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Peace in the Middle East

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Mark A. Bruzonsky

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Washington

In March, first during a press conference and then at a Clinton, Mass. town meeting, President Carter outlined what soon may evolve into a major new American initiative for a Middle East settlement. Carter's three-point program includes near-total Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders; establishment of real peace, including special security arrangements for Israel, and creation of a "homeland" for the "Palestinian refugees."

The administration's vision of an eventual Arab-Israeli settlement was jolting to all, but especially to the Israelis. Israel had not been under the illusion that Carter was going to live up to the excessively pro-Israel rhetoric of the campaign, but it hardly expected so forceful, hasty and public a discussion of the Palestinian issue and the simmering dispute over borders. After less than two months in the White House, Carter almost casually unveiled a far more comprehensive picture than any of his predecessors had drawn of U.S. policy in the area. And, though the various Arab parties are still waiting with growing anticipation for actions, it appears that the President is pointing the United States down a path first outlined in the Brookings Institution Report, "Toward Peace in the Middle East," released in December 1975, after considerable controversy among the report's sixteen signatories. Indeed, Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz was active behind the scenes in late 1975, trying to convince a number of prominent American Jews on the panel to withhold their support. His failure at that time foreshadowed last month's developments.

So far, Israel's nervous response has been all too predictable. Though press spokesman Avi Pazner at the Washington Embassy does his best to play down the atmosphere of acute anxiety, Israel has begun a new "information drive." This campaign was announced by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who last week was forced to resign because of his financial improprieties, immediately after Carter showed his cards. It is designed to convince American public opinion—and Congress, of course—that Israel both deserves and requires "defensible borders" substantially enlarged from those of June 1967; that the "Palestinian problem" must be solved within the context of Jordan; and that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) can never be a legitimate participant in Middle East negotiations.

Most observers of the Israeli scene believe that there will be no fundamental change after the May 17th Israeli election. Israeli foreign policy is determined these days more by circumstances and American pressures than by personalities and ideologies. The Labor Party—now headed by the more colorful Shimon Peres—might be able to substitute partners in the Knesset by replacing

the intransigent National Religious Party with Yigal Yadin's new Democratic Movement for Change, thereby gaining at least some degree of flexibility to deal with both the Arabs and the Americans. Indeed, a coalition government with Peres at its head, Yadin pressing for electoral reform, Yigal Allon as Defense Minister and Abba Eban as Foreign Minister offers some attractions. But in all likelihood the coalition framework will continue to force upon Israel a reactive policy rather than an assertive one. The *Jerusalem Post* correspondent, Asher Wallfish, writing in the April 2nd issue of *The Nation* (before the recent Israeli developments) concluded that "one prediction is sure: the next government will be feebler than the present one." While Peres will probably prove a more popular campaigner than Rabin, it remains likely that Labor will emerge limping from the election.

Already the potential flexibility of the next Israeli Government has been somewhat diminished by Moshe Dayan. His recent threat to bolt from Labor caused such panic that important party leaders reversed their February platform decision and agreed that, before any territorial concessions are made in the all-important West Bank, new elections will be called. This is the exact demand by the right-wing elements after the December 1973 election. The independent newspaper *Haaretz* reports that Dayan's move will surely have a "negative effect on the freedom of political action of the next government" further paralyzing even the Labor Party.

After May 17, it is widely assumed, U.S. policy for the Middle East will aim for a serious reconvening of the Geneva Conference. *The Washington Post* candidly editorialized earlier this month that "If the Israelis can produce only another weak and diplomatically shackled government, they are going to find Washington designing their security interests and negotiating positions." Those skeptical that the neophyte Carter administration would attempt a comprehensive Middle East settlement—even one to be implemented over a period of years—have now become skeptical of their own skepticism. Even so, chances for actually achieving a Middle East peace remain slim, while the dangers of a breakdown of the Geneva talks are ominous.

Edward R.F. Sheehan, a Middle East expert at the Harvard Center for International Affairs and author of *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, applauds Carter's initiatives but puts the odds against success at 3 or 4 to 1. And former Under Secretary of State George Ball, in a much-publicized *Foreign Affairs* article advocating a U.S.-imposed settlement, warns that

nothing could be more reckless than to regard the projected Geneva Conference as merely another episode in the long-playing Middle East movie serial. It will be a high-risk venture with success or failure propelling the principal participants toward either relative stability or almost inevitable war. If it ends with a whimper—as it will in the absence of a decisive American initiative—it will be followed by a bang.

Roadblocks to success have been set up by the various

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Arab parties as well as by Israel. No Arab party has as yet accepted the kind of peace Carter has outlined, though Egyptian President Anwar Sadat has come far in his talk of "permanent peace" and "normalization" of relations. The Palestinians, as represented by the PLO, have yet to accept Israel in any form, though their willingness to contemplate a West Bank-Gaza Strip Palestinian state has in it an element of de facto recognition.

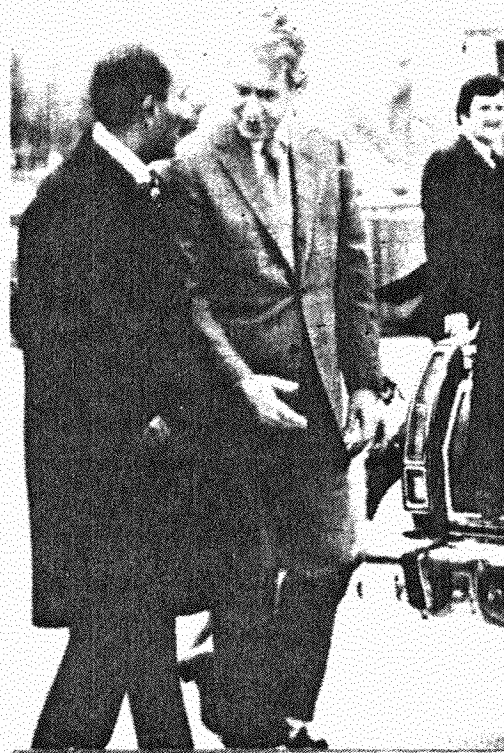
Carter's apparent determination to bring about a complete and total peace and to distinguish between Israel's sovereignty borders and its security borders is bound to create at least some tension in U.S.-Arab as well as U.S.-Israel relations. In short, a political mine field lies ahead and the United States appears to be heading into it partially blind. It is a major gamble with serious domestic as well as international ramifications, but it is being attempted because really there is no choice. If the role, in Carter's words, of "catalyst to bring about their ability to negotiate successfully with one another" should fail, a much more forceful approach may well be required, along the lines outlined by George Ball.

For some, Carter's Middle East vision is but one manifestation of what has come to be termed "Open Mouth Diplomacy"—more a public relations show than serious policy formulation. But others there think the new President may have been underestimated after all. Disclaimers notwithstanding, Carter and his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski seem determined to do whatever is needed to break the Middle East stalemate—which has become intolerable for U.S. interests.

Both Brzezinski and William Quandt, his Middle East man at the National Security Council, played important roles in formulating the 1975 Brookings Report—that consensus statement on American Middle East interests and how peace might be nurtured by American diplomatic intervention. Earlier that year, Brzezinski, then still on the Columbia University faculty, had advocated creation of "what would probably be the PLO-dominated state of Palestine." Quandt's background is that of a scholar, one of whose major interests is Palestinian nationalism. And the Brookings Report itself clearly calls for recognition of "the principle of Palestinian self-determination." So it should have been no great surprise when this administration began to discuss a Palestinian "homeland"—a concept which of necessity means Israeli withdrawal from almost the whole of the West Bank and some special arrangement for sharing a nonbarricaded Jerusalem.

Carter spoke in Clinton on the evening of March 16. The next day a hungry press descended on the State Department, where reporters were denied any interpretations. Instead, they were told that the President was "extraordinarily well briefed" on Middle East issues and that his statement the previous evening "represents the cohesive and complete position of the United States Government." That was a rather bold assertion, certainly cleared with Secretary of State Vance, that those who would belittle Carter's sophistication, or the coherency of his administration's foreign policy making, do not understand how this President and this administration operate. Since then *Newsweek* has reported that Carter spent "hours of discussion" with Brzezinski and Vance, putting together this "major revision of U.S. strategy."

A few days after Clinton, *The New York Times*



Secretary Vance Greets President Sadat at Andrews Air Force Base

hailed President Carter's performance as a "wise policy" and "a fair vision of the American purpose and method in the Middle East." According to the *Times*, "there is nothing makeshift or accidental about the policy he intends to pursue." Other editorial comments, with noticeable exceptions such as that by columnist Joseph Kraft, ranged from favorable to enthusiastic.

It is doubtful we shall be hearing many more specific promptings from the Carter White House as the Israeli election approaches. Washington was hoping for Rabin's continuance, but still would much prefer Peres to a right-wing Likud coalition, which has become possible though unlikely. Further nudges from America at this time could undermine Peres and even force him to make uncompromising campaign promises—something about which Carter should be most sensitive.

During President Sadat's Washington stay, Carter made few comments that added to his previous statements. The same approach is likely later this month when Jordan's King Hussein is expected. By late May, when Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd comes to call on the new President, it is possible that the administration will resume its public discussion of Middle East matters. Carter will also be meeting in Europe next month with Syria's President Hafez Assad.

With this period of more traditional diplomatic consultations coming up it is useful to recall in some detail what has already been said, keeping in mind that the United States has committed itself to a major push for a Middle East compromise before the end of the year.

Carter's vision is essentially one of an Israel at peace with all its neighbors, including Palestinians occupying

a "homeland" in the area of the West Bank and Gaza Strip—territories occupied for the past decade by Israel, but whose political future has never been resolved. The "first prerequisite of peace," the President said at Clinton, requires Arab acknowledgment of Israel's right to exist. He has in mind gradually establishing normal relations between Israel and its neighbors. He foresees a situation where interaction would be "opened up to travel, to tourism, to cultural exchange, to trade, so that no matter who the leaders might be in those countries, the people themselves will have formed a mutual understanding and comprehension in a sense of a common purpose to avoid the repetitious wars and death that have afflicted that region for so long."

The borders Carter envisions are, with "minor adjustments," essentially those that existed before the 1967 Six Day War. The State Department has let it be known that the United States would consider a continuing Israeli control over all of Jerusalem a "major" change and therefore unacceptable, but Carter has tactfully refrained from commenting on this most emotional issue. He has, however, distinguished between Israel's "sovereignty borders" and what might be its "security borders," at least for some period of years. This might involve the creation of demilitarized zones, introduction of international peace-keeping forces, and even the possibility of Israeli military patrols within territory that would revert to Arab sovereignty—at least while any agreement is being implemented.

For many, the most significant of Carter's Clinton remarks was his call for "a homeland . . . for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years." While the Israelis officially have begun once more to insist that Carter means only a Palestinian area within Jordan, a more impartial assessment is that this administration has not yet decided just what form such a "homeland" should take. Prime Minister Rabin said, when questioned about the "homeland" statement, "I'm afraid Carter doesn't have [Jordan] in mind."

At the moment the intention in Washington is to promote a degree of ambiguity which, while it puts the parties on notice, publicly allows them to make their own interpretations. What specific proposal the United States will soon decide to promote remains uncertain, much depending on how the Palestinians respond during the next few months and on the preparations of inter-Arab diplomacy for Geneva. The Carter administration has definitely kept its option to advocate a sovereign Palestinian state. Since Clinton, Carter has been quoted as saying that the Palestinian problem will have to be resolved within "the framework of the nation of Jordan, or by some other means"—another attempt to create as much ambiguity as possible, since "some other means" can refer only to a separate Palestinian state, possibly linked to Jordan in various ways.

Carter's Middle East package is both comprehensive and well conceived. As the *Times* editorial put it, his outline is one of "real peace, real withdrawal and a real solution to the problem of the Palestinians." Former Secretary of State Kissinger's attempts at step-by-step diplomacy may have prepared the way for this bold move

to resolve the fundamental issues between Arabs and Israelis, but Carter has taken the first major step toward asserting U.S. leverage upon all parties to the dispute.

By doing so, he has also raised the sensitive issue of American security guarantees for Israel—in effect the glue to hold any comprehensive settlement together while the parties adjust to new realities. Such guarantees could be one of the ways Carter thinks Israel's security frontiers could be extended beyond its sovereignty borders. The United States, for instance, might agree to monitor and patrol demilitarized zones in the Golan Heights and West Bank, enlarging on the role it now plays in the Sinai passes from which Israel reluctantly withdrew in 1975. Indeed, during his February visit to Israel, Secretary Vance discussed in general terms the possibility of American guarantees. And in an interesting Congressional development, Rep. Clement Zablocki, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, told a meeting of the Zionist Organization of America that he now favors "a formal security commitment between the United States and Israel, duly ratified by the Senate and binding in all its terms."

As with the British Balfour Declaration's call in 1917 for a "Jewish national home," Carter's assertions to date merely acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian people who deserve some form of self-determination. It is the form that remains in question and it will be shaped in large part by the behavior of the Palestinians themselves. Unless they can make changes in the liberation-oriented Palestine National Covenant (a quasi-constitution), the Israeli hold on U.S. policy, coupled with Carter's determination to foster a real peace, may well prevent any further gestures by Washington toward the idea of a separate Palestinian state. But if Palestinians at some future time should alter the ideological base of the PLO, it is possible—even likely—that the United States will finally acquiesce in inviting that body to represent the Palestinian people in Geneva. Morton Kondracks, the new executive editor of the pro-Israel weekly, *The New Republic*, suggested last month that "The conflict between Israel and the U.S. could well come . . . over just how much change is to be demanded of the PLO before it is accepted as a party to negotiations."

But it is clear even now that the administration perceives the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict to be more significant than did any of its predecessors. In a little reported development, Robert Lipshutz, a senior Presidential counselor who serves informally as liaison with the Jewish community, may have thrown a little more light on the attitude of the White House toward the Palestinians. Speaking just days before Carter's Clinton appearance, Lipshutz noted that "a large percentage of the Palestinian people feel they have been deprived of their rights and, whether such an attitude is justified or not, we would ignore this situation at our peril. The resolution of this problem," he continued "is of utmost importance to the state of Israel, to the Arab countries, to the United States and indeed to the world."

Positive public and press reactions to Carter's Middle East views are further stimuli to the administration's determination. Even before Clinton, reaction to the President's press conference comments about a comprehensive Middle East peace requiring Israeli withdrawal

to approximately the 1967 "sovereignty" borders were surprisingly favorable. "Some of the President's ideas should prove valuable . . .," *The Christian Science Monitor* noted on March 10. The following day *The Washington Post* observed that, though "much remains to be learned about the Carter approach, . . . the plan seems to us extremely promising and sound. . . . We think," the *Post* continued, "that Mr. Carter is right to make a bold Mideast initiative and that his effort is serious and fair and deserving of the most responsible consideration. . . ." *The New York Times* agreed, declaring that "President Carter has now cut through this tangle with a shrewd and prudent formula for negotiations. . . . If the Carter formula is not recognized eventually as the essential framework for negotiations, there would be little point in talking." The White House will be closely following future press reactions to its Middle East positions, always aware that the Ford-Kissinger "reassessment" in early 1975 failed precisely because forces opposed to it were able to use public and Congressional leverage to block administration moves.

But during the two years since the "reassessment," many perceptions have been changing. Now something of a new consensus is jelling throughout the country, and especially in Washington, about what to shoot for and how to proceed in the Middle East. Geneva will be the public forum, but much will have to be worked out beforehand in confidence. The agenda will largely be territorial withdrawal and Palestinian "homeland," in exchange for peace and security. "We see potential progress in 1977," the President commented on March 25. "I believe our country is willing to devote a great deal of attention" to Middle East diplomacy.

Whether the administration and public opinion will march together during the coming months is now one of the big questions. As in December 1969, when former Secretary of State William Rogers publicly discussed a U.S. initiative for breaking the Middle East deadlock, Israel is again attempting to short-circuit America's influence. A major and possibly traumatic policy reassess-

ment is in store for Israel after the May 17th election, but for now the Israelis have decided to compete with the administration for public and Congressional opinion—and in this there is more than a touch of *déjà vu*. Within the American Jewish community attempts to silence and discredit those who support the notion of a Palestinian state and Israel's return to the 1967 borders have become excessive and distasteful. As never before in recent memory, the community is in danger of political fragmentation should there be a confrontation between Israel and the United States on these issues.

Carter has a chance for success only if he can hold together public, press and eventually Congressional support for the Middle East course he has charted. Only thus will he be able to withstand the inevitable domestic political pressures. By one account, every single Middle East document the President has received through the bureaucracy insists that "the problem of Israeli intransigence" will be the greatest obstacle he must confront in pursuing the kind of comprehensive settlement he has outlined. And George Ball is right to warn in his analysis that Israel's attitudes will be translated into American domestic politics, as happened during the campaign. "President Carter must be prepared to accept formidable political opposition," Ball writes. "That will not be easy, for in the years since [1957] Israeli supporters have greatly increased their political power in Washington." Still, Ball continues,

If America should permit Israel to continue to reject inflexibly any suggestion of a return to earlier boundaries and the creation of a Palestinian state and to refuse even to negotiate about Jerusalem, we would be acquiescing in a policy hazardous not only for Israel but for America and the rest of the world. That would not be responsible conduct for a great power.

Months of political maneuvering lie ahead. A bruising confrontation between the United States and Israel is near unless one of the parties alters course. Yet real and lasting peace can be built only upon a solid and trusting American-Israeli relationship. □