

'Peace process deadlock'

From



Washington

THE basic problem with the much in the news Arab-Israeli "peace process" is that it never really existed. Thus it shouldn't be such a shock to find ourselves confronted by the current situation of stalemate, despair, and growing tension.

The much repeated term "peace process" has become in actuality a euphemism of purposeful distortion; a kind of soma-like verbal drug shoved down the throat of all who dare question the wisdom or commitment of the politicians at the helm on all sides. (For those who may have forgotten, 'soma' is the drug made famous in the novel *1984* as a kind of universal pacifier).

The "peace process" terminology has always been primarily a mask to obscure the basic political and military logjam making resolution of the central Palestinian issue all but impossible; a logjam that was in many ways created at Camp David more than a decade ago.

At that time the Camp David twisted the very "separate peace" the US and Egypt had always said they opposed into a distorted and distant vision of far more to come.

Just how much of the twisting was at the crafty manipulation of Menachem Begin is still quite difficult to say. But for sure Begin knew all along that separate peace it was; especially when he simply put his foot down and told Carter that the settlement moratorium in the occupied territories was only for 90 days, not permanent as Carter had said.

For Camp David was something of a Trojan peace; and today's stalemate has roots in that contortion.

Soon the Israelis began further twisting history, first ensuring that Jimmy Carter wouldn't see a second term despite his Camp David success—but this is a separate subject which I'll have much more to say about it in a future column.

For the Israelis, Likud and Labour alike, Camp David was always in reality—whatever words various parties used—the much-sought separate peace with the largest and most powerful Arab state; a central goal of the Zionist movement from even before Israel's creation.

The actual Israeli intent never was to reach a serious settlement with the Palestinians;

but rather to follow Camp David with some kind of follow-on separate peace with Lebanon, and then Jordan. After that, the Israeli establishment hoped they would then be free to work on the Palestinians, driving a wedge between the external nationalist leadership of the PLO and the people actually living under occupation.

As far as the Israelis were concerned, if the Palestinians somehow accepted the "autonomy" process first touted by Menachem Begin in 1977 and then legitimized by Camp David, they would slowly accommodate—so long as actual control of the territories remain in Israeli hands. For after all, once an autonomy process took root both in concept and on the ground it could then be manipulated, so the thinking went, to finally kill-off the competing notion of Palestinian independence.

But if the Palestinians continued to reject autonomy, which the Israelis knew very well was far more likely; so much the better. For in this case Israel would simply continue to expand into the territories, consolidating her grip while doing everything possible to demoralise the Palestinians and buy more time to create more facts. And what better an excuse then to tell the world that it was all the fault of the Palestinians themselves for rejecting the autonomy offered to them by Camp David!

Israel also viewed that so long as the Arab world could be kept divided and off balance they would not represent any serious threat.

For the Americans, of course, Camp David was a diplomatic achievement saleable to public opinion; experts, critics, and cynics be damned. However much critics pointed out not only the agreement's inadequacies but its dangers, getting this across to the American and Western publics was all but impossible.

I myself wrote in the cover article to the April 1979 issue of *The Middle East* magazine the following summary under a sub-title of "Carter's pre-election peace":

"Whatever the outcome of President Carter's exhaustive efforts to couple Egypt and Israel in a fragile treaty, the US had undeniably acquiesced in a variant of Kissinger's 'step-by-step' diplomacy. Carter mentioned the previous banished phrase in his address

to Egypt's Peoples Assembly in early March.

"It is 'obviously a bilateral peace. It's useless to pretend it's comprehensive,' admitted one frustrated top-level Egyptian diplomat during Carter's visit... Meanwhile, in Washington one of the top diplomats on Carter's Mid-east team confided, 'Carter's risking everything in a wild gamble... If much more isn't done and within a year a real process of the occupied West Bank autonomy begun, then whatever the agreements say, whatever the wording, they will unravel and go into the dust-bin of history.' The official acknowledged that 'so far the Israelis have given nothing real on the Palestinian issue.'

"Regardless of American rhetoric in public, regardless of Carter's half-hearted insistence that 'this treaty can be the beginning of a comprehensive peace in the region,' the likelihood of determined efforts by Washington to truly resolve the Arab-Israeli impasse diminishes daily."

For the Egyptians of course, self-delusion was in vogue. The professionals had all deserted but for Osama El-Baz.

The outcome of the Camp David accords was Egypt's retirement from the battle gave the Israelis license to attack Baghdad, invade Lebanon, seige Beirut, and all the while push the Palestinians under further and further.

This terminology of "peace process" somehow survived the 1982 war; cheaply and easily rejuvenated when Ronald Reagan finally read a speech in September which once again put American words far ahead of American deeds.

It survived the bombings of Iraq and Tunis; and then the brutal assassination of Abu Jihad. And it survives the increasingly harsh suppression of the Intifada.

It further survived the US-Israeli strategic alliance which the Arabs rather amazingly acquiesced to; pre-occupied as they were with Lebanon, and regional threats to established power.

And now, so far at least, it survives both the political deadlock nearly two years after Arafat's peace initiative as well as the fast unfolding massive influx of Soviet Jews which cannot but make any potential or theoretical settlement even more unlikely.