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## Carter confounds the skeptics with his Mideast plan

By Mark A. Bruzonsky  
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WASHINGTON — When Jimmy Carter took to the pulpit of the Clinton town meeting and laid out his three-point Middle East program of near total Israeli withdrawal, real peace and a "homeland" for the "Palestinian refugees," he changed all the rules of Middle East diplomacy.

The Carter Administration's vision of an ultimate Arab-Israeli settlement was shocking — not so much for what he proposed, but for the manner of its presentation. Less than two months in the White House, Carter almost casually unveiled a far more comprehensive outline of US policy than any of his predecessors.

So far, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's nervous response has been to proclaim a new information campaign designed to convince American public opinion — and the Congress, of course — that Israel requires and deserves "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 partner to Middle East negotiations.

This response reflects a pre-election toughness which Rabin must exhibit if his Labor party is to triumph at the polls on May 17.

Meanwhile, there is building anxiety, both in Jerusalem and Washington, that not too far down the road, unless someone alters course, a major clash between the United States and Israel is becoming inevitable.

Former Under Secretary of State George Ball's important article in the current April issue of Foreign Affairs pinpoints some of the areas where serious friction exists between Israeli and American perceptions and interests. Ball's insistence on the need for a major American initiative "to save Israel in spite of herself," is but one sign of a growing US uneasiness with the seemingly unending Middle East stalemate.

After the Israeli election, less than

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seven weeks away, the expectation is now widely shared that US diplomacy in the Middle East will take aim on a serious reconvening of the Geneva Conference.

Those skeptical that the neophyte Carter Administration would attempt a comprehensive Middle East settlement — even one that would be implemented over a period of years — have now become skeptical of their own skepticism. Even so, the chances of achieving a Middle East peace remain slim.

The roadblocks come from the various Arab parties as well as Israel. No Arab party has as yet accepted the kind of peace Carter has outlined and the Palestinians have yet to accept the existence of Israel in any form.

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For some, Carter's vision is but a manifestation of what has come to be termed "Open Mouth Diplomacy" — more a public relations show than serious policy formulation. But, for others, there is the thought that Jimmy Carter may have been underestimated after all.

Disclaimers aside, Carter and his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, seem to be supporting nearly all of the recommendations contained in the December 1975 Brookings Institution report, "Towards Peace in the Middle East." Both Brzezinski and his Middle East man at the National Security Council, William Quandt, played important roles in formulating this consensus statement on American Middle East interests and how peace might be nurtured by American diplomatic intervention.

Significantly, this report was approved by a number of active and influential members of the American Jewish community.

The day after Carter spoke in Clinton, a hungry press descended on the State Department. There they were denied any bureaucratic 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."

# Carte 'open mouth diplomacy' could work in Mideast

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This was a rather bold assertion, certainly cleared with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, that those who tend to belittle Carter's sophistication and the coherency of Carter Administration foreign policy-making simply do not understand the way 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 US strategy" for the Middle East.

It seems doubtful we will be hearing too many more specifics from Carter as the Israeli election approaches, and Carter extends a White House greeting to Egypt's President Sadat this Monday and later this month to Jordan's King Hussein. He will follow these sessions with a meeting in Europe with Syria's Hafez Assad in May.

The Washington visit of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd has been delayed, apparently due to worry about King Khalid's health, but will probably take place early in the summer.

Carter's goals are essentially one of an Iraq at peace largely within the 1967 borders and with a Palestinian "homeland" in the area of the West Bank and the 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 outlined at Clinton, requires Arab acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist.

Carter has in mind, essentially establishing relations between Israel and her neighbors "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 essentially those which existed before the 1967 Six Day War with minor, mutually-agreed alterations. The State

Department has let it be known that the United States would consider continuing Israeli control over all of Jerusalem a "major" change and therefore unacceptable, but Carter has tacitly refrained from commenting on this most emotional issue.

He has, however, distinguished between Israel's "sovereignty borders" and what might be her "security borders," at least for some period of years.

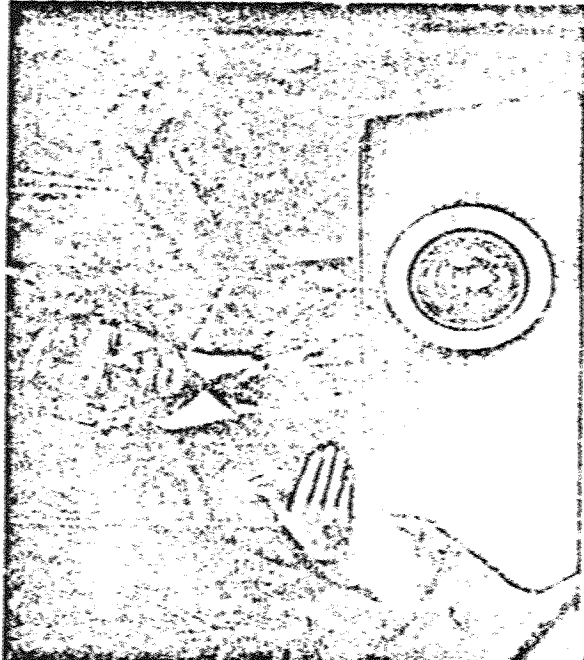
This might allow for creation of demilitarized zones, introduction of international peacekeeping forces, and even the possibility of Israeli military patrols within territory that would be returned to Arab sovereignty — at least for the period of years in which any agreement is being implemented.

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 have begun to insist that Carter only means a Palestinian area within Jordan, a more impartial assessment seems that this Administration has not yet decided just what form this "homeland" might take.

At the moment, the intention is to promote the kind of ambiguity which allows the various parties involved to make their own interpretations. The eventual meaning of this "homeland" term is first something the Palestinians themselves will have to deal with as well as a matter for inter-Arab diplomacy.

Still, the Carter Administration has left the door open to possible advocacy of a sovereign Palestinian state, Carter has been quoted since Clinton 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.

When the President's Clinton comments are linked to those made at his press conference a few days earlier, there appears to be a comprehensive package-plan both well-conceived and in the process of implementation. As a New York Times editorial put it,



(AP Wire Photo)

Carte in Clinton with a plan for the Mideast.

Carte's outline is one of "real peace, real withdrawal and a real solution to the problem of the Palestinians."

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's efforts at step-by-step diplomacy may have prepared the way for this bold attempt at resolving the fundamental issues between the Arabs and the Israelis; but few expected Carter to seize the moment with such haste and deliberation.

To the Israelis, Carter has held out the hope of achieving something much more than an end to the state of belligerency — a peace with the attributes of normal relations. To the Syrians and Egyptians, the Carter vision is one involving "a substantial withdrawal" by Israel, allowing for only "minor adjustments" to the 1967 frontiers.

And to the Palestinians there is the hope of eventually having a "homeland." But first they must become willing to live in coexistence with Israel, something the Palestine National Council (an embryonic

commitment between the US and development, Rep. Clement Zablocki, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in a speech before the Zionist Organization of America meeting in Washington, has come out in favor of "a formal security commitment between the US and

Israel, duly ratified by the Senate and binding in all its terms."

On the highly controversial Palestinian issue, it is not difficult to appreciate why the Carter Administration has purposefully clouded the President's call for a Palestinian "homeland."

As with the British Balfour Declaration's call in 1917 for a "Jewish national home," Carter's assertion simply acknowledges the existence of a Palestinian people deserving of some form of self-determination.

It is the form that remains in question and the final outcome probably rests as much with the Palestinians as with anyone else. If they cannot achieve an eventual changing of the totally unacceptable Palestine National Covenant to a constitution of the Palestinian movement, it is unlikely the Carter Administration will make further gestures toward the idea of a separate Palestinian state.

But if a future Palestine National Council should alter the current ideological base of the PLO, it is possible the United States will finally acquiesce in inviting that body as the representative of the Palestinian people to Geneva.

The Carter Administration clearly does perceive the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict to be more significant than any of its predecessors.

In a little reported development, Robert Lipshutz, one of Carter's most senior counselors who also serves informally as liaison with the Jewish community, may have elaborated somewhat on the attitude of this Administration 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," Lipshutz continued, "is of utmost

Importance to the state of Israel, to the Arab countries, to the United States and, indeed, to the world."

Even before the President's Clinton presentation, reaction to Carter's earlier comments about a comprehensive Middle East peace requiring Israeli withdrawal to approximately the 1967 "sovereignty borders was surprisingly favorable in the American press, notwithstanding the initial attacks from both Sadat and Rabin.

Something of a consensus seems to be congealing in Washington about how to proceed and what to shoot for in the Middle East.

Geneva will be the public forum, though much will have to be worked out before and in confidence, and the agenda will be territorial withdrawal and Palestinian "homeland" in exchange for peace and security.

"We see potential progress in 1977 and are uniquely hopeful," the President commented on March 25. "I believe our country is willing to devote a great deal of attention" to Middle East diplomacy, he added.

Whether the Carter Administration and American public opinion will continue together during the coming months is now one of the biggest question marks. And this may explain why the Israeli response so far is what is being called a new information campaign.

Pending the outcome of the Israeli elections, when a major policy reassessment will be in order, the Israelis have decided to compete with the Administration for public and congressional opinion — and in this there is, of course, more than a touch of *de ja vu*.

If Carter can manage to retain press and public support for the Middle East course he has now charted, and if he can manage to withstand the inevitable domestic political pressures, 1977 may become the year when the fifth Middle East war was prevented and Arab-Israeli reconciliation began.