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DEVOTED TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS PLACE IN WORLD AFFAIRS

The US and Israel: a Loosening Bond

by
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Mark Bruzonsky, who writes from Washington, is an Associate Editor of *Worldview Magazine*. In this article he traces the development of US Middle East policy since the Carter administration assumed office, and argues that despite President Carter's fulsome expression of support for Israel when Mr. Begin arrived in Washington at the beginning of last month, the United States is no longer prepared to back Israel to the exclusion of its other Middle East interests.

The Ford-Kissinger "reassessment" of American Middle East interests was still alive, though crippled by "the prevailing domestic political situation" (said Kissinger), when Carter strolled from the inaugural stand to the White House 16 months ago. The Brookings Report, detailing what was to become (for Carter's first 9 months in office) his personal outline for a "comprehensive Middle East settlement" was already a year old. And the Palestinian issue was just then emerging into the American consciousness as one of self-determination and legitimate nationalist fervor.

It was uncertain back then which way Carter would turn. "The Israelis and organized American Jewry", I wrote in December 1976, "think Carter is pledged to undo the Ford-Kissinger 'reassessment' (which Carter condemned during the second debate)". Yet, as one of Ford's Jewish advisers bitterly reflected with considerable prescience, "it's remarkable that the Jewish community would fall for Carter who has only given cheap promises, while Ford has tried to take a positive, balanced approach".

America's commitment to Israel's existence and basic security are *not* the issue at all. Never before, as the President repeatedly stressed during

the last round of Begin talks, has Israel been more capable of defending herself. And never before have the major powers of the Arab world, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, been willing to evolve normal relations with Israel. In addition, the US has been privately sounding out Israel on a treaty relationship (including the stationing of symbolic American forces) to help stabilize a comprehensive settlement, once achieved.

Rather, the basic development explaining the escalating tension in US-Israel relations is that the "reassessment" of American Middle East interests has taken hold. It has become imperative for the US to free itself from the constraints imposed on its policies by the Israeli interpretation of that "special relationship". Especially with Begin at Israel's helm, the US simply can no longer afford to allow crucial policies affecting our relations with other key countries in the region to be subordinated to what Israelis consider to be their own interests.

In recent months, Carter has greatly increased the time-frame in which his "comprehensive peace formula" is to be implemented; in a sense he has returned to step-by-step. Yet, there is one tremendous difference from the Kissinger policy associated with this term: now there is a public outline to indicate where the steps are leading: Israeli withdrawal on all fronts, normalization of relations between the major countries, Palestinian homeland, American security guarantees.

Another Israeli government might eventually be capable of seeing the benefits of such a package, if not its inevitability, especially after Sadat's "sacred mission". But Begin has proved himself, in Washington's



The underlying reality that has to be faced: last month's OPEC meeting in Saudi Arabia.

belated view, to be the sinister, dangerous zealot he always has been. Both Carter and Sadat probably gave Begin much more of a chance than he deserved.

In all likelihood, the coming months will witness a progressive series of bitter, bruising struggles between Carter and Begin — both leaders assessing possibilities and risks as they determine what alternatives they have and whether to proceed on a collision course. Even should Begin be replaced, the Washington-Jerusalem schism is now so fundamental that after a brief respite serious tensions will reappear. Ezer Weizmann, the current saviour in the eyes of many, differs only marginally from Begin (and not even on the crucial issues) and lacks the authority within the Herut party to go very far very fast, even should he want to.

Begin, and at his urging much of the organized American Jewish community, have already begun a major campaign to discredit and threaten Carter. Carter has taken the decision to fight fire with fire. By dramatizing how much Begin himself has exacerbated the previously existing differences between the two countries — to the point where the "special relationship" itself is seriously strained and in doubt — Carter is threatening Begin with erosion of his political base at home and within American Jewry. Begin has been shown that American

policy can affect Israeli politics just as Israeli policies can affect American politics.

Down the road is now looming an attempt by Carter to take his case over the heads of Israel's American Jewish constituency (and the Congress) with a direct Presidential appeal to the country at large.

According to the April issue of the *Washington Strategic Review*, the President has privately been making such threats since January, when "complex efforts" began "to pressure Israel into making greater concessions to Egypt's President Sadat".

The *Review*, published by Georgetown University's prestigious Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), states that these efforts have included:

- requests to European, Latin American and Asian allies to "hold up arms purchases from Israel",
- requests to Iran "that oil supplied [to Israel] be slowed down or interrupted pending a peace agreement",
- and "efforts to convince American Senators and Congressman to use persuasion on Israelis".

There have been four distinct periods in the Carter White House's Middle East planning:

1. January 1977 - September 1977: Serious Geneva preparations which include the expectation of bringing in the PLO.

2. October 1977 - November 1977: Geneva preparations without advance agreement on principal differences and with indirect PLO participation.

3. November 1977 - January 1978: Confusion over Sadat initiative, hope for Israeli flexibility, mediation as the process of direct negotiations stumbled.

4. February 1978 - : Attempt to promote Egyptian-Israeli agreement on a "Declaration of Principles" offering hope for a gradual, comprehensive settlement. Deferral of the Palestinian issue to later date under cover of the Declaration.

When it came into office, the new Administration's approach was shaped by the Brookings Report, which Carter had studied and approved on the advice of two of its drafters: Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had become Carter's National Security Adviser, and William Quandt who had become Brzezinski's deputy for the Middle East.

By May, Carter had decided the time was ripe for a major effort to reconvene Geneva. "To let this opportunity [for peace] pass could mean disaster not only for the Middle East, but perhaps for the international political and economic order as well", he ominously insisted. Already troubled by Israeli resistance, the President sent chills through Jerusalem when he said, also in May, "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".

On June 17, Carter designated Vice-President Mondale (unassailable because of his pro-Israeli reputation) to deliver a crucial speech whose aim was to reassure the Jewish community of the new government's unwavering commitment to Israel's welfare but also to define the basic elements of the White House outlook. But when Mondale came to the two crucial issues – territories and Palestinians – he found himself in difficulties. To tell Israel that she must "return to approximately the border that existed prior to the war of 1967" and accept "a Palestinian homeland or entity – preferably in association with Jordan" – these were fighting words. The Administration was just beginning to appreciate its problems.

It is on the Palestinian issue that Carter has made the greatest deviation from his original plans. Until September, Carter hoped to bring the PLO into the Geneva negotiations. The Brookings Report called for "Palestinian self-determination" and so did the new President, however cautiously.

Since coming into office, Carter had been in contact with Yasser Arafat through intermediaries and occasionally through American officials. In March 1977, at the time of the Palestine National Council meeting in Cairo, Carter came out with his "Palestinian homeland" term – what Brzezinski privately described, at the time, as "the American Balfour Declaration".

As circuitous negotiations continued with the PLO, Carter took cautious steps during the summer to convince Arafat he was genuinely willing to deal with the hitherto leprous organization and to prepare the American public for what might be coming.

At a press conference on July 28th, Carter stated that "the major stumbling block" to reconvening the Geneva Conference, "is the participation of the Palestinian representative". He then added: "We will discuss" matters with the Palestinians if they will agree to recognize and co-exist with Israel. Should this occur, he continued, the US would then advocate "participation by them at peace negotiations".

The following day, Secretary Vance

made clear what was already becoming widely understood – the US now thought of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians. About to leave on a Middle East shuttle, Vance was asked if he expected to meet with any members of the PLO. His response was telling: "I do not expect that there will be any meeting with the PLO during this trip" because, he added, "there has as yet been no suggestion by the PLO that they are prepared to do the things which President Carter outlined".

A few days later, in a *Time* magazine interview, Carter repeated his offer to the PLO. Here is how *Time* quoted the President's views, brackets and all: "If the Palestinian leaders adopted that position [acceptance of Israel's existence] or espoused the UN Resolutions 242 and 338 as a basis for negotiations at Geneva, we would immediately commence plans to begin talks with the Palestinian leaders. I hope Mr. Begin would accept that [the participation of some Palestinian leaders at Geneva], but I don't have any way to predict what Mr. Begin will do".

Behind the scenes, though, negotiations with the PLO had become stalemated. The PLO had finally indicated a willingness to accept 242 – with the reasonable reservation that the Palestinians had "national rights", not just refugee rights as mentioned in the resolution. But in return the PLO insisted that the Americans would have to go beyond a commitment to "begin [public] talks". The PLO demanded that the US recognize it, extend it an actual invitation to Geneva, or otherwise show by some *unambiguous action* that as far as the Americans were concerned the PLO deserved to be a party to the negotiations and to any settlement.

This hurdle was never surmounted. Carter did make one final, major effort before the US-PLO dialogue collapsed. He told a news conference in September that "the PLO represents a substantial part of the Palestinians", hoping this would encourage Arafat to take the leap he had for so long contemplated.

Yet the PLO demanded more, especially as there were substantial reasons (from their point of view, at least) to mistrust Carter and to conclude he would be prevented by Israel and the American Jewish lobby from fulfilling his promises to the PLO.

By October it was "Bye-Bye PLO"

(Brzezinski's now famous indiscretion, or was it?) and "Hi, Hi" Soviet Union. Frustrated by the PLO's internal squabbling and increasingly aware that Geneva was going to be a highly speculative endeavour, Washington altered its planning in three respects.

First, a search began, with Anwar Sadat's encouragement (and maybe even Arafat's), to find Palestinian representation not under the PLO's umbrella but not necessarily unacceptable to the PLO. There was mention in the press of three Palestinian intellectuals in the US, any of whom might head a delegation to Geneva comprised of diverse Palestinians, including West Bankers and low level PLO personalities. In early November, *Agence France Presse* reported that Walid Khalidi, a highly respected, brilliant scholar spending the year at the Harvard Center for International Studies, might soon be President of a government-in-exile.

Second, Carter realized that preparations for Geneva were going to be almost totally procedural. The substance would simply have to be dealt with on the spot.

And third, faced with a potentially disastrous Geneva conference, it was decided to attempt to enlist the cooperation of the Russians. Doing so, it was thought, might substantially increase the chances of actually making progress once the procedural hurdles were out of the way and the parties gathered at the Palais des Nations.

The White House panicked at the intensity of the outcry over the October 1st US-Soviet Joint Statement. Though it hardly went beyond formerly enunciated policies, the Israelis rightly realized the cards were being stacked against them for a rough time at Geneva. And they decided to fight before it was too late.

Faced with domestic crisis or concessions, Carter held a late night session with Foreign Minister Dayan at the UN Hotel in New York. Out popped an American-Israeli "working paper", undoing much of what Carter had attempted with the Joint Statement. It was a pitiful example of Israel's leverage over Washington and of Carter ineptitude.

Carter never did resolve the discrepancies between the Joint Statement and the working paper, for by mid-November Sadat had taken matters into his own hands. Confused by preparations for a Geneva Confer-

ence destined for failure, frustrated by Arab World chains which hampered Egyptian pursuit of nationalist goals and disappointed (to say the least) by American indecisiveness and weakness, Sadat realized he had to take a historic leap.

As the Egyptian-Israeli talks progressed, the American role gradually became that of intermediary and then mediator. By January, with the talks going backwards, Saudi Arabia was pressing Sadat to break them off. The US too was becoming increasingly apprehensive whether the Begin coalition would respond with sufficient concessions to keep the peace process moving forward.

Though every Israeli statement then denied it, it was obvious by mid-December that Begin's real response to Sadat was a tricky effort to maneuver him into a separate deal. Begin tried offering Sinai as the bait. When Sadat balked, Begin went back on the offer, allowed settlements to go forward and then publicly began renegeing on 242 (something implicit in Begin's positions from the beginning). He was showing Sadat and Carter how tough he could be; just as he was to do when he used the Israeli army to savage southern Lebanon in March.

By January, Carter realized that Washington could regain the initiative. Sadat had tremendously strengthened Carter's hand, but Egypt could do little more. Hesitantly at first, Carter began maneuvering to build a fire under Begin. He even took the matter up with Hubert Humphrey on his death-bed - sending Humphrey a draft personal letter designed to chastise Begin. When Begin responded in February by counter-attacking, Carter began to realize he would have to confront Begin in the open and maybe seek his removal.

It was within this framework that Administration officials began letting journalists know, in early March, that the approaching Carter-Begin talks would be candid, harsh and decisive. It was generally thought, though, that the PLO bus attack and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon would divert the talks from their intended purpose or make Carter put off his planned confrontation. Begin may even have been partially motivated by this strategy.

The President, however, had simply had enough of Begin's deceptions, slanders and irksome charm. Carter rammed through the Security Council



Not everybody's favourite son: Israel's Prime Minister Begin honoured by the Yeshiva University of New York.

resolution calling for Israeli withdrawal and a UN force for the area south of the Litani River without so much as consulting Begin (then on his way to Washington). It was a clear indication to Israel that policy coordination was no longer to be assumed or expected. "The US used to be our protection from the UN", an Israeli Foreign Ministry official harshly complained just before Begin's arrival.

The package arms sale proposal just passed by Congress also represented an unprecedented departure from past practice. The Israelis were more incensed that their arms supply was being *linked* to weapons for Egypt and Saudi Arabia than that the US was considering supplying weapons to these other countries. Consequently, the arms package battle actually represented White House determination to regain the freedom to decide on major Middle East policies regardless of Israeli attitudes. In fact, in a move specifically designed to demonstrate Presidential anger, Carter invited members of the Senate (and separately members of the House), while Begin was still in Washington in March, for a pep talk on the arms package and for forceful criticism of the by then dis-

traught Prime Minister.

The Administration is, of course, attempting to play down the notion that never before have Israeli-American relations been so bad. Other incidents are recalled - Eisenhower's 1957 threat of sanctions, the 1970 "Rogers Plan", the 1975 "reassessment". But, this time, Israel faces much more than a passing crisis. This time, American interests are causing a transformation in the "Special Relationship" itself. And Israeli attitudes are causing the transformation to be more detrimental to long-term US-Israel relations than might otherwise be the case.

The US will continue to champion Israel's existence and security - a fact highlighted by Mr. Carter's promise of everlasting support when Mr. Begin was in Washington for Israel's 30th anniversary celebrations in early May - a promise which Mr. Begin called "one of the greatest moral statements ever". But the US is no longer prepared to back Israel to the exclusion of other vital concerns. A Washington-Cairo-Riyadh axis has become the major American goal in the Middle East. And Israel would be well advised to find a way to make the triangle four-sided.