

# Saudis Push For Geneva To Break Mideast Deadlock

With the collapse of the Sadat-Begin peace initiative, Saudi Arabia has Middle East peace efforts into the rapid reconvening of a Geneva conference as the best vehicle for securing an overall settlement.

The Saudi push to Geneva is reflected in Riyadh's refusal to cooperate with the Carter Administration's ineffectual efforts to revive the moribund Israeli-Egyptian dialogue. On March 5, the day that Assistant Secretary of State Alfred Atherton was to have arrived in Riyadh to solicit Saudi backing for his mediation efforts, the Saudis suddenly canceled the visit. The snub was a deliberate move on the part of the Saudis to disrupt Atherton's shuttle diplomacy and underscores the Saudi commitment to pursue a comprehensive peace at Geneva involving all parties, including the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

According to several Washington-based Mideast analysts, the Saudis are pressuring the Carter Administration to revive the historic Oct. 1 joint U.S.-Soviet communiqué recognizing Palestinian rights and urging the reconvening of Geneva as the basis for further peace efforts.

One week before Atherton's expected arrival, Saudi Arabia's domestic news service condemned Atherton's diplomacy as a "tranquilizer" for the Middle East and a way for the U.S. to avoid doing what it should be doing: pressuring Israel to make badly needed concessions in the occupied territories and on the crucial Palestinian issue. The broadcast likened U.S. mediation efforts to Henry Kissinger's disastrous step-by-step diplomacy. Atherton himself was personally informed that "dialogue is meaningless" unless Israel changes its intransigent position.

Underscoring Saudi efforts to secure a durable settlement, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal has announced his plans to depart on a major tour of the Arab world in the near future to organize for Geneva. The Saudis have already issued a call for the convening of an Arab summit to consolidate Arab unity. According to informed sources, Saudi Arabia is discreetly communicating with the Soviet Union on the prospects of reconvening the Geneva conference, for which the Soviets are co-chairman.

Foreign Minister Saud has emerged as the most vocal Saudi Arabian critic of the "go-it-alone" aspects of Sadat's peace initiative. Saud is also reputed to be one of Saudi Arabia's most sophisticated officials, a leader who sees the importance of developing relations with the Soviet Union in defiance of Saudi Arabia's traditional anti-communist posture. Over the past several weeks, public statements from King Khalid and Crown Prince Fahd have also recognized the importance of the Soviet Union.

## *Jordan Also Welcomes Soviet Role*

Despite efforts to pull Jordan into the Begin-Sadat talks — intended to lock the Palestine Liberation Organization and Syria out of the peace process and ensure the signing of dangerous bilateral accords in lieu of an overall settlement — Jordan's King Hussein has adamantly refused to give in and is making it known that he will not join Sadat unless Israel agrees to withdraw from the occupied territories and to accept some form of autonomous Palestinian state on the West Bank. According to the March 8 *Washington Post*, Hussein, in an interview with Austrian reporters, called for stepped-up Soviet involvement in the Mideast peace efforts and stressed that only U.S.-Soviet cooperation can bring about an overall settlement, either in Geneva or at the United Nations.

*An editorial entitled "The Return to New York" in the March 2 Jordanian daily Al-Rai spells out Jordan's position and the signs of a major shift in the Middle East:*

"All signs indicate that Atherton's attempts to put an end to the Egyptian-Israeli deadlock by means or formulating a declaration of principles have passed unnoticed.

"It seems that the U.S. Administration is convinced now, more than at any time before, of the futility of the bilateral negotiations. This is owing to the wide contradiction between the peaceful demands and Israel's expansionist objectives. Hence we can understand the new signs that several sides are making.

"The first sign — the commentary of the Damascus paper *Tishrin*, which emphasized Syria's support for the efforts exerted to set up a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, irrespective of the source of these efforts.

"The second sign—the statements of the U.S. State Department spokesman asserting that his country is not attempting to exclude Syria from the peace efforts.

"The third sign — the report published by Cairo's *Al-Ahram* about Rumania's endeavors to contact a number of world capitals with the aim of discussing the possibility of implementing Waldheim's proposal for the convocation of a conference in New York to include the parties concerned with the Middle East dispute.

"If the New York conference has so far been seen only as a theoretical way out of the deadlock that has confronted the peace efforts, it also specifically constitutes a visible way out for several problems that have troubled Arab relations.

"Jordan and Syria championed the initiative of the U.N. secretary general at the time as the best means to continue Arab and international cooperation for the sake of the future of the Middle East, international stability, and world security.

"Despite the persistence to continue the bilateral negotiations in the hope of softening the Israeli attitude and the failure to achieve any tangible positive result — and we can say that the negotiations have completely failed to introduce radical changes to Israel's arrogant stands — the opportunity still exists to strengthen and support the aforementioned positive signs with the aim of holding the New York conference. Yet, it depends on the U.S. Administration's taking a harder line toward Israel, if Washington does not wish to see itself, together with the parties concerned with the dispute, in the Israeli bottleneck."

#### *Sadat Remains Stubborn*

King Hussein's refusal to accept anything short of an overall settlement has opened the way for the consolidation of ties among Jordan, Syria, and the Palestine Liberation Organization. PLO executive committee member Abu Maizer met this week with the Jordanian

Ambassador in Damascus, while PLO Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi will arrive soon in Amman for talks with King Hussein. Concurrently, a high-level PLO delegation led by Yasser Arafat flew to Moscow for talks following the conclusion of a mutual defense pact between the Soviets and Syria. The Soviet-backed Syria-Jordan-PLO axis will provide the muscle necessary for getting Geneva back on track.

Isolated as he is, Egypt's President Sadat is stubbornly — and suicidally — holding back from refocusing his peace efforts on Geneva or the United Nations. In an interview last week in the Egyptian magazine *October*, Sadat condemned the Oct. 1 joint Soviet-U.S. communiqué and dismissed the idea of reconvening Geneva altogether. Commented one well-informed Middle East analyst, "For Sadat to opt for Geneva would be the same as admitting the failure of his initiative, and that's something he just will not do."

—Nancy Parsons

## Does Israeli Cabinet Crisis Spell Doom For Begin Government?

Over the past week, a bitter conflict has broken out within the Israeli cabinet over the controversial issue of Israel's building new Zionist settlements in Arab lands occupied during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Defense Minister Ezer Weizman has emerged at the head of a cross-party faction opposed to the expansionist policies of Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon.

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### ISRAEL

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Prime Minister Menachem Begin appears to be delicately straddling the fence between these two groups, but his statements on March 8 and 9 affirming Israel's "right" to control and settle the West Bank irrespective of external and internal pressures to the contrary indicate a strong tilt toward the Dayan-Sharon camp.

Begin's attitude sets his government up for a fall on two accounts. First, U.S. Administration pressure on Israel to abide by internationally recognized protocols insisting on Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank will help Weizman's faction to prevail. Second, Weizman himself — now touring in the U.S., where he is being delicately cultivated as a pro-U.S. Israeli leader by Administration policy-makers — has taken a very strong position against appeasing Sharon and Dayan. He has threatened to resign if new Israeli settlements are approved, and has told Washington press sources that "I put my foot down very hard!" in a phone conversation with Begin March 7. According to France's *Le Matin* March 8, Weizman declared in the U.S., "The next week will be decisive. I will not allow a group of fanatics to sabotage the peace process."

*A former Israeli parliamentarian analyzed the developing Israeli faction situation in the following way:*

The Begin government is a fleeting episode. Weizman, the Liberals (a faction of the ruling Likud Party — ed.) and Yadin (deputy Prime Minister and head of the Democratic Movement for Change group) have stood up to Begin in a way that was not expected. Begin himself, according to close personal friends, is melancholy, and is talking of resigning.

If he were to resign, that would trigger an easily identifiable realignment in Israel. Weizman, some of Begins' own Herut faction in the Likud, Yadin's people, and the Labour Party would come together to present an alternative involving a normal, objective policy involving the West Bank. After Begin resigns, a process can begin of moving toward giving up the territories.

You cannot take it for granted that every world leader is normal. Every leader to some extent is mad. Begin has great virtues, he is very learned and so on, but on the basic fundamental point of the West Bank, he's mad. He won't agree to any settlement that involves giving up the West Bank.

*A second Israeli analyst corroborated the above thesis. Commenting on a spate of rumors this week that Weizman, Finance Minister Simcha Ehrlich, and Sharon are all threatening to resign, the expert noted:*

All the talk of resignation in Israel by these Ministers probably will end up with Begin resigning. This is a growing possibility: after Begin's visit to the U.S., if sufficient pressure is put on him by the U.S., it will lead to a situation where any Israeli Prime Minister would have to make concessions —