

# The Washington Post

22 March 1977

## Palestinians' Choice

THE PALESTINIAN counterpart of elections has just been held in Cairo. The returns were mixed. Ideologically, the Palestinian mainstream continues to move in the right direction: toward explicit acceptance of Israel's right to exist. But it hasn't by a long shot arrived. The more moderate Palestinians find it unfair that they should be expected to accept Israel's national claims when Israel has yet to accept theirs. But the burden remains on them to demonstrate that they approve the premises of the settlement process of which at least some of them hope to become a part. One must say some because, as the Palestine National Council meeting in Cairo demonstrated, the Palestinians are divided and unable to put up strong leadership.

The Palestinians, not alone, regard Jimmy Carter as the key man—as well they might. In his first major Mideast pronouncement, on March 9, he ignored the Palestinians; he addressed the Arab states and held out just to them a powerful inducement—the return of virtually all the territory they lost in 1967—to join a settlement process. But in his second pronouncement, on March 16, Mr. Carter did not dodge. He endorsed “a homeland” for the Palestinians, while stating that to get a crack at it they must accept Israel's “right to be there.” That is the fundamental trade-off. President Carter could not offer the Palestinians more. ~~He could not offer the Israelis less.~~ As in his acceptance on March 9 of the Arabs' territorial goals and the Israelis' political ones, he was saying to Palestinians and Israelis that each can get what it wants only by granting the other what it wants. Unsurprisingly, his remarks stirred mixed feelings in both camps.

The immediate practical problem is how to work the Palestinian problem into the broad Arab-Israeli

negotiations at Geneva, which the Carter administration is trying to crank up later this year. The Palestinians are out of phase. The Arab states would like to bring them to Geneva, perhaps tucked somehow into the Jordanian delegation, without first having them accept Israel's “right to be there.” But the Israelis refuse—as they have every right to. And the United States, to keep faith with the Israelis and to earn their confidence for the tests sure to come, backs them in their refusal. The Palestinians themselves seem torn between not wanting to miss the Geneva train for fear it will head toward a settlement without them, and not wanting to get aboard for fear it will take them to the kind of settlement they feel they can't accept. The push and pull on this question will be the stuff of diplomacy for months to come. The crucial thing to look for is what the Palestinians choose.

We would add a note to Mr. Carter's approach to the Mideast. It troubles us that he seems so determined to demonstrate personal command of foreign policy substance that he will take major steps without always consulting senior aides and that he will risk misstatements. But we think he is proceeding wisely, if unconventionally, nonetheless. For some years the dominating tactical question for the United States has been whether it should inject its own views on a settlement at an early stage or a late one. There is no automatic magic or menace in either style. It is a question of judgment and taste. We think Mr. Carter, by injecting his own views early, has made a good choice. It minimizes illusions; it lets the parties prepare for the necessary fundamental change. That Arabs and Israelis alike are alternately growling and nodding shows they've gotten the message.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 1977

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### *Mideast Wrestling*

As your March 22 editorial, "Palestinians' Choice," concluded, it does appear that both the Arabs and the Israelis are realizing that President Carter may be serious in proceeding with the kind of settlement he has now outlined. While it is true that the Palestine National Council has not sufficiently altered its ideological opposition to coexistence with Israel to merit bringing the PLO directly into the settlement process at present, it should also be noted that the Israelis themselves have yet to accept the kind of settlement Mr. Carter is advocating. Prime Minister Rabin has instead rather brazenly suggested his country will institute a "new information campaign" to compete for congressional and public opinion with the President.

In an editorial in London's *Economist* on March 12 the "Israel-Palestinian deadlock" was compared to "two intertwined wrestlers each afraid to move for fear the other will hurl him to the ground."

Indeed, if the tables are turned in the first paragraph of your editorial critical of the Palestinians, we might have a reasonable statement of what we can expect the Israeli predicament to be shortly after the May 17 election: "The Israeli election has just been held. The returns were mixed. Ideologically, the Israeli mainstream continues to move in the right direction: toward explicit acceptance of the Palestinians' right to nationhood. But it hasn't by a long shot arrived. Even the more moderate Israelis find it unfair that they should be expected to accept the Palestinians' national claims when the Palestinians have yet to accept theirs. But the burden remains on them to demonstrate that they approve the premises of the settlement process of which at least some of them hope to become a part. One must say some because, as the election demonstrated, the Israelis are divided and unable to put up strong leadership."

In this situation, it should be no wonder that the current issue of *Foreign Affairs* carries an article suggesting it is up to the United States to save the Israelis (and I would add the Palestinians) in spite of themselves.

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