

Begin's Visit To U.S. Hints New Negotiating Stance

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's arrival in the United States for "direct private talks" with President Carter signaled that the peace process in the Middle East has reached a critical point, and that Israel is now on the verge of making a crucial decision on its future negotiating stance vis-a-vis the central Palestinian question.

The Begin-Carter meeting overshadowed the Cairo conference between Egypt and Israel, the first-ever direct talks between Arabs and Israelis. At the center of both the Carter-Begin meetings and the Cairo conference is the question of the "rights of the Palestinians," and, according to official sources, a breakthrough is expected.

Begin's sudden arrival in the U.S.—only two days after having conferred in Jerusalem with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance—gave rise to speculation that Begin is considering "major and even historical concessions" to the Arabs to clear the way for an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict at a reconvened Geneva conference. At the center of the speculation are reports, confirmed in general terms by official and diplomatic sources, that Begin will announce a plan to give some form of autonomy to the occupied West Bank. The key question is whether the concessions delivered by Begin will go far enough to satisfy Egypt's President Sadat and the Palestinians.

Israel's Decision

"Tangible and concrete results are expected and should be forthcoming without delay," Egypt's chief delegate to the Cairo conference, Ambassador Esmat Abdel Meguid, said in his opening statement. Meguid's statements may portend a major Israeli concession, centering on a stated willingness to discuss Palestinian rights with designated representatives of the Palestinian people—which, inevitably, will include the Palestine Liberation Organization. This will not only heal the existing rift between Egypt and Syria, but will clear the way for an overall peace agreement.

According to reliable reports from Egyptian, American, and Jordanian analysts, Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat have already reached a private understanding on the shape of an Arab-Israeli peace, including a role for the PLO within the framework of a Palestinian "government-in-exile" that would assume control over the West Bank and Gaza which was occupied by Israel in 1967. Along with Western Europe, both the Soviet Union and Cyrus Vance's State Department are in support of such a formula, which would

create the basis for U.S.-Soviet détente and for vastly expanded trade and development in the Middle East.

If the circles associated with Henry Kissinger, Walter Mondale, Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan of Israel, and British intelligence can sabotage such an accord by playing on the numerous points of instability in the complex Middle East conflict, however, then the sudden collapse of the Cairo conference, and the eruption of a renewed crisis, will pit the U.S. and the USSR against each other in a Cold War style-showdown.

The conference in Cairo, attended by low-level delegations from Egypt, Israel, the United States, and the United Nations, began Dec. 14 and is expected to last about 10 days. Although the substantial part of the negotiations, if not already concluded, will occur outside the Cairo framework in top-level private meetings, the actual Cairo meeting may come up with a basis for an overall accord.

Although there are continuing rumors that Begin and Sadat are seeking a Kissinger-style "separate peace" between Egypt and Israel and excluding the other Arabs, both leaders have strongly denied such an intention, and both have stressed the central character of the Palestine question to any peace settlement. "The problem of the Palestinians will be discussed and debated and, I assure you, we will find a solution to the problem," announced Begin two days ago, with Vance at his side. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, Secretary Vance found a new Israeli "flexibility" on the Palestinian question in his discussions with Begin.

Shimon Peres, the leader of the opposition Labour Party in Israel, gave a further sign of a softened Israeli position on the Palestinian question. Asked in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* yesterday if he accepts the idea of a Palestinian national existence," Peres replied: "That's right. Every nation can decide about its identity." On the PLO itself, Peres almost explicitly called for the PLO to form an exile government: "The question is if the PLO is a representative or a terrorist organization....If people want to discuss, let them keep their guns under government control."

A PLO Government-in-Exile?

One of the key remaining questions is whether, and how, the PLO will take part in the settlement of the Middle East crisis. Without the participation of the PLO, it is considered extremely unlikely that any stable agreement can be reached.

According to several sources, one of the plans which Israel is considering is the so-called "functional

division" of the West Bank, according to which Israel would retain permanent military control over the area while giving up civil administration to Jordan, possibly with a phony Palestinian parliament to exercise "autonomy." Such a plan, attributed to Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, is similar to the Allon Plan, and is not taken seriously as a peace plan by any Middle East analysts.

But if the PLO continues to remain outside the negotiating process by refusing to give public indications that it will recognize Israel in exchange for Israeli recognition of the PLO, then there is a serious chance that such a plan will be rammed down the throat of Egypt at the Cairo conference—which is a formula for disaster.

The position of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat amid the complex negotiations, though officially opposed to the Sadat peace initiative, is widely known to be much more sympathetic in private. In fact, both American and Arab analysts suggested this week that Arafat—who has not personally spoken out since Sadat visited Jerusalem—has a silent agreement, behind the scenes, with Sadat.

Said a Jordanian official, "If Sadat can get the Israelis to indicate willingness to compromise on the Palestinians, then Arafat will have a strong hand inside the PLO to push for a government in exile. It will also have a significant effect in allowing for an Arab realignment," referring to an expected reconciliation between Syria and Egypt.

The importance of the government-in-exile for the PLO is as follows: Because Israel refuses to deal directly with the PLO—whose Charter calls for the destruction of Israel—the creation of a Palestinian government would create an entity with which the Israelis could negotiate concerning the West Bank. In addition, such a provisional government could include West Bank leaders and non-PLO wealthy Palestinians more palatable to Israel and the United States, and could attend the Geneva conference or similar talks with Israel.

Saudi Arabia, whose leaders met Vance Dec. 14, has already begun a diplomatic sweep aimed at bringing together Egypt and its allies with Syria and the so-called "resistance front" formed at a recent meeting in Libya and including Syria, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, and the PLO. In a major statement yesterday, Saudi Crown Prince Fahd urged the Arab world to "confer and work for the realization of the objectives of the Arab world."

— Bob Dreyfuss

Government Observers Say: Begin Will Deal With Palestinians

This analysis was provided to the Executive Intelligence Review by a former Central Intelligence Agency officer who has been deeply involved in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Begin wants to deal with West Bank Palestinians and with other wealthy Palestinians outside the West Bank who represent big Arab money interests. They'd be delighted to get in on this. As far as Arafat is concerned, he is ideal to deal with. The PLO is as respectable an organization as you can find. Begin knows this very well, but he chooses not to understand.

Urge PLO Form Government In Exile

Below are comments from a Defense Department-connected Arab specialist on the likelihood of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forming a government-in-exile.

Question: Last month the magazine Events ran an editorial by Salim el Lozi urging the formation of a government-in-exile for the PLO. What are your views on such a development?

Answer: At the time of the editorial, the prospects of forming such a government was probably more possible, but all of that has been taken over by the Sadat trip to Israel. I would say that whether a government can be formed will depend upon the strength of Arafat and Fatah. I think a government could be the only viable alternative for the Palestinian movement, but the Tripoli conference brought all of the conflicts within the PLO to a head. I think that Sadat and many others know that a solution with just representatives of the West Bank and Gaza won't work. Sadat definitely sees benefits to Arafat.

Q: Do you see any solution to this problem?

A: Yes, if Israel makes a concession during the Cairo conference which the Arab moderates will accept as a concession then this will strengthen their hand, allowing Syria to move again toward Sadat. If this were to happen it would be a big help to Arafat in forming a government in exile which would include personalities from the West Bank and Gaza. And finally if the Soviet Union views with approval these developments, this would of course give Arafat the margin of support he needs. In this situation many of the renegade elements within the PLO could be calmed.

Nevertheless, if King Hussein decides to come in on the settlement, and there is established an Egyptian-Israeli-Jordanian arrangement, then Arafat will eventually go along. He won't have any choice. But Arafat is worried—as is Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia—about assassination, by radicals, by dissidents.

A State Department Middle East specialist commented on the Carter-Begin talks and the "plan" for the West Bank and the Palestinians that Begin is reportedly bringing to Washington, D.C.

Let me sum it up: if what you've seen in the papers about the various possible Israeli plans is their opening statement, for negotiations, then things are damn good. But if this is their final position, if they say that they have thought and thought and this is what they can come up with, then it ain't gonna fly.

...Peres (the leader of Israel's Labour opposition—ed.)

is showing some signs of flexibility. Instead of saying, "We'll never talk to the PLO," now he's saying, "We won't talk to them unless they do this and this and this," which is an improvement. What he actually says is not as important as the general tone of what he says. If both sides are serious about a settlement, all these problems would go away. There are dozens of scenarios for solving

the Palestinian question, and each one is better or worse than another, but the problem is: How do we get even that far? It's like we have four maps of Los Angeles, each one somewhat different—but we're in Washington. The problem is to get to Los Angeles.

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Support From Europe For A Comprehensive Settlement

France, according to several newspapers in that country, is devoting much energy to promoting a comprehensive and equitable peace in the Mideast among the Western European nations — nations whose exports will play a vital role in developing the Mideast region.

The Mideast was reportedly the premier issue when French President Giscard met with British Prime Minister Callaghan last week. Britain has deviously been pushing for a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace (see the Economist excerpts), and Giscard surely tried to change that attitude during the summit. After the meeting, the French president admitted that he had not been successful, stating: "There is... a convergence of attitudes between the two countries with respect to the perspectives for peace in the Middle East."

Le Figaro, "Behind the Scenes in Cairo" by a special correspondent, Dec. 14:

Four questions can be asked among many others. What is Monsignor Monterisi, the Pope's special envoy, doing in Cairo? Certainly, Pope Paul VI has always been interested in this part of the world and "wishes that peace reign in the Middle East, the cradle of Christ where millions of Christians live," but that is not sufficient to explain such an initiative. In fact, Monterisi could well have in his cassock pockets a peace plan for Jerusalem, the capital of the three monotheistic religions. But, on the other hand, his presence in the corridors of the conference could well be an indirect form of pressure on Syria, an Arab country with a very strong Christian minority which Assad (the Syrian president —ed.) himself a member of the minority Alawite community, cannot ignore.

The second question which intrigues all observers: what, in fact, is Egyptian vice-president Mubarak doing in France? No one can believe for an instant that the number two man of Egypt can spend five days abroad in this period just to visit nuclear power sites (as interesting as they may be). In reality, the number two man, who has already played a role in the Israeli-Arab negotiations during certain trips (which were secret, especially the one in Morocco), is in France before going to Rabat once more to see what Europe could offer in the realm of political and military guarantees for the two parties concerned. Moreover didn't d'Estaing evoke this question in his meeting with James Callaghan in London?

Third question: why did Moroccan King Hassan II who, let us repeat, has been the mainspring of certain things in the theatre of the Mideast, send three personal emissaries into the Arab world just recently? Abderrahim Bouabid, leader of the Moroccan left and now a firm supporter of the government, will go to the two most serious hardliners of the rejection front — Iraq and Libya. Abdelhadi Boutalib will travel to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia, and Ahmed Bensouda will go to Syria, Kuwait and the Emirates. Most likely, Sadat is counting on the influence of Cyrus Vance in Riyadh, Damascus, and Amman but also thinks that an Arab will know how to be even more convincing with certain countries.

Finally, the last question: why was an English journalist assassinated last week as he was just leaving Cairo airport? It is already well known that this poor fellow had recognized in his plane an "important" Palestinian personality who should not have "logically" been en route to Cairo...

In brief, we are all going to assist at the official opening of the conference while asking especially... what is happening elsewhere.

Le Figaro, "The Three Hypotheses," by Paul Marie de la Gorce, Dec. 14:

The moment has come when we will know whether the Jerusalem meeting between Sadat and Begin will be a prelude to peace or not.

In reality, everything goes back to three principal hypotheses. The most optimistic would be hope that Egypt and Israel agree, in principle, on everything: the Sinai would be evacuated and a Palestinian entity would be created. The pessimistic hypothesis is that of failure: no agreement would be possible on Palestinian rights, and President Sadat would not accept arrangements limited to other subjects of the negotiation. An intermediary hypothesis would hope that, for want of an immediate solution to the West Bank, a partial and separate accord on Israeli withdrawal from the Egyptian territory occupied since 1967 is accepted, even if it is only temporary. In any case, one can say that a failure would signify without a doubt a new confrontation, and that a separate and limited accord, without putting an end to the Israeli-Arab conflict, would be compounded with the inter-Arab conflict. It is within a short period of time that the new deeds must intervene to give probability to the