

**S**AVVY politicians here are whispering among themselves that the Bush presidency may be far more wounded than was even imaginable just a year ago at the height of Bush's showdown with Saddam Hussein.

Many here who closely follow Mid-east affairs are already discounting this still nearly new year of 1992 and looking ahead to 1993.

The basic realities of political life here are that whatever President George Bush might actually want to do he simply isn't going to be able to get much done this year when it comes to the Arab-Israeli peace process -- unless the Arab side gives up -- or to ousting Saddam Hussein -- unless he just lucks out -- or just about anything else that is politically difficult.

For more and more in the months ahead President Bush is going to have become more and more a full-time candidate struggling for a second term considerably beyond what he had to do to win against Mike Dukakis in 1988. And in doing so Bush is going to have to make a lot of promises, accept a lot of compromises, and incur a lot of political IOUs. It's not a formula for political potency either now or into the future.

When it comes to Israel and the Mid-east chessboard, there have always been two polar competing schools of thought here as to the real goals and intentions of the Bush administration.

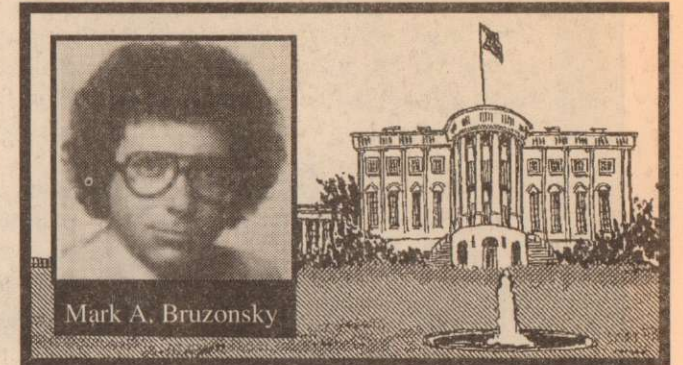
For many, including this analyst, the overall threads of continuity in American policy remain far more pronounced and considerably more important than the differences of this or that moment.

For those who adhere to this "continuity" approach the Bush administration is doing the same dance regarding Israel and the Palestinians as have previous American administrations -- though admittedly with some new steps and maybe, at times, more finesse. Still, the basic goals remain much the same -- Israel is fundamentally useful to overall American policies of keeping Arab capitals divided from each other, looking to Washington for sustenance and survival, militarily inferior, politically infiltrated, and economically contained.

For those who believe in this "continuity" way of thinking, this American government just as previous is not looking to any fundamental changes in the US-Israeli connection but wants to be able to arrange some

# LOOKING TO 1993

From



## Washington



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kind of autonomy deal for the Palestinians that will diffuse the issue, allow Washington to claim "even-handedness", and allow America's Arab allies in the region to claim credit and legitimacy and progress.

The other school of thought is that something major has changed with the Bush administration in regard to how to deal with Israel. Whether it be the end of the Cold War, America's new preoccupation with the region after the Coalition War, or something Bush and James Baker themselves have brought to American policy, this school of thought insists that there is truly a new American policy in the making and that the White House is truly working not in tandem with Israel but in ways that

will eventually make it possible for a real Israeli-Arab peace to take hold.

I leave it to others -- including so many groups in Washington that have sprung up to propel this way of thinking onto the American scene -- to further explain this school of thought. Not sharing it myself, others can surely be far more persuasive about it than I.

But whichever way one leans, the Bush administration's main goals at the moment are very short-term. Bush is well aware that whatever dreams he might have he can't bring about peace before the November election, that the best he can possibly do is try to keep hope alive.

What this means in actuality is that

Washington will be trying every trick in the book to simply keep negotiations ongoing -- in one form or another -- even though everyone is well aware at this point that nothing is going to come out of all the diplomatic turns in 1992 unless the Arab side gives up and surrenders.

The Israelis are of course very much aware that Bush is a wounded president and may not be back in 1993. Plus, of course, they are becoming increasingly preoccupied with their own upcoming elections this summer.

But the Israelis aren't going to take many chances and they have proved time and time again that they know how to play a bad hand very well.

First of all, mostly covertly of course, the Israelis are probably going to attempt to manipulate American politics as much as they can, hoping to get themselves one of the tamed Democrats who are at the moment falling over each other to prove who is more supportive of Israel. Secondly, they will be trying to corner Bush into as many promises during the campaign -- both public and private -- so that even if Bush remains at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue he won't be able to squeeze Israel too much.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians have once again positioned themselves terribly. In juxtaposition to their enemy, the Palestinians and most of their Arab brethren have proved, time and time again, that they

know how to play a good hand quite badly.

By entering into the kinds of talks they have and in the way they have -- after a great deal of sweet-talking by Baker -- it seems they thought a few months back that they were positioning themselves for real political rewards in addition to a few public opinion points.

But not only have they managed to get themselves bogged down into what could become endless talks about what "autonomy" means, they have created the conditions some key countries were waiting for to open diplomatic relations -- in some cases de jure, in others de facto -- with Israel.

Furthermore, by pursuing negotiations in the way they have, the Palestinians have in a way legitimized Israel's expansion and brutalisation -- for while the diplomats talk these policies continue. In a very tragic sense, it seems to me the bitter edge has been taken off of Israel policies ... for, after all, aren't the Israelis now negotiating, for the first time, directly with the Palestinians? At least, so goes the propaganda.

Furthermore, and of considerable more significance in the long run, it seems that Israel has positioned itself in such a way that very small future gestures not historically significant will be said to be major concessions.

Even more importantly, in the months ahead, the way the Palestinians have handled things they have handed Yitzhak Shamir a way to run for office as both the candidate of negotiations as well as the candidate of strength and no-compromise. At this time, anyway, it seems Shamir's chances of staying around for 1993 are somewhat better than Bush's.