damage. If the deterioration of Israel's position continues, however, the movement toward an imposed settlement might become the only option open to the U.S.

A *Washington Post* editorial following the conclusion of the recent Security Council debate perhaps has best summarised the sympathetic but determined American attitude which has developed toward Israel. Rabin, the editorial states,

will have to display great qualities of leadership to start moving the Israeli mainstream toward a position on the vital Palestinian issue consistent with the world's interest in a Middle East settlement. We think, nonetheless, that this is the direction in which Israeli as well as American policy must move. . . . A Palestinian state . . . will eventually have to be established in the Middle East.

It is as yet too early to decide whether recent dramatic events at Entebbe will materially influence an essentially complex situation. It may be of interest to note that during June the Security Council at the U.N. called for a two-phase programme for the return of displaced Palestinians to their homes, recommending June 1st, 1977, for Israel's withdrawal of occupied territories.

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