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WASHINGTON: UNCERTAIN, WAITING, BUT GETTING READY

by MARK A. BRUZONSKY

The battle for American public opinion and congressional support on Mideast issues is escalating. The "pro-Israel lobby" is beginning to use sledgehammer tactics, which may backfire, and in any case are unlikely to alter the growing consensus in Washington: to push for a settlement.

The Lebanese bloodbath and Palestinian disarray have greatly confused Middle East prospects as viewed from Washington. There remains considerable quiet agreement with the editor of the Jewish lobby's Washington newsletter, Wolf Blitzer, 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." Yet the uncertainty about the president-secretary of state combination, coupled with the backward-looking Democratic Party Middle East platform plank has created an atmosphere of wait-and-see.

During the summer, the increasingly visible Jewish lobby has somewhat desperately gone on the offensive urging rethinking of the "Jordanian option," attempting to block most U.S.-Arab arms and some economic agreements, resuming the crusade against the

PLO and "Palestinian national rights", and challenging even the contemporary wisdom that at least Sadat's Egypt is truly moderate and desirous of reaching a lasting Middle East settlement.

Repression in the American Jewish Community

Within the American Jewish community, the escalating questioning of Israeli policies has come under severe attack. The Presidents' Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations (the umbrella body for organized American Jewry) even met in New York in June to take a position essentially outlawing public discussion of Israeli policies. Free inquiry within the American Jewish community is still being subordinated to Israeli government desires.

But the also increasingly visible "Breira"

organization seems to be weathering the storm of charges — including a direct assault by Hadassah that Breira and American Jews who dare express other than mainstream or reactionary policies are “left-wing defeatists” whose very existence “runs counter to Israeli security and Jewish survival.”

Breira published a direct counterattack to the politics of Jewish communal repression in the June issue of its monthly *interChange* — a publication which has in a short time achieved notice in such important newspapers as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the Long Island daily *Newsday*. Prominent American Jewish writer Irving Howe, author of the bestselling new book *World of Our Fathers*, insisted in the June issue that the relentless campaign to prohibit public thought and expression now “verges on . . . witch hunting.” “Such a course,” if allowed to continue, he wrote, “would make the life of the American Jewish community lifeless; a mere ritual of parades, resolutions, and generous checks.”

“I am not a member of *Breira*, nor do I expect to become one,” Howe wrote in that June article. But his increased contact with a number of the more thoughtful and reflective individuals circling around *Breira* apparently had its effect. By late summer he had changed his mind and joined. It is a story sure to be repeated often in the months ahead.

For *Breira* is potentially the most interesting development in American Jewish life in recent memory. It is opening up a pro-Israeli but, at least in part, non-Zionist alternative which is more representative of the bulk of American Jewry’s intellectuals than any of the established Jewish organizations.

The simple reality is that American Jewry is in the throes of an ideological-identity crisis separate from but interdependent with Israel’s political nightmares. Cultural, political and economic matters are all at issue — but the heart of the crisis is largely existential. *Breira* was spawned by the turmoil, not its cause. Once safely alive, *Breira* was destined to grow like a weed in such an environment.

A number of Washington political commentators have already grasped the political significance of what is taking place on the American Jewish scene. Stanley Karnow —

formerly foreign affairs editor for *The New Republic* until he broke with the new owner Martin Peretz who, for one thing, has been blatantly using the magazine for articles sympathetic to Israeli government policies — wrote in one of his July columns that “One of the most significant developments in years is the growing willingness on the part of American Jews to criticize publicly Israeli policies . . . The development is important because it means that U.S. politicians need not endorse Israel’s behavior automatically, as many have in the past, out of concern that they will be confronted by an antagonistic American Jewish community whose political influence is considerable.” What “this means”, he continued, is “that the United States may be able to exercise more flexibility with Israel as it seeks a settlement to the constantly worsening situation in the Middle East.”

Washington-Jerusalem “Collision Course”?

As the November election approaches, the assertion by Ari Rath (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 Washington Middle East policy-makers when he told a Bnai B’rith audience in June that “simple logic requires us — indeed impels us — to persevere in the search for a comprehensive settlement.” But Washington is increasingly aware that there are many in Israel who understand this logic for either tactical (public opinion) or strategic (the real possibility of achieving a gradual peace) reasons. A “collision” is not inevitable though 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 (and the Arabs must first 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

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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 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, but 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 has been a time of preparation and rethinking. Those who remember 1969 know that post-election years are traditionally times of greatest strain in Israeli-American relations, times of American initiatives which have to date nearly always been resisted by Israel. Those who have forgotten might recall, in the words of scholar Shlomo Slonim, that "by late 1969 there were signs that the differences between the United States and Israel were leading to a crisis of major proportions in relations between the two countries." Such signs exist again today and Israel's political and economic position is far weaker than 7 years ago. But few in Washington see anything right now 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 crossroads

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 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 is not doing so are infinitely greater."

Secretary Kissinger last May (also before a Jewish audience) painted much the same future. 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 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 were intensely involved with Middle East policies are gone or may go with Kissinger — most importantly Under Secretary Joseph Sisco and Policy Planning chief Winston Lord. But even if Kissinger departs (a certainty unless Ford wins in which case a new spurt of Kissinger activism can be expected since he seems very much to want to stay on), 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 for Political Affairs, may emerge, but as a newcomer, cannot, at first, fill Sisco's shoes on Middle East matters.

Other men at lower levels will continue to exert their influence — among them

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"Red" Austin in Policy Planning and Phil Stoddard in Intelligence and Research where a young scholar Sam Roberts 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 become president and secretary of state will listen, maybe more so than in previous years when the Middle East was less pressing. In fact, it needs to be impressed on the Israeli collective mind 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 be the most important political development in many years since the Congress has been the primary barrier 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 Jewish 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 Amityay, then in his first year as successor to Sy Kenan as head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). And it largely blocked what Kissinger now says was to be a major initiative beyond step-by-step for an overall settlement.*

This Israeli-Jewish lobby maneuver a year and some months ago not only prevented the more bold American policy initiatives Kissinger was considering, but also halted further articulation of American Middle East policy to the American public. The con-

sequence has been a period in which Israel's supporters have constantly been on the defensive here and a series of minibattles has ensued. The administration, seeing no other alternative, has resorted to a pressure-by-pressure approach when what is called for is American-Israeli cooperation and a joint peace initiative. But few in Washington believe any longer that the fragile Rabin coalition is capable of such a partnership. Here is where the arguments for progressive pressure which might even result in imposition find eager listeners.

Resentment at Jewish Lobby Tactics

Today, indications are that the Israeli-Jewish lobby 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 aide puts it, "AIPAC often does with a sledgehammer what should be done with a stilleto" 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 the lobby's influence.

In fact, the question has arisen in the minds of some of the most knowledgeable of Israel's friends whether the new aggressive tactics adopted by AIPAC since the change over in leadership a couple 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 as they never were when AIPAC was headed by its founder Sy Kenan, who built a position in Washington of immense but subtle influence.

But any public discussion of the Jewish lobby is considered taboo and journalists as well as persons in the Jewish community who have tried have found themselves, or their publications, under considerable pressure. Last year, for instance, former Chief of Staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Carl Marcy planned to write in his *Foreign Affairs Newsletter* about AIPAC and how the lobby went about

* This is pointed out by Edward R.F. Sheehan in his new book *The Arabs, Israelis and Kissinger*, which is already the subject of much discussion before its October release because of an excerpt in the spring issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine. The book is must reading.

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"getting 76 Senators to sign a letter to the President giving unqualified support to the foreign policy positions of Israel at a time when the president and Dr. Kissinger are engaged in delicate negotiations between Israel and Egypt." As Mr. Marcy wrote in an "Editor's Comment" in the issue which was to deal with this topic,

"After broaching the subject to several individuals and groups, we confess we were intimidated by such comments as the following: 'Good idea; do you have independent means to support your newsletter?' 'Don't be stupid, damned few people will think any presentation balanced no matter how hard you try.' 'What are you, nuts or something?'"

"We confess to only one conclusion: The subject of Israeli-Arab relations is so fraught with emotion that it can't be discussed rationally in Israel, the Arab World, the United States, or the U.S. Senate.

"I may already have written too much!"

This year, an economic counselor for the Israeli Embassy who formerly worked for AIPAC, Chaim Even-Zohar, became so nervous and fearful when he learned he may be quoted on this subject that he spewed forth many threats to this journalist and then called magazines threatening "legal action" if he was quoted at all!

Needless to say, almost everyone refuses to talk "on the record." But this too may change. Senator Percy for one now laughs — at least a little — about the campaign orchestrated against him last year when he said something about Yasir Arafat being "relatively" a "moderate."

Washington is full of stories by journalists and bureaucrats who have been unable or unwilling to discuss the power and tactics of AIPAC. Hence it is only men so little aware as General George Brown or Spiro Agnew who ever mention the subject.

The truth is that once the very symbol of effective low-key lobbying with the near-

unanimous backing of the entire American Jewish community, AIPAC today is 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." And one of the most respected representatives of a major Jewish organization has even concluded that Kenan's successor Morris Amitay, a former foreign service officer and aide to Senator Abraham Ribicoff, "...has personal qualities which are outrageous and very harmful to the cause we all share."

There are numerous stories about the lobby these days and most are not complimentary. No matter what one's view of proper Israeli policies, this development should be causing considerable anxiety.

McGovern Subcommittee Hearings; Endorsement of the Brookings Report

The primary focus during the 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 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 titled "Toward Peace in the Middle East" proved to be the main thrust of these important hearings. Without major exception, this report was fully supported by all eight of the final witnesses who testified on future U.S. policy options. 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 was strongly underscored.

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But the reality is that what the Brookings Report suggests is far more controversial. It can now be reported that Bertram Gold, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, refused to sign the report. And other Jewish members of the Panel were subjected to considerable pressure, some by Ambassador Dinitz himself, not to sanction the report especially on the matters of Palestinian rights and 1967 boundaries.

In fact, had it not been for Philip Klutznik's progressive stand, it is likely the report would have either been far less forthcoming or rejected by some of the Jewish members of the panel. Klutznik's endorsement had the effect of making the report immune from public attack. But the trade-off may have been some kind of agreement by Brookings to give the report low visibility here — Israeli newspapers have had much more extensive coverage for instance. Another sign of how cautiously Brookings has distributed the report (except upon specific request) is the letter Brookings' Henry Owens sent to Senator McGovern on 28 July, months after the Senator had begun promoting the report in Congress and after the conclusion of all six sessions of the McGovern subcommittee hearings. The letter informed Senator McGovern that a report on the Middle East "was published in January (it was published in December, 1975) and that since there have been "so many recent indications from members of the Congress . . . that they were not aware of its existence . . . I thought it best to let you know about it. If you would like a copy, please let me know."

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. Using the leverage the U.S. now has with all parties it might be possible to induce, persuade and if necessary to gently coerce important concessions from both sides that could result in a resumed Geneva Conference. Presidents' Conference chairman Alexander Schindler's recent comment that Israeli leaders "would almost be more comfortable, for domestic political reasons, if the decisions were imposed rather than articulated and accepted from within" summarizes the basic reasoning behind pressuring Israel in an attempt to buttress the forces of moderation there.

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 may largely determine American pressures.

So, after years of divisiveness, the State Department and an increasingly independent Congress are getting ready for what many are convinced may be a crucial year for deciding the future of Arab-Israeli relations and maybe of American-Israeli relations. Senator Stevenson has captured the mood which few are willing 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."