

Courageous and risky decision on Palestinians

PRESIDENT Jimmy Carter is not responsible for initiating the new U.S. policy on the crucial Palestinian problem.

The policy is leading to a serious break with Israel if the Palestinians can find the strength to respond.

Henry Kissinger, with Gerald Ford's approval, took the first step in the aftermath of the March-April "re-assessment" of Mid-east policy in 1975.

In November that year, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of state responsible for Mid-east affairs, Harold Saunders, broke the ground for what is now taking place. (Saunders is now Director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and one of the senior officials travelling with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance throughout the Mid-east.)

Testifying before Congress, Saunders stated bluntly: "In many ways, the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the heart of that conflict." He went on to detail the evolution of the PLO and the various competing ideologies and strategies. Since the PLO "has not stated its readiness to negotiate peace with Israel — and Israel does not recognise the PLO or the idea of a separate Palestinian entity — we do not at this point have the framework for a negotiation involving the PLO."

But, "it is obvious," he added, "that thinking on the Palestinian aspects of the problem must evolve on all sides. As it does, what is not possible today may become possible."

The following month the Brookings Institution, one of Washington's most important "think-tanks," issued a document suggesting a new, comprehensive American approach to the Mid-east quagmire. Among the broad cross-section of scholars and community leaders who signed the document were a number of American Jewish leaders, Zbigniew Brzezinski (then a professor at Columbia University) and William Quandt (then a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and now Brzezinski's Mid-east deputy at the National Security Council).

This Brookings report has become an outline for the Carter Administration's Mid-east efforts. In addressing the Palestinian problem, the report states: "There should be provision for Palestinian self-determination, subject to Palestinian acceptance of the sovereignty and integrity of Israel within agreed boundaries." On boundaries, the report refers to "the June 5, 1967 lines with only such modifications as are mutually accepted."

Shortly after the Presidential election, PLO leader Yasser Arafat sent two PLO representatives, Issam Sartawi and Sabri Jiryis, to the

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U.S. to attempt to work out an agreement with the U.S. whereby the upcoming Palestine National Council would make major ideological and political concessions in return for a U.S. commitment to deal with the PLO and to support Palestinian self-determination.

As a sign of good faith, the U.S. was asked to grant a visa to a PLO official to run a Washington information office. Kissinger was interested and designated retired Ambassador L. Dean Brown, most recently his Special Envoy to Lebanon, as intermediary allowing the State Department to maintain it was not having any meetings with the PLO officials.

The whole effort collapsed, however, under extensive pressure from the Israeli government and from the American Jewish lobby and also because Jiryis had made a technical error — regarding his birth-place — on the visa application. Kissinger was also in a difficult position, not really able to bind his successor during this period.

Twice during the Presidential campaign Carter expressed his view that the Palestinians must be granted a national existence. In November 1975, Carter stated at a foreign policy conference: "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."

Two months later, when speaking before 75 Jewish leaders, the president-to-be indicated: "I think eventually the Palestinian people have to be recognised — their legitimate need, ultimately recognised as a nation with territory assigned to them on the East Bank or the West Bank of the River Jordan."

But during the main part of the campaign Carter was careful to stay away from the touchy Palestinian issue. Had he not done so, he probably would not be president today. There was a considerable apprehension about Carter in the Jewish community and Carter paid much attention to alleviating this situation during the summer of 1976.

But soon after taking office on January 20, 1977, Carter, Vance and Brzezinski decided they had to quickly assert a new Palestinian policy. In view of the difficulties Kissinger had when he tried to do this, the President's decision was both risky and courageous. In 1975,



when journalist Edward Sheehan asked Kissinger if he had plans for dealing with the Palestinian problem, Kissinger responded: "Sheehan, do you want to start a revolution in the U.S.?"

And so, at Clinton, Massachusetts, on March 16, Carter made a basic change in American Mid-east policy by advocating a "Palestinian homeland." The Palestine National Council was meeting on that very day in Cairo and Carter clearly was sending a signal. But it was too late.

But by June, Carter had decided to go forward with the offer he has now made to the Palestinians. In preparation, he made known to the European Economic Community that the U.S. no longer opposed an EEC statement endorsing the idea of a Palestinian homeland. Although publicly Carter has maintained he strongly opposed the European statement, the Europeans were actually surprised when the opposition they had come to expect was withdrawn.

And so, the stage was set for the historic offer, now on the table, from the U.S. to the PLO.

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's mistake was in misjudging the determination of Carter. By returning to Israel and immediately legalising West Bank settlements without even having informed the President, he left himself open to Carter's doing the same thing with the Palestinian issue.

No longer will American-Israeli policies be co-ordinated. Begin may well find himself, within a few months, or at the most a year, facing international negotiations with all other parties, including the U.S., declaring themselves opposed to the Begin government's positions on at least two of the three crucial issues — occupied territories and Palestinians. As for the third — normalisation of relations and lasting peace — it will be up to the Arabs to deliver.