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When the Palestine National Council convenes in Cairo on March 12, the many hundreds of Palestinian representatives may finally endorse the idea of a state for themselves *within* Palestine rather than insist on Arab sovereignty over *all* of Palestine.

If this does happen, it could mark a historic watershed in this century's bitter struggle between Jews and Arabs for that Biblical land. It would then become more realistic to contemplate negotiations leading to creation of a Palestinian state to coexist with Israel.

Such Palestinian ideological evolution would be in line with what the United States has been urging for a number of years, most recently by Secretary of State Vance. Consequently, it could lead to greater American support for Palestinian nationalism. More immediately, it could result in American diplomatic contact with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) — still the only widely accepted representative of the Palestinian Arabs.

Such developments might then help bring about a basic change in Israeli Government policy — probably after the May election. Already a sharp shift is revealed by a December Israeli public opinion poll in which 37 percent of the public expressed a willingness to negotiate with the PLO once there is recognition of Israel's right to exist.

An example of what could be U.S.-PLO pre-diplomacy" (recall the U.S.-China "Ping-Pong diplomacy" period) began last fall. Sobered by the bloody experience in Lebanon and responding to unprecedented pressure from Arab governments plus a chorus of pragmatic moderation from within, the PLO took the giant step of meeting with highly influential dovish Israelis in Paris beginning in July.

U.S. role as Palestinians meet

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

These meetings were followed by PLO chief Yasser Arafat's dispatch of two representatives, Sabri Jiryis and Isam Sartawi, to the U.S. in November. They met with a number of American Jewish leaders (the most senior names are not yet publicly known) and attempted to reach an understanding with the U.S. concerning further evolution in American attitudes toward Palestinian nationalism.

At that time the attempt was made to have Jiryis remain in Washington to run an information office. Though this initiative came during the presidential transition period, the State Department responded not with outright refusal but with insistence that the time was "not propitious." Behind the scenes Secretary Kissinger even designated retired Ambassador L. Dean Brown, most recently U.S. special envoy to Lebanon, as liaison. But in the end, the matter became a subject of newspaper headlines and Jiryis's visa was not renewed on a technicality.

In this period of preparations for what will be exceedingly difficult negotiations when the Geneva conference resumes, the encouragement of Palestinian moderation should be an American priority — as it has become for most of the Arab states, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The real work which needs to be done is in preparing the way to Geneva. If the Palestine National Council fails to clearly break from its doctrinaire positions toward Israel, progress toward a Middle East settlement will become far less likely.

U.S. policy — no recognition of the PLO until the PLO accepts Israel's sovereignty and the Geneva conference framework — remains sound. But it is crucial that the new Carter administration realize the room for carefully calculated interim steps should there be persuasive reasons to offer the Palestine moderates gestures of good faith.

It was the need for assurances that American political initiatives would follow PLO policy changes which motivated the PLO's November attempt to have a representative remain in Washington. This issue of a PLO information office has since taken on a separate symbolism. To the State Department, granting the now renewed visa application of Sabri Jiryis requires a change in U.S. policy, though one far short of recognition for the PLO or even of an invitation to Geneva. For the PLO moderates it has become a test of U.S. intentions and understanding. There is considerable reluctance to continue to make concessions unless there are firm indications that there will be a political response.

It has become clear during the past few weeks that the PLO will have to acceptably restate its positions before the U.S. will be willing to take such a step as allowing a PLO-run Washington office. But hopefully, President Carter and Secretary Vance have relayed private assurances to the moderate Palestinian leadership that positive developments can be expected if the results of the National Council meeting reveal a reasonable political posture.

For without some sign of U.S. responsiveness it will be exceedingly difficult for the moderates to carry the day in Cairo.

If no such assurance has been transmitted during these first hectic weeks of the Carter presidency there may still be time for Mr. Carter to publicly restate his November, 1975, view that "I think one of the integral parts of an ultimate settlement has to be the recognition of the Palestinians as a people, as a nation, with a place to live and a right to choose their own leaders." Such a presidential initiative during the next few days would be most timely and potentially reflected in the Cairo proceedings.

After years of struggle, Israel's apprehensions that what some see as PLO metamorphosis is only a chameleon-like alteration masking real intentions is understandable. Still, neither Israel nor the U.S. can afford not to test what might become a real path toward Middle East peace.

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