

The Atlanta 'consultation'

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WASHINGTON: For four days early this month former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford hosted a "consultation," on the Mid-east in Atlanta, Georgia — the city Americans increasingly think of as the capital of the south.

Ambassadors, foreign ministers, luminaries of differing nationalities and perspectives — including the Russians — paraded their views before an awed Emory University audience that tended to give the two past presidents standing ovations and considerable deference.

Pictures of Carter at Camp David and Carter with Mid-east leaders (mostly former ones) decorated the heavily guarded entrance hall. The 60 or 70 participants were whisked in and out, speeches were delivered with gusto and fanfare. No matter how many times the organisers appealed to the audience for restraint, the audience applause meter rather interestingly recorded mid-American reactions and attitudes.

With unusual regularity there were serious expressions of urgency about the tinderbox situation in the Mid-east, and, less frequently, of despair. Gerry Ford even pounded the table at one point warning the Israelis, who were not there, that they would have to accommodate important American interests — this after Zbigniew Brzezinski made tough and pointed comments about how Israel and the U.S. were on a rocky, potentially traumatic course with each other.

Falacious excuse

There were some Israelis; and they did participate in discussions with representatives from Arab countries, including Syria. But the Israeli government had the audacity to publicly refuse to send an "official representative," with the falacious excuse that the PLO was invited.

Dr Walid Khalidi from Harvard University and the Institute of Palestine Studies was there, and as always eloquently presented the case for Palestinian nationalism. But the PLO was nowhere to be found — though the organisation should indeed have been invited, and if not invited should have sent a representative to sit in anyway. Those who watched as spectators or journalists far outnumbered the actual participants.

According to Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin had made him another of his rather unreliable promises when Carter visited the region earlier this year making arrangements for this consultation. Indeed, it was termed a "consultation," because the intent was to bring representatives from the warring parties to an intellectual even for dialogue and a search for ways towards peace.

Begin, so Carter told the audience, had agreed to send a delegation to this inaugural event launching Carter's Centre for Conflict Resolution. Yet, after the rather serious matter of Begin's renegeing on his promise at

Camp David to freeze Israeli settlements, one would have expected Carter to be somewhat wary. Actually he was rather upset with the Israelis for detracting from his consultation. But before the audience he took it all in stride, suggesting that maybe the change in government in Israel caused this little mix-up.

One is left only to surmise that the Israel's Likud government had decided all along to boycott in view of the positions being taken in public by Ford and Carter — most recently in their joint *Readers Digest* article. And so they made whatever lame excuse they could. Their absence was nothing short of contemptuous, with two former presidents of different parties presiding. Yet both Carter and Ford were generous to let the whole matter slide by, filling in with a few "unofficial," Israelis (mostly with Labour Party credentials) who said just about what one would have expected the "official" ones would have said.

Ambassador Gideon Raphael, a retired senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official, often had provocative things to say, but one could not help from concluding that while the Mid-east is rocketing into the next century, Raphael had somehow missed most of the contemporary changes taking place in the Arab world.

Moreover, the Israeli government missed not only the chance to participate in a major event with important Arab dignitaries and to learn about the real possibilities for comprehensive peace negotiations. It missed as well an opportunity to experience and sense the schisms which continue to grow between the U.S. and Israel, no matter how much the Reagan administration attempts to create a pre-ebecton era of good feelings.

Superb address

The consultation organisers did make some attempt to "balance" the proceedings away from a singular focus on the Camp David "peace process." The Crown Prince of Jordan and the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Prince Bandar Bin Sultan both gave superb addresses in which they thoughtfully and particularly criticised U.S. policy and respectfully challenged the Camp David approach. The Syrian Minister of State was also given his moment, and his talk was straightforward and well-conceived, though he was greeted with obvious hostility, scepticism, and, in some cases, incredulity, for the most part.

But still — especially in view of Carter's repeated explanations of Camp David and references to those participating in the consultation who were with him for that deed — the conference tended to mute criticism of the Carter years and highlight what the former president continues to see as his greatest accomplishment, the Camp David accords. So to with the Reagan plan — it was treated with unusual general approval and was not subjected to a rigorous historical and political dissection (as it should have been). Indeed, most American participants in the "consulta-

tion" focused not on Israel's total rejection of the plan and subsequent unprecedented aggression aimed at undermining it; but on the Arab world's continuing refusal to negotiate with Israel.

Carter was often at his inquisitive, charming best — (including his graceful recovery when he slipped and introduced the Lebanese representative as having been sent by president Abhyui but he too often portrayed ignorance of regional subtleties and cowardice about the state of U.S.-Israel relations — such as when he refused to even utter the term "Jewish lobby" in explaining how the Congress views the Mid-east situation and why Congress often doesn't follow the same course as the White House.

"How can we in this country do what needs to be done when a former president is such a coward," whispered one American colleague friendly with Carter but troubled by Carter's continuing reluctance to assert publicly what are known to be his real views.

What was most sadly missing in Atlanta, though, were not the strident voices of anti-Americanism unleashed by Camp David and more recently by Reagan administration bravado and complicity with Israeli imperialism, but the more passionately thoughtful voices that now permeate intellectual and foreign policy circles in most Arab countries, including Egypt.

Polite reflection

What was heard from the official representatives of the Arab countries were but the tempered, "diplomatic," politely-rounded reflections of what is really going on within the Arab world. And from Egypt itself there were only the official apologists who follow the Sadat-Carter direction, now transformed into the Mubarak-Reagan course — most notably the Egyptian President's shrewd and wise foreign affairs adviser, Osama El-Baz, whose Cairo-rumours have it, may soon become Egypt's new ambassador in Washington.

Though Carter continues to believe in Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty the seminar event of his efforts to achieve peace in the Mid-east, there were no representatives from Egypt at the Atlanta consultation to explain why that very same "Camp David peace process" has become the focus of so much scorn and derision.

For, the uncomfortable truth is that for many who were not invited to present their views at this consultation the legacy of Carter's Camp David is hardly a just and lasting peace. It is instead Sadat's assassination, Israel's brutal invasion of Lebanon, Arafat's downfall coupled to fading hopes for an Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement, an escalating and potentially catastrophic Soviet-American deadlock in the region, and even increasing moderate Arab disenchantment with the U.S. with as yet undetermined ramifications.

(To be concluded)