



WINTER 1977

Mark A. Bruzonsky

## Middle East Policy: Carter's "Year of Decision"

**B**ack in 1971 Anwar Sadat, then considered by the future American Secretary of State to be little more than a caretaker clown, declared the "Year of Decision." Events intervened and the fateful decision was not implemented until October 1973; it changed the course of Middle East history. Suddenly Sadat was a statesman, and his friend Henry manipulated a renewal of Egyptian-American relations and a Washington-Cairo-Riyadh axis. The year 1977 may well be another "year of decision"—this time for the direction of U.S. Middle East policy. Indeed, Sadat now looks to the U.S. as the power that can smooth the way to peace. And with Egypt's economy teetering on the brink of collapse, Sadat must also manage to translate progress toward peace into economic advantage. For this too Egypt has bet on Washington.

Both the U.S. and Israel now must be responsive to the wave of moderation that is now prevalent among Arab leaders. For Israel, this could offer hope for a gradual building of lasting peace. For the U.S., important economic, political, and military interests are at stake. Numerous policy decisions regarding the Middle East will be

required in the early months of the Carter administration, spanning issues of arms sales, foreign aid, and technology transfers. But all will be jeopardized without continuance of the American post-Yom Kippur War effort to bring about a deescalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. What now is underway is not an overnight fix but the effort to build a path that may lead over the coming decade to real peace.

From the Six-Day War until the Yom Kippur conflict, the U.S. waffled between a stated policy advocating near-total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories and acquiescence in Israeli hegemony. Then Sadat's gambit forced the U.S. to face up to this contradiction. The result, to be blunt, has been a basic reassessment of America's relationship to Israel. As long as the Israelis continue to pretend that little has changed, there will be growing tension between the U.S. and Israel. If a unified strategy cannot be found, a showdown between the two countries might become unavoidable. And in that case the American Jewish community would find itself squarely in the middle, torn by conflicting loyalties and competing fears.

One of the major legacies of Henry Kissinger's foreign policy is that the Middle East now has been brought, in his own words, "to a moment of unprecedented opportunity." Indeed, many in the American Jewish establishment linked themselves early in the campaign to Carter, fearing a continuation of the Ford-Kissinger Middle East diplomacy. And now, among American Middle East experts, the realization of the need to bring about certain Israeli concessions to match, and bring about, certain Arab concessions is molding a new consensus on how the U.S. should proceed after the inaugural. This consensus is shared in Israel by a small dovish minority, many of whose members are associated with an organization known as the Israel Council for Israel-Palestine Peace.

BECAUSE OF the prevailing state of political paralysis in Israel, the U.S. election campaign was followed with special interest. In Israel as well as in the American Jewish community, there was an astonishing amount of optimism in view of the party platform stands and the statements of both presidential candidates.

Shortly before election day last November, an Israeli editorial writer said, "God's gift to Israel is that the United States has this type of election

cycle." In October, a noted American Jewish academic told me, "It's as if we are 50 million strong in this country—it's unbelievable."

But, of course, it is a dangerous illusion to think that the Middle East planks in the party platforms or the candidates' campaign statements have forecast the future of U.S.-Israeli relations. Indeed, during the campaign year a number of Israelis wisely warned of the serious divergence between American and Israeli perceptions on how to proceed with Middle East diplomacy.

In May, for instance, the Israeli-sponsored magazine *Israel Digest* carried an article by a former director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry entitled "Will a Middle East Solution Be Imposed by the U.S.?" Walter Eytan concluded, after an American visit, that while "formerly, any talk of an 'imposed settlement' was taboo, today such a solution is regarded by most [Americans] as likely, and by many as the only way out of the impasse. It is taken for granted that whoever is elected President this November. . . will not let matters drift as they have for so many years in the past."

Another Israeli observer, the editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, also chastened by a recent American visit, wrote in July that "Washington and Jerusalem are. . . headed toward an inevitable collision." "The year 1977," Ari Rath concluded, "will also be a year of a real American push toward a solution of the Middle East conflict. The U.S. will lean heavily on Israel, even to the extent of imposing a settlement."

Ari Lova Eliav, a former secretary-general of the dominant Labor party and a man with impeccable Zionist credentials, sadly reflected during the summer that a U.S. peace initiative might simply be "rammed down Israel's throat." "Given the present relations of forces," he noted, "I am afraid that this is what is likely to happen."

Israeli journalist Matti Golan (author of the book *The Secret Conversations of Henry Kissinger*) summed up Israel's predicament last April in the American Zionist journal *Midstream*. "Rabin has just about used up the time he has been able to gain," Golan wrote. "For while he was busy counting the months and weeks. . . the Arabs were assiduously using the same time to acquire broad political support, even from formally unsympathetic places. And so Israel has arrived unprepared at the time of decision."

Because of this year's Israeli election campaign, 1977 may turn out to be a time of reprieve. Israel

would be best served by advice to begin preparing both the Israeli electorate and the American Jewish community for the inevitable compromises the Jewish state must soon make on territories, Palestinian nationalism and the PLO, and possibly on the very nature of the state. It would be tragic if the Israeli election campaign turned out to be as banal as our own and only further hardened Israeli attitudes, boxing in the Labor party so that the next government, like the present one, would only be capable of taking "decisions not to decide."

It is true that the hesitant Arab acquiescence in Israel's existence is largely premised on Arab awareness that the basic U.S. commitment to the survival of the Jewish state is a political fact, and not on an Arab understanding or acceptance of the real nature of Zionism and Jewish aspirations. Nevertheless, now *Israeli policy must be designed to decrease the Arabs' hesitancy, not to discredit it*. Unfortunately, Israel's own political structure and coalition framework—combined with certain, mostly religiously inspired, ideological blocks to Israel's vision of reconciliation—make a dramatic change in the Jewish state's positions unlikely. This situation may well elicit firm U.S. initiatives to which the Israeli government would have to respond. As Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the chairman of the Presidents' Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations, put it some months ago, Israeli leaders "would almost be more comfortable, for domestic political reasons, if the decisions were imposed [on them] rather than articulated and accepted from within."

WHILE CANDIDATE CARTER catered to Jewish sensibilities, the President now must face Middle East realities and American foreign-policy problems. Some may feel that his Middle East campaign statements may have him somewhat boxed in. Creation of a dike against further American pressures on Israel was the primary motivation behind the early decision by many members of the Jewish establishment to join the Carter bandwagon. Early on, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC—the umbrella organization serving as a "Jewish lobby") swung into the Carter column. Edward Sanders, AIPAC's president, had his name inked out on AIPAC stationery and joined Carter's Atlanta staff. Alexander Schindler and Yehuda Hellman, chairman and executive director of the Presidents' Conference, also joined up, *de facto* of course, with the expected victor.

But as the campaign drew close, the Israeli government became anxious about seeing so many chips put in one place. The strong alignment of the American Jewish community with Carter had "some Israeli government people shaking in their boots," as one Jewish official who was involved in the Ford campaign saw things shortly before the election.

Israel did extract a promise of more sophisticated arms from Ford—but then decided to await the election outcome, fearing a repeat of then Ambassador Rabin's 1972 endorsement of Nixon, which brought a storm of charges that Israel was interfering in domestic American politics. General Arik Sharon did come to the U.S. late in October to push for Carter, but this apparently was on his personal initiative and totally independent of the government. Understandably, days after the election, Ambassador Dinitz left for Israel, obviously to work out a strategy to prevent Carter from moving toward pressuring Israel. But only a shift in Israeli policies can alter the collision course Jerusalem and Washington are now on. The U.S. Security Council vote challenging Israeli policies in Jerusalem and the occupied territories was clearly meant as a warning.

Further U.S.-Israeli confrontation now could set back the possibilities of a process toward peace. This consideration holds back some of those who otherwise would promote a heavy-handed U.S. attempt to impose a settlement—for then many Israelis might come to see themselves as totally isolated and turn defiantly to nuclear weapons and a right-wing Likud government in this year's election. That, in turn, might lead many Arabs to delude themselves into believing that a tangled American lifeline calls into question the basic U.S. commitment to Israel's welfare.

A far more desirable alternative would be a joint U.S.-Israeli initiative to test all possible openings for that elusive path toward coexistence. But if this is to be a viable option it must be candidly admitted, even by Israel's friends, that one important roadblock is the Israeli government's reluctance—for reasons of both domestic politics and international geopolitics—to risk offering the specific concessions that could make a historic peace initiative attractive to the Arabs.

The task for the U.S. in 1977, in the area of Middle East policy, should be not to impose a decision but, instead, to *convince*, first the Israelis of the necessity to consider major historic con-

cessions, and then the various Arab states and the Palestinians to make equivalent concessions.

Progress toward peace in the Middle East requires a firm American commitment to Israel's welfare. Fortunately, the American Jewish community, together with Israeli moderates, may be able to act as a bridge. Unfortunately, however, except for a few exceptional leaders within American Jewry, there is little understanding of this imperative.

The U.S. election year, in short, was simply a time of false calm—a respite that should have been used by Israel to appreciate American perceptions, the growing uneasiness within the American Jewish community, and the urgent need to reevaluate Israeli attitudes and policies.

Thus the U.S. is faced with a difficult situation. Failure to act boldly will only convince Israel that the situation has not been changed by new geopolitical realities and a new American consensus—and such a failure would seriously frustrate the Arab moderates. Yet American attempts to coerce Israel might backfire and, domestically, would surely create political confrontation with the Jewish community—especially after the expectations built up during the campaign that Carter would be far different from Ford and Kissinger.

MIDDLE EAST REALITIES, as they emerged from the Yom Kippur War, were only put on "hold" for the American election contest. Of course, the Lebanese eruption and Arab disarray contributed, but even in their absence the Middle East would have simply had to await the completion of the U.S. election.

But now, as the recent Brookings book *Setting National Priorities: The Next Ten Years* concludes, "Encouraging and supporting Arab-Israeli negotiations for a general settlement will thus be the most urgent foreign policy task facing the next Administration. . . . There is no alternative. . . ." Spelled out, a settlement usually includes phased Israeli withdrawal from nearly all occupied territories, creation of a Palestinian "entity" or state, a novel arrangement for a united but dually administered Jerusalem, significant Arab economic and political concessions giving substance to their recognition of Israel, and various forms of specific security arrangements and credible "guarantees" for Israel.

The strategy should be to use U.S. political, economic, and military inducements to advocate

mutual concessions, from both the Arabs and Israel. The goal should be not an imposed settlement but the nurturing of a process of gradual coexistence, which could lead the Middle East combatants to a peace they would *themselves* create and wish to maintain.

Recognizing the subtle but real distinction between imposing and advocating a settlement, the U.S., albeit sympathetically, will have to apply mounting persuasion to Israel on three crucial matters:

1. Palestinian nationalism must again be recognized as historically and politically legitimate, as it was at the time of the U.N. partition plan in 1947, which would have divided Palestine into a Jewish and a Palestinian Arab state. A presidential statement to this effect early this year should be considered. Further efforts to encourage the moderates among the PLO leadership are urgently required.

2. This first step would open the door to comprehensive negotiations—at Geneva or elsewhere—aimed at an overall settlement. The Palestinians would deserve separate recognition, and the PLO, should it agree to negotiate with Israel at the conference, would undoubtedly make up part of the Palestinian delegation.

3. Israel must be unambiguously prepared to abandon settlement in the occupied territories under appropriate conditions ensuring Israeli security. Some territorial adjustments are certainly possible and a special arrangement for Jerusalem is essential—but neither “created facts” (the settlements) nor chauvinistic ideologies (right-wing Zionism as well as the more militant Palestinian outlook) can be allowed to block attempts at reconciliation.

Once the U.S. and Israel, together, have thus cleared a path to Geneva, a comparable exercise of American diplomacy will be required with various Arab parties. Syria and Egypt must explicitly recognize that Israeli security considerations *as well as Israel itself* are legitimate. Furthermore, the Arab states' and the Palestinians' willingness to begin the long process of bringing about the normal conditions of peace should symbolically begin with stages of progressive economic and cultural contact. Termination of hostile propaganda, demilitarization and arms control agreements, and some form of supplementary American security alliance with Israel will also be required.

Let us hope that Israeli leaders will soon come to

agree with former Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who insists that “time is of the essence and unhappily for us, time is running out. We ought to grasp the central issues and involve the United States in resolving them.” Let us hope as well that the various Arab parties will continue to see in U.S. efforts the enlightened pursuit of their own self-interest. □