

SOMETHING

A FEW days ago a group of progressive Israelis, took a very unusual step ... unusual in a number of ways.

First they made an appeal directly to the American Congress. That in itself, for a private group of Israeli citizens, is rather extraordinary.

Second they asked, actually pleaded with, the American Congress to withhold something from Israel. It's hard to remember any time in the past when Israelis have asked the American Congress *not* to provide something.

This latest nuance in the complicated American-Israeli relationship came in the form of an *Open Letter To Members of Congress*.

The Open Letter was organized primarily by Reserve Major General Mattityahu Peled, currently professor of Arabic literature at Tel Aviv University, whose recent interview with me was featured just a few weeks ago in this newspaper.

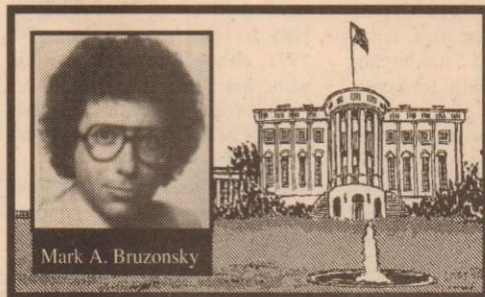
Here are key sections of the Open Letter:

"Out of our deep concern for the fate of our country, we -- a group of Jewish Israeli citizens -- feel that the time has come to address you," the Open Letter begins.

"Since its founding, our country has been at war with its neighbours. In its isolated position and burdened with huge military expenses, it could maintain itself only thanks to foreign aid, which in the last two decades has been generously provided by the United States. In fact, due to your willingness to provide that aid to our country, Israel has become the largest recipient per capita of US aid.

"By virtue of this policy," the Open Letter continues, "the US has assumed a considerable responsibility. It is with American money that the government of Israel can pursue its policies, which regrettably include the policy of gradually annexing the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Such annexation is affected by setting up new settlements and creating an expanding Jewish presence in those territories. With American money, the government is able to offer Jewish settlers ...

From



Washington

Indeed, peace initiatives -- such as the one presently undertaken by Secretary of State James Baker -- stand no chance of success as long as the Shamir government persists in its unrealistic and irresponsible 'Greater Israel' policy

extremely generous subsidies amounting practically to free housing.... Such a policy inevitably entails gross violation of human rights of the indigenous Palestinian population of the occupied territories, whose land is expropriated so that the new Jewish settlements may be established....

"All this is done openly, with the knowledge of the entire Israeli population," the 15 brave signatories of this unprecedented Open Letter --

mostly professors and writers - - and in their prefatory comments.

"The United States cannot shrug off a degree of responsibility for the way its money is used. Against the wishes of at least half of Israel's own citizens, the government maintains a policy which is detrimental to the chances for peace in our region. It can afford to do so only thanks to the continued flow of unconditional American aid.

NEW

FROM THE ISRAELI LEFT

"Indeed, peace initiatives -- such as the one presently undertaken by Secretary of State (James) Baker -- stand no chance of success as long as the Shamir government persists in its unrealistic and irresponsible 'Greater Israel' policy. This policy is directly responsible now for the daily hardships caused by a violent conflict which is being unnecessarily perpetuated at a time when -- at long last -- there seems to exist a real chance to bring it to an end and start a process aimed at achieving peace. Needless to add that with the elimination of the chances for peace, the danger of another war becomes imminent.

"As you know," the Israeli signatories continue getting to the heart of the reason they have taken this unique initiative, "an Israeli request will be brought before you in September ... for ten billion dollars in loan guarantees, for the purpose of absorbing the Soviet and Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel....

"On you, members of the US

Congress, rests a tremendous responsibility. It is within your power to make sure that your willingness, of which we have no doubt, to extend humanitarian aid to these immigrants not be turned against the principle of 'Land for Peace', which is the cornerstone of the administration's peace initiative, and with which we are in full agreement.

"The loan guarantees requested by Israel should therefore be made conditional upon the Israeli government's acceptance of that principle. Such acceptance should be manifested by an immediate cessation of all settlement activities, namely, setting up new settlements or expanding existing ones, within the occupied territories. Unless this condition is met by the Israeli government, you could never be sure that part of the money given for the absorption of immigrants would not in fact be used to accelerate the de facto annexation of territories subject to negotiations.

"We, like many other Israelis who deep in their hearts share our view," the Open Letter concludes, "would regard the adoption of such a measure on your part as the greatest service the United States could render Israel at the present moment."

In many ways, especially looked at from within Israeli society, this quite dramatic but as yet quite unheard Open Letter to the American Congress deserves much applause. And yet, as the political situation is developing, it could backfire on its signatories in a number of ways. The pluses, and the minuses, next week in this column.