

Can Begin Beat Carter?

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When one of the two leading pro-Israeli magazines in the US, *The New Republic* (the other is *Commentary*) headlines its Middle East analysis "The long anticipated crisis in American-Israeli relations may be at hand," the political moment deserves special analysis. Carter's post-Sadat moment of truth may be only weeks away. Washington's foremost political columnist, David Broder, noted in mid-March that "The time has arrived when Carter will either deliver on his commitments or not."

In international affairs, Carter is well aware that one of his most important pledges was publicly expressed last May when he startled Israeli leaders by saying, "I would not hesitate, if I saw clearly a fair and equitable solution (to the Middle East problem), to use the full strength of our own country and its persuasive powers to bring those nations to agreement".

Whether Carter will succeed is highly questionable. That he is about to make the attempt is considerably more likely. And that the first target of America's "persuasive powers" will be Israel has become largely self-evident.

Both Senator Richard Stone (Democrat, Florida), Chairman of the Near East Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Rabbi Alexander Schindler, Chairman of the most important caucus of Jewish organizations, publicly warned in Israel early in March that the Carter administration was preparing to take steps toward an imposed Middle East solution. And at least one very well-connected Democratic Party leader in this capital is taking bets that within two months Carter will finally jump

his case over the heads of the American Jewish community directly to the American people.

It should be remembered that three years ago President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger considered doing much the same thing after a series of frustrating negotiations with Israel. It was the spring of 1975 "reassessment" and Israel had become so nervous that it mobilized its Capitol Hill lobby and produced the warning letter from 76 senators. As *Commentary* magazine challenged in April that year, "The consequences of attempting to impose a one-sided settlement on Israel . . . could be traumatic for both Israel and the US".

Three years ago it was the then "prevailing domestic situation", to quote Kissinger, which forced the White House to back off, awaiting, as journalist Edward Sheehan noted in his study of that period, "some future date when the President (will be) stronger, when his prospects (will be) more auspicious".

Today the potential international consequences of inaction are providing Carter with a powerful counterweight to domestic political pressures. Furthermore, the offensiveness of Israeli and American Jewish blocking tactics seems to be gradually irking the President himself as well as National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Most irritating to the Carter White House have been two specific assaults - the first directly on the integrity of the President and the other on the biases of Brzezinski.

In February, Carter was aghast at the attempt to portray him as having endorsed the Begin Plan, including the settlement activities which in the past months have dominated the news.

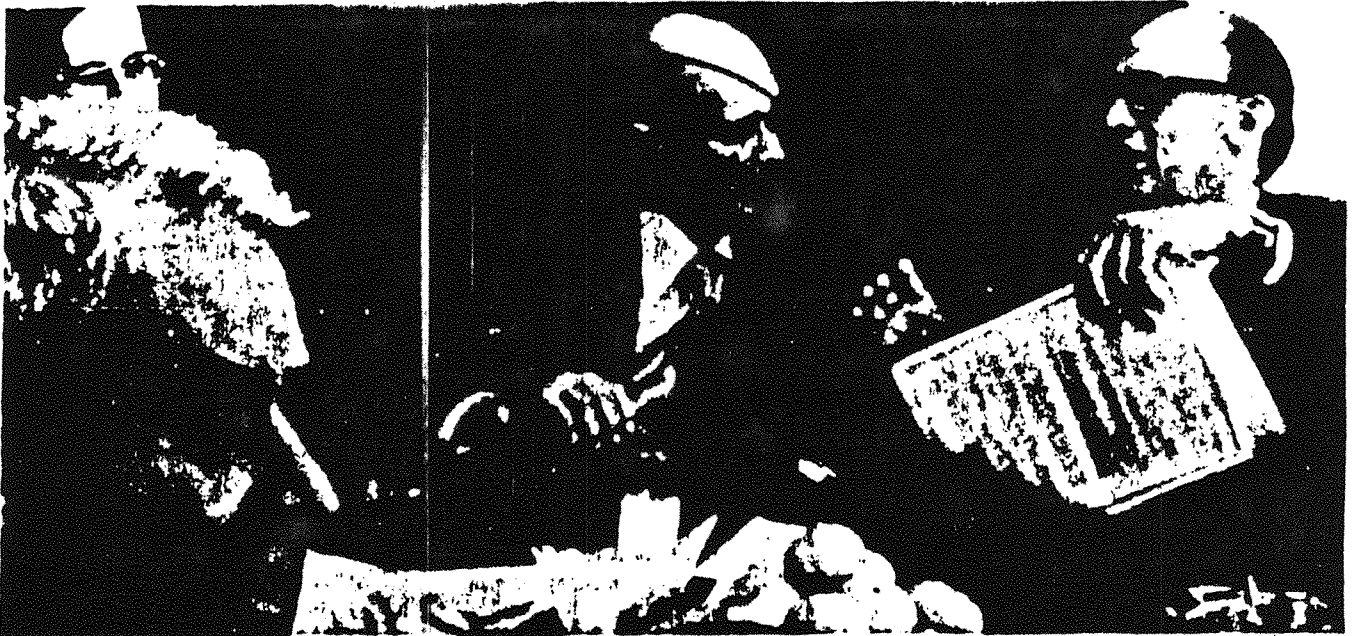
Even worse, in Carter's view, were the repeated implications that the President was a deceptive, opportunistic liar because he was denying his former endorsements upon which Begin had relied when presenting his plan to the Egyptians. An Israel Embassy spokesman further charged that the Carter administration was guilty of "ill-timed cynicism" by using the settlements issue "as a stick to beat Israel on the head. They did it to destroy our image here before trying to sell the warplanes".

Israel wisely backed off this time, however, when these strident exchanges were recognized to be dangerously pushing Carter toward a premature schism. But not before Israel seriously considered releasing transcripts of Jerusalem and Washington conversations which, according to one official, "would have proved our case that Carter had been told the full Begin Plan and he approved".

The campaign to discredit the Carter White House was resumed in March against Brzezinski. First there was Mark Siegel's resignation. Siegel charged that Brzezinski had been misleading him (and presumably everyone else) about the real dangers inherent in the sale of F-15s to the Saudis. Siegel had come to "harbour a deep distrust and personal dislike for Brzezinski", it was widely reported.

Pressures were escalated in mid-March. There were crudely leaked stories condemning Brzezinski and a Jewish Lobby-inspired letter - one reminiscent of the 1975 letter from 76 Senators which helped defeat implementation of the policies that stemmed from the "reassessment". In this year's letter, 21 of the 37 members of the House International Relations Committee called for Carter to reassess his arms sale package - this even before formal notification of the sale had been sent to the Congress.

The attack of Brzezinski, which is continuing, was first leaked to the *Washington Star*, which ran a major front-page story on 9 March headlined: "US Jewish leaders found Brzezinski was bruiser". The following day the *New York Times* ran a front-page story based on information provided by Rabbi Schindler in a call he made to the newspaper. "So far the anger is not at Carter", was Rabbi Schindler's veiled threat. But, he continued, "there's a big question mark on Carter" even though so far "all of the anger



Growing tension: Cyrus Vance faces Moshe Dayan and Menachem Begin in Jerusalem, January 16th.

and mistrust is toward the National Security Council and toward Brzezinski". Brzezinski retorted angrily, indicating that Jewish leaders were actually saying, "if you don't agree with us, we're going to stamp you an anti-semitic". Apparently feeling threatened, Brzezinski went on the record to say "I've decided to grit my teeth and bear it. What we're doing is in the national interest of the United States and is central to Israel's survival."

But this impending confronting of Israel with an American peace package – probably in the form of suggested principles to break the deadlock over what has become known as a "declaration of principles" – must first await the outcome of the arms package deal now before the Congress.

Israel's strategy, as it was with both the Nixon and Ford administrations, is to defeat the White House before it can implement any such plan. It is primarily for this reason that the arms sale package has taken on even a greater significance than American relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. As one Middle East analyst here has put it, "This battle may well determine whether the Carter administration is capable of exerting any meaningful pressure on Israel. Should the administration not be up to the challenge, the Arabs may have to re-evaluate their reliance on the US – and that, of course, could have ominous implications. Moreover, an arms package defeat might force Carter to accept the Israeli aim of a

"Sinai III" – type accommodation with Egypt, as Washington would have little leverage to aim for anything else."

It is well-known that since taking office 15 months ago Carter has made various promises to Saudi Arabia and more recently to Egypt. The package arms sale proposal should be primarily recognized for its political significance – what the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), in its endorsement of the package, termed "official acknowledgement of the growing political and economic bonds between America and the Arab world."

Yet, "a Congressional veto could create a crisis" in US-Saudi relations, *US News and World Report* rightly noted in early March. Though such a crisis would probably manifest itself as a slow boil rather than an explosion, a cornerstone of Carter Middle East policy would be rendered unstable. And if the Egyptian arms were also refused Sadat's tenure would become substantially more doubtful. Egypt's Washington ambassador, Ashraf Ghorbal, expressed such forebodings in conversation in mid-March.

Nevertheless, during March, the likelihood of Congressional acquiescence in the arms package gradually decreased to the point where even a high-ranking Defence Department spokesman confided the odds were at best only 50-50.

If the sale should be blocked (more likely it will be "delayed" and later submitted in a different form), the administration will have to accept at

least partial blame. Its own unpreparedness persuasively and convincingly to argue its case was most evident in the weeks preceding the letter from the House International Relations Committee.

Consider this revealing exchange between a Jewish audience composed of young adult members of the United Jewish Appeal and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Nicholas Veliotis, one of the State Department's top-ranking spokesmen on the arms sale issue:

Question: Why, if the sale of arms to all three countries is required, is it necessary to group all three together as a package?

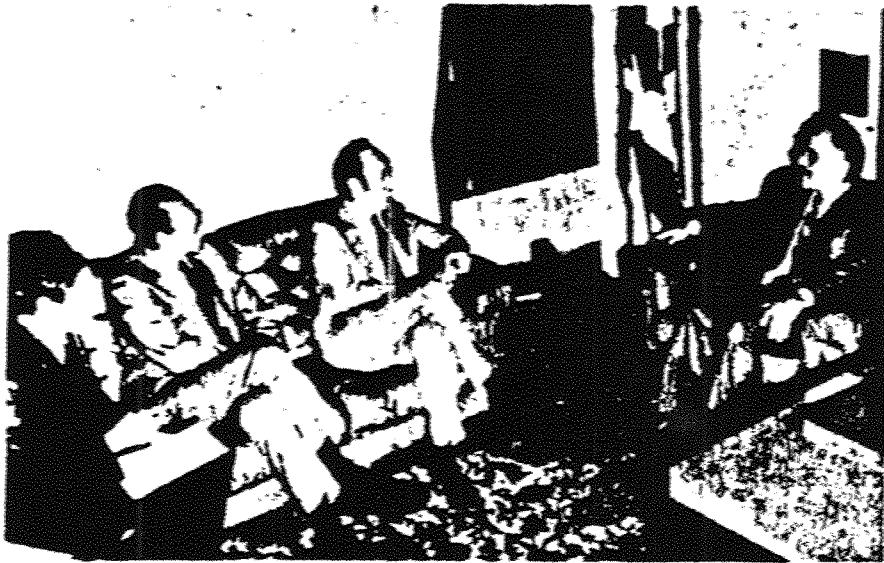
Answer (Veliotis): The timing on going forward was dictated by the parties themselves. They insisted on going forward at this time (Moans from the audience). You may not believe that, but that's the truth.

Question: Why are all three proposals together as part of a package rather than three simultaneous proposals?

Answer (Veliotis): Since they all insisted that we go forward, the decision was made to submit them simultaneously (loud moaning and booing from audience). Why? Because, we decided to do it that way (prolonged audience booing).

Question: Obviously, Sir, you decided to do it that way, that's very clear. But the question was why (laughter from audience).

Answer (Veliotis): Well, the



Looking for Jordan's support: US envoy Atherton with King Hussein in Amman, March 4th.

decision was made to go forward with all three simultaneously, and whether or not these are a package . . . I really couldn't go beyond what the Secretary of State said, which was to suggest that they stand or fall together without saying that they necessarily are a package (laughter, booming, hissing from audience).

Further consider that in an unprecedented series of memoranda to Congress from the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (known as AIPAC and usually referred to as "The Jewish Lobby") and from the State Department regarding the Saudi sale, AIPAC appeared far more persuasive. If the State Department determined the time finally appropriate to combat AIPAC's credibility on Capitol Hill with a direct challenge to its facts and opinions, the job had to be done well or it should not have been attempted at all. In this case the State Department even let AIPAC get in the last word.

All this said, real "even-handedness" may be finally coming to American Middle East policy nearly a decade after the term was first coined by William Scranton, acting as advance man in the Middle East for President-elect Nixon. Long-term and vital American interests necessitate an unmistakable strategic realignment involving a Washington-Riyadh-Cairo axis in addition to the special relationship with Israel. Washington further appreciates that this axis and the special relationship must not conflict with each other and if possible must be made to complement each other.

In this unprecedented situation,

continuance of the "we are not really able to pressure Israel" posture is becoming intolerable not only for various Arab parties but also for a broadening sector of American intellectuals, academics, government officials and businessmen. The type, magnitude, constancy and ramifications of today's pressures are the only real issues worth debating.

Ironically, Begin's unyielding stance is having the effect of actually increasing Carter's leverage. The Israeli Prime Minister has been demolishing Israel's credibility while seriously weakening the once-broad coalition of supporters of which the American Jewish community was only the spearhead. Begin's re-interpretation of Resolution 242 to accord with his party's "Greater Israel" ideology, coupled with his deviousness on the settlements issue, may be giving Carter the public opinion opening required finally to risk public revelation of the policies that became defined with the Ford-Kissinger "reassessment" and were partially outlined in the December 1975 Brookings Report.

Still, before raising hopes, it must also be stressed that Carter has seriously backtracked, since October 1977, from his direction towards a truly comprehensive Middle East settlement. He still speaks these words, but his intent at times seems more in line with the thesis of a separate accommodation between Egypt and Israel that currently permeates much of Washington and has motivated Israel ever since Sadat's appearance in Jerusalem.

Six months ago the agenda not only

called for Geneva and reasonable Soviet involvement in a process leading to a true historical compromise, there was, actually in progress, a serious attempt to resolve the Palestinian problem. Along with the territorial and normalization issues, the Palestinian problem had been recognized, however reluctantly, as crucial to real peace prospects. President Carter had even spoken of the "countless hours" he spent attempting to bring the PLO into the negotiating process.

Carter's three-point combination approach - withdrawal, normalization and a Palestinian homeland - had been carefully constructed. But it collapsed under Israeli and American Jewish assault. Then came the temptation to view Sadat's efforts as no longer requiring pursuit of such an ambitious settlement. What Washington still does not fully appreciate is that Sadat made his initiative in desperation, aware that Carter was incapable of achieving his overall settlement without a stupendous change in the perceptions and nature of the conflict. While Sadat attempted to arm Carter to pursue his objectives, Carter may have decided he's not really up to the original task after all. In a sense, Carter may now be pursuing a revived step-by-step approach.

Looking back, the quickly aborted American-Soviet joint statement probably marked the actual climax of the comprehensive settlement approach. Faced with an avalanche of protests, the Carter people panicked and within hours reversed themselves with the US-Israeli Working Paper prepared in an emergency meeting between Carter and Dayan.

Carter's increased reluctance to pursue a true Middle East settlement is now rather evenly balanced against international realities plus White House anger.

The battle for Washington is no longer over whether or not pressure will be exerted upon Israel for a settlement. The crucial question is what kind of settlement. Will it be one premised on the principles enunciated in the first months of the Carter Presidency? Or will it be one based on an attempt to push both Israel and Egypt (with Saudi and Jordanian acquiescence) into a first-step accommodation with the hope that a vague set of "principles" can set the stage for stability rather than breakdown?

