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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Israel's small shift — a Carter wedge?

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

Israel's willingness to have Palestinians in a united Arab delegation at the first session of a resumed Geneva conference, though hedged with restrictions, may give the Carter administration the wedge it needs to fulfill its pledge to Saudi Arabia and Egypt to get the peace process moving during 1977.

Still, this peace process is not likely to proceed very far unless the U.S. is able to outmaneuver Israel's current government and return the process to substance rather than public relations and invalidate the obtrusive restrictions placed by Israel upon participation at Geneva. This weekend's joint U.S.-Soviet statement may be the beginning of a major international effort to do just this.

Last Thursday, President Carter had lent his prestige to circumventing the main Israeli condition — refusal to deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). He stated for the first time that the PLO "represents a substantial part of the Palestinians." He added that the U.S. will "begin to meet and work with the PLO" if the PLO adopts United Nations Resolution 242 — even though such PLO recognition of Israel might be combined with the insistence that Palestinian self-determination be added to that resolution's reference to "a just settlement of the refugee problem."

Israel's goals, in what much of the press has wrongly regarded as a major policy shift de-

signed to accommodate American diplomacy, appear to be fourfold:

- To block possible U.S. acquiescence at the United Nations to inclusion of the idea of "Palestinian national rights" in a new framework resolution for the Geneva conference which would reaffirm the centrality of Resolution 242 passed in 1967. A central condition placed by Israel on its willingness to attend Geneva is that there be absolutely no change in 242.

- To take the burden off Israel of refusing to attend the Geneva conference which the U.S. is making strenuous efforts to bring about. By phrasing Israeli policy in the positive rather than the negative the burden at least appears to have shifted to the Arabs.

- To further pressure the moderate Arab states — especially Egypt where President Sadat craves a foreign policy success even more than does President Carter — to distance themselves from the PLO.

- To also separate the PLO and the U.S. which have been cautiously courting each other through intermediaries for some months. Israel is desperately attempting to lessen the likelihood the PLO will take any further steps toward accepting American conditions that could lead to some form of American-PLO relationship.

Essentially, Israel has changed its position on only one, relatively minor, aspect of Geneva — the symbolism of a unified Arab delegation

at the opening session. But even here the Israeli Cabinet insists that the non-PLO Palestinian Arabs at this session be considered part of the Jordanian delegation which they will formally join in all negotiating sessions. This has actually been the Israeli view for some time.

Moshe Dayan, Israel's foreign minister, stated very clearly recently that Israel's views about the arrangements for the Geneva conference incorporated Israel's views about what would be discussable at the conference. Israel is not prepared to discuss self-determination for the Palestinians and certainly not a Palestinian state, which would mean partition of Palestine, as was originally envisioned by the UN in 1947 (though Israel would remain at least within its pre-1967 borders). Israel is prepared only to negotiate peace treaties with the neighboring Arab states, essentially evading what has often been termed, by high U.S. Government officials, among others, the heart of the conflict — the Palestinian issue.

Faced with this situation, the Carter administration appears to be tactfully pursuing the following goals:

- To use the wedge provided by Israel to bring about a Geneva conference where the Palestinians will be represented (which means some role for the PLO) and where Palestinian self-determination will be on the agenda in addition to peace treaties between Israel and the four adjoining Arab states.

- To convince the PLO that the historical moment has come requiring a public and unambiguous willingness to acknowledge Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state if Israel will acknowledge the right of the Palestinians to a national existence as well.

- To continue acting as an honest intermediary gradually narrowing seemingly irresolvable differences and using persuasion as well as various forms of leverage to keep momentum in the general direction of an eventual settlement.

- To begin serious consideration of the types of assurances and guarantees the U.S. is willing and able to make to Israel to help give the Israelis sufficient courage to begin contemplating the kind of risky settlement the Carter administration has been advocating for some months.

American and Israeli goals remain substantially at odds. Israel's recent policy announcements have not really altered this reality; in fact, they resulted from Israel's awareness of the dangerous gap that has been growing between Washington and Jerusalem. Still, Israel has provided something of an opening and it is now up to the Carter administration to adroitly exploit its small achievement.

Mr. Bruzonsky is associate editor in Washington of *Worldview* magazine.