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Lending an Ear to the PLO

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance will be spending this week in the Mideast. On the eve of his departure he indicated that one of his goals will be to see if the political and ideological positions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) are really changing. This could be a hint of developing new American policy toward Palestinian nationalism. Still, events during the past few months reveal a most unfortunate pattern of U.S. reluctance to acknowledge moderating PLO attitudes, and more importantly, to encourage them.

Last week, for instance, Vance rejected the visa application of a leading official of the PLO, Sabri Jiryis, to attend a meeting of the American Friends Service Committee in Washington this past weekend. Not only has this prevented the American public from hearing first-hand the new policies of the PLO, it may also have sabotaged another meeting between Jiryis and a leading Israeli moderate, Reserve Gen. Matti Peled, who has been directly reporting to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Another application remains on the secretary's desk awaiting his return, but indications so far are that it will not receive American approval. This visa application would allow Jiryis, one of the PLO's most reasonable and articulate spokesmen for coexistence with Israel, to come to the U.S. to head the new PLO Washington information office which he successfully registered with the Justice Department last November.

To appreciate the importance of the U.S. considering a positive gesture toward the moderates in the Palestinian movement, it is necessary to put current developments into the context of those past few months.

Battered by the brutal conflict in Lebanon, the Palestinians have been forced to become less radical and more realistic. Last October, at the Riyadh and Cairo Arab summits, the Palestinians were finally convinced that they would no longer be allowed to roadblock movement toward a possible overall settlement with Israel. Since that time, a leadership faction within the Palestinian movement, headed by PLO-chief Yassir Arafat himself, has repeatedly signaled its desire for a separate state—in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip—which would live with the Jewish state rather than replace it.

Certain specific and courageous steps have been taken by this leadership group, which faces

serious internal opposition. Unprecedented meetings between two emissaries of Arafat, Jiryis and Isam Sartewi, a heart surgeon trained in the U.S., have been taking place in Paris with Israelis. These same PLO representatives came to the U.S. last fall and met with leading American Jewish leaders and spoke before a number of important American foreign policy groups, including the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

At that time, which was during the Ford-Carter transition period, the State Department refused to extend Jiryis' visa, indicating that the moment was "not propitious." This rejection, however, was based on a passport technicality.

The issue of a PLO information office has now taken on a separate symbolism. To the State Department, granting the pending Jiryis visa application requires a change in U.S. policy, though one far short of recognition for the PLO or even of

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an invitation to the Geneva Conference. For the PLO moderates it has become something of a test of U.S. intentions and understanding. There is understandable reluctance to continue to make concessions unless there is assurance from the U.S. that there will be a political response.

Secretary Vance and President Carter now have the ball. The Israelis, in the midst of an election campaign, will not alter their own policies beyond the subtle shift to the more reasonable position that only a change in the PLO's Covenant (which repeatedly calls for Israel's destruction) might cause an Israeli reassessment. The Palestinians, when they meet in Cairo during the next few months in their embryonic parliament, the Palestine National Council, will be considering just such changes.

It is within this context that some American gesture toward the Palestinians is now required from the Carter administration. How Carter, Vance and Brzezinski handle this delicate moment in the evolution of the political and ideological positions of the Mideast antagonists will be one of the early tests of their ability to grasp the reins of international diplomacy.