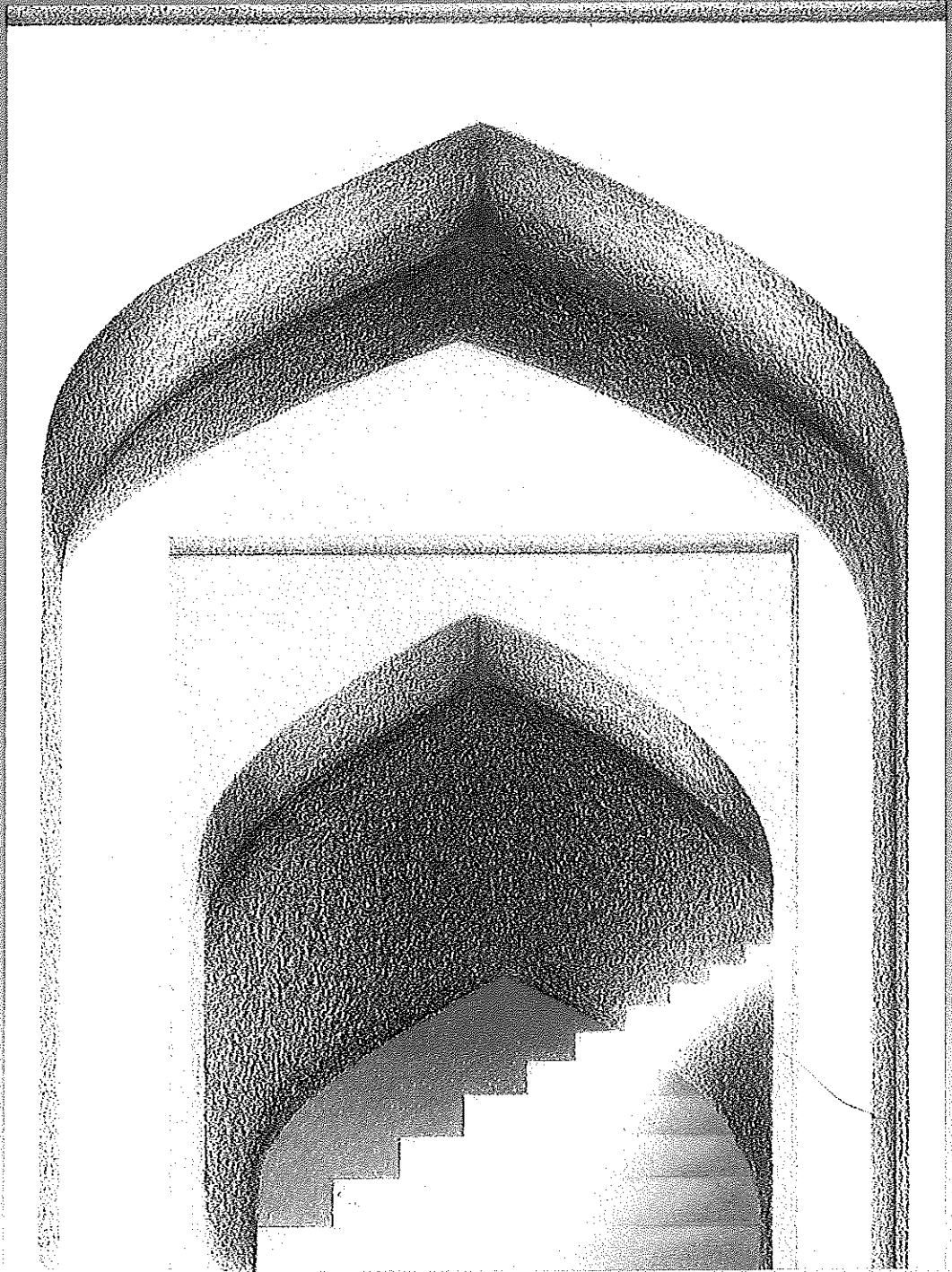


Prospects For Change In The 1990's

TENTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

THE
MIDDLE
EAST



GEORGE P. SCHULTZ • PRESIDENT ELIAS HRAWI • ROBERT NEUMANN
ZE'EV SCHIFF • KENNETH W. STEIN • JOHN C. WEST

VOLUME 7, NO. 2 AND 3, 1990

Texture of the Middle East Peace Process

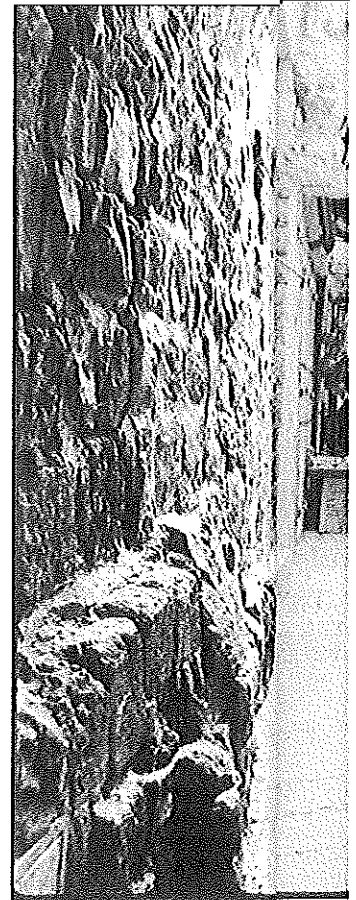
By Kenneth W. Stein

The intifada is thirty months old. Like its political precursor of fifty years ago, this Palestinian uprising is a collective demonstration against Jewish nationalism and continued Zionist growth. From 1936-1939, the Palestinian Arab revolt demonstrated Palestinian Arab impatience with British occupation and with the failure of His Majesty's Government to impede the formation of the Jewish national home. The 1930s revolt unfolded in an atmosphere of severe Palestinian economic hardship and British unwillingness to allow the establishment of a majority Arab self-government. Demonstrably threatening to Palestinian existence were the uncontrollable waves of European Jewish immigration, which had the ultimate effect of displacing Palestinian Arabs to Transjordan. Palestinian moderates who wanted a compromise with Zionism were muted by more extreme Palestinian voices. During the revolt, surrounding Arab states usurped the mantle of Palestinian interests and representation, and then held stubbornly to them for the next five decades. After the revolt, the Palestinian community was fragmented socially and politically. With a singularity of purpose, Zionists devoted their energies and resources to choreographing Jewish immigration and land settlement, as well as opposing British occupation of Palestine. Particularly during and after the Arab revolt, virtually no serious Zionist scheme was devised for finding an

accommodation with the Palestinian Arab national movement. Fifty years ago, the British summoned Palestinian leaders to the February 1939 London conference and perfunctorily heard their pleas. By the following May, a British policy statement was issued which mollified Palestinian fears but which, in fact, did not halt the development of the Jewish national home.

Both the intifada and the Arab revolt unexpectedly jolted the political *status quo*. But unlike its precursor, the intifada unified a physically dispersed and ideologically diverse Palestinian community. Most importantly, the intifada liberated, at least for a limited time, Palestinian Arab political prerogatives from the vise of parochial Arab national interests. It solidified the PLO's international political status to the persistent and precious imperative of being the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." Together with King Hussein's proclaimed disengagement from the administration of the West Bank in July 1988 and the PLO's subsequent public proclamations, the intifada became a vibrant catalyst for a community physically battered by Arab regimes and recently torn by ideological and personal animosities. It returned the Palestinian issue to the center of inter-Arab pan-national agendas, demonstrated respectively by the June 1988, May 1989, and May 1990 Arab summit conferences in Algiers, Casablanca, and Baghdad. Unlike the Arab revolt of half a century earlier, the intifada became a social adhesive and political incentive to take action in support of Palestinian Arab national aspirations.¹

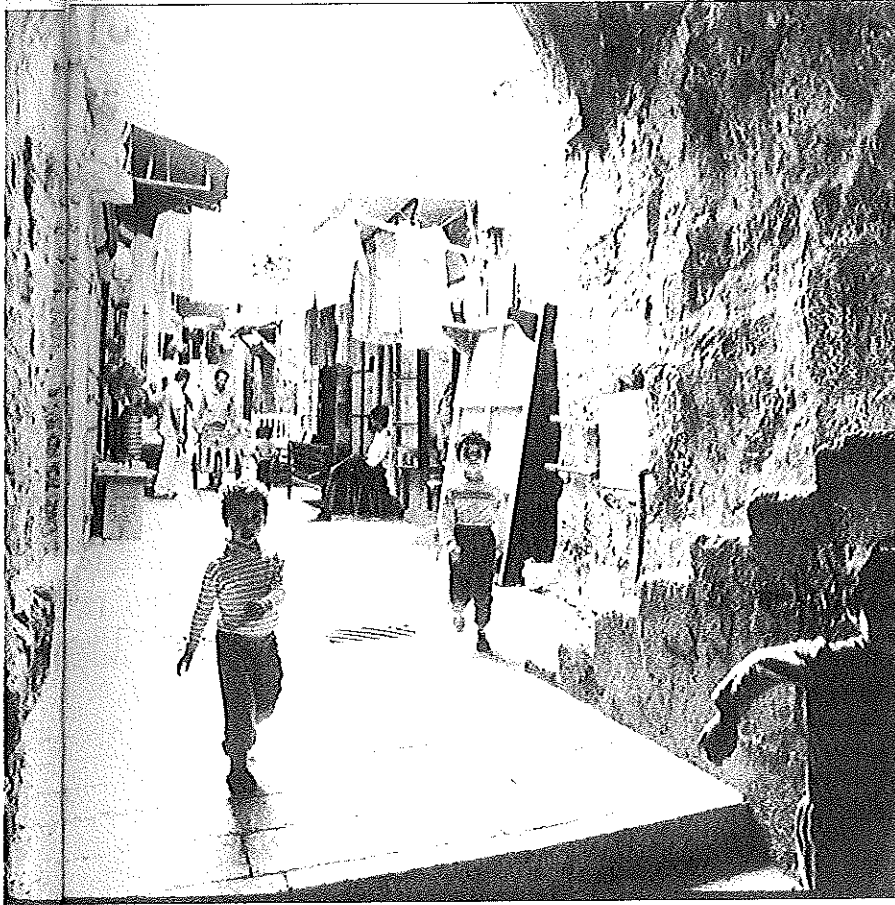
The intifada continued the "Palestinianization" of the Arab-Israeli conflict that had begun a decade earlier.² It telescoped diplomatic focus to the West Bank and Gaza as primary areas for a territorial solution to Palestinian aspirations. It anointed West



A scene from Jerusalem.

Kenneth W. Stein is Director of Middle East programs at the Carter Center and Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History and Political Science at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He is the author of The Loud Question in Palestine 1917-1939 (University of North Carolina Press, 1984), and collaborated with President Jimmy Carter in writing The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East (Houghton-Mifflin, 1985).

1. See remarks by Mahmud 'Abbas, PLO Executive Committee Member, *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* (London), 14 October 1989, as quoted in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Near East and South Asia* (hereafter FBIS), 24 October 1989, p. 8.
2. See Kenneth W. Stein, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making Progress Toward Peace," *Middle East Insight*, (Spring 1989) pp. 3-10.



Bank-Gaza Palestinians with a political voice not hitherto experienced within the composition of the PLO and its process of decision-making. Due to the state of "helplessness in the Arab world," the PLO maneuvered the impetus of the intifada to gain a portion of Palestine through negotiations.³ By December 1988, a year after the outbreak of the intifada, the PLO accepted the preconditions (acceptance of United Nations resolution 242, renunciation of terrorism, and recognition of Israel) for participating in a dialogue with the United States. These statements promoted the PLO as the interlocutor *primus inter pares*. Constructive engagement of the United States with the PLO legitimized the PLO's status as the Palestinian representative for possible Middle East peace negotiations. Dramatic changes in eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union reduced Soviet

involvement in regional areas, leaving the United States as the only diplomatically relevant Great Power in the region to manage a negotiated solution. For much of 1989 and the first half of 1990, the PLO-Washington dialogue became an integral part of the peace process.

Not surprisingly, the intifada and the PLO-Washington dialogue put Israel uncomfortably on the diplomatic defensive. Israel was caught off-guard by a confrontation with the Palestinians in which eighty-five percent of those battling the Israeli army were children.⁴ In a reverse of historical stereotypes, the international media portrayed Israel as the Goliath against the Palestinian David. American supporters of Israel grew increasingly tense, impatient and uncomfortable with Israel's severe handling of the uprising. Within Israel, the intifada and a public dispute about the future of the territories dominated the November 1988 parliamentary election debate. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir embraced neither Secretary of State George Shultz's 1988 initiative⁵ nor (at least through the first half of 1990) Secretary of State James Baker's plan to initiate a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue in order to advance the negotiating process. In February 1990, Shamir jolted Arab controversy about the future of the occupied territories by implying that Israel needed them for the settlement of Russian Jewish immigrants. By March 1990, the fall of Israel's government was directly connected to the intifada's propagation of a diplomatic process. From the moment the PLO-Washington dialogue began, Israel and its supporters doubted the sincerity of PLO chairman Yasir Arafat's remarks about accepting Israeli legitimacy and renouncing Arab terrorism. Israel strongly objected to the State Department's March 1990 report, which claimed that the PLO had not engaged in planning terrorist acts. When the Israeli army foiled the May 1990 sea-borne Palestinian terrorist attack allegedly aimed at vacationers on Israel's Mediterranean beaches, Jerusalem chastised Washington for believing that Arafat or the PLO had an altered attitude toward Israel's existence. Finally, in June 1990, Jerusalem expressed much relief when the United States suspended the dialogue with the PLO for its failure to condemn explicitly the aborted terrorist attack.

As yet, as a consequence of the intifada, enormous amounts of diplomatic attention, action, and time were devoted toward resuscitating the Arab-Israeli

3. Remarks by Nabil Shaath, political adviser to Yasir Arafat, *al-Anba'* (Kuwait), 28 March 1989.

4. Remarks by Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, *Wocheupresse* (Vienna), 15 December 1989.

5. See Kenneth W. Stein, "The Palestinian Uprising and the Shultz Initiative," *Middle East Review*, (Winter 1988-89), pp. 13-20.

peace process. Diplomacy was renewed in the 1988 Shultz initiative, reworked in the 1989 Shamir plan, reworded in the July 1989 efforts of Egyptian President Mubarak, and refined in the 1990 Baker plan aimed at bridging all these attempts. Still no breakthrough resulted. At each juncture of these proposals, positions of the respective sides were identified and reaffirmed. In the process of undertaking feasibility, valuable parameters were established about procedure and process. As the texture and mechanics of Arab-Israel negotiations emerged, it became apparent that attitudinal axioms adopted in the Arab-Israel peace process were not original to the last thirty months. Many had materialized in earlier phases of Arab-Israeli bargaining; much had been learned from the 1973, 1974, and 1975 troop disengagement agreements, the 1978 Camp David Accords, and the 1979 Egyptian-Israel Peace Treaty. Nonetheless, it is instructive to note the presence, repetition, and refinement of negotiation attitudes which (re)appeared since the intifada. Four thematic tendencies are particularly and significantly identifiable: *passivity of the respective sides, procedure as substance, pace of the peace process, and anxiety about the political outcome*. Although not exhaustive in scope or number, this list intends to represent dimensions to be included, avoided, or understood when the negotiating process inevitably assumes speed. Each attitude reveals proclivities, sensitivities, and obstacles which should be considered if future negotiations are to be even partially successful. Each shapes the environment in which negotiations may occur. Each molds reality. Each points to a renewed diplomatic process in which the United States must be actively and centrally engaged in nurturing and structuring the outcome, despite the vilification directed at Washington by the May 1990 Arab summit conference resolution.

A. Passivity of the respective sides.

Both sides espouse the desire to advance the peace process toward formulation of a comprehensive, durable, or just peace; but both tend to be mutually reactive rather than independently initiatory. Israel remains torturously slow in accepting changes in substance or in procedure. Systemically its governmental system is paralyzed and subservient to minority interests; its general public is bisected about proposals for the future disposition of West Bank and Gaza territories occupied since the June 1967 war. Moreover, Israel's imperceptible diplomatic pace is due to its stronger influence in Washington, military

options, and control of the territories. Because of historical experience, Israel possesses a national psyche which is singularly cautious about making dramatic changes that may have a negative impact upon its future.

Each Arab country wants diplomacy to progress, but is hesitant to move forward without an umbrella formulation of pan-Arab consensus. Reluctance to initiate negotiations borders on chronic hesitancy. With a defensive attitude toward Israel, no Arab state nor the PLO wants to break ranks by working outside of a loosely defined Arab consensus. This absence of initiative means no bilateral discussions with Israel. Part of the collective Arab preference to move slowly is a fear of Israel's dual imagery of shrewd diplomacy and favored influence with Washington. Among some Arab decision-makers, there is the notion that since Washington "forced" Sadat to make the historic compromise of recognizing Israel, these Arab states will be individually coerced to make compromises with Israel that are psychologically, emotionally, and nationally objectionable. To offset these perceived Israeli advantages, Syria, Jordan, the PLO, and Egypt still endorse the convocation of an international Middle East peace conference. A conference would provide them the strength of a numerical majority, precluding Israel from being able to dominate each Arab state successively.

B. Procedure as substance

Bilaterally there is a keen desire not only to predetermine the negotiating outcomes, but also to structure the process to insure the preservation of national interests. Thus procedure becomes substance. For Israel, there is an acute need to determine both the party and the conditions of the negotiations. In essence, Israel wants to determine the Palestinians with which it will negotiate. The PLO is considered to be a thoroughly independent political actor that is, at best, untrustworthy; by contrast, the West Bank and Gaza Palestinian population is familiar with and semi-dependent upon the Israeli economy. Some members of the Israeli political establishment want elections in the territories in order to identify local Palestinian representatives as an alternative to the unwanted PLO leadership. "Elections are an expression of democracy," noted a *Knesset* member in March 1990. He continued, "How can Arafat claim legitimacy from the people when others will be elected as the Palestinian representatives?" Regarding the proposed Cairo talks with Palestinian representatives, the position of the current Israeli government is to

limit the agenda to a circumscribed discussion of election procedures. If the agenda were expanded, Israel fears that broader issues would be discussed, including territorial rights, sovereignty, and the emotionally infused question of Jerusalem's future. Conversely, the PLO fears that, unless the procedural agenda is reasonably open-ended, Palestinian representatives will be negotiating merely for the right to collect garbage or to buy library books in the occupied territories, reducing their rights to municipal privileges rather than national prerogatives. For the PLO, this outcome would be a coerced acceptance of "full autonomy" as expressed in the Camp David Accords and not a clear path toward an independent Palestinian state.

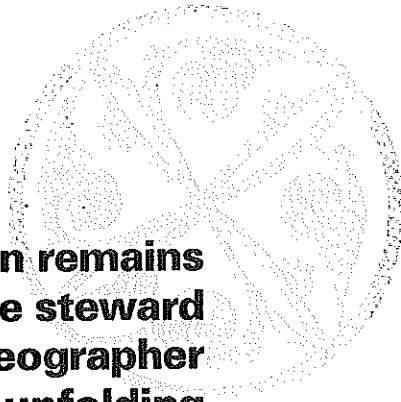
Syria, Jordan, and the PLO favor an international conference format in which authoritative or effective decisions can be made by a plenum. Israel would thereby be denied its current negotiating advantage of control of the territories without the interference of external powers or institutions. Israel's rejection of United Nations observers for the West Bank and Gaza, as suggested in a May 1990 United Nations

resolution, is precisely predicated on the notion that involvement of the United Nations will take power and prerogative from Israel, at least from the perspective of the international community. Since Arab capitals endorsed the September 1982 Fez Plan, which called for the temporary placement of the occupied territories under United Nations control, Israel sees this procedure as a precursor to losing territorial influence to an institution it finds markedly inhospitable. Israel prefers bilateral negotiations with limited involvement of the United Nations and certainly with no international conference imposing solutions or vetoing negotiated agreements.

C. Pace of the Peace Process

Once the peace process is initiated, the difficulties will begin to mount for Israel when it moves too slowly from the vantage point of diaspora Jewry—and also from the perspective of an Arab world whose expectations have been frustrated by thirteen years of the Begin/Shamir period and forty-two years of Israeli statehood and Palestinian diaspora. In spite of Washington's advocacy for patience, Arab states do not condone Israeli slowness over procedure, wrangling over substance, and internal political maneuver. Arabs interpret these Israeli actions as intentional impairment and time used to "colonize" the territories with Soviet Jewish immigrants. They further view procrastination as Israeli insincerity, additional proof of Israel stalling for time in order to create facts. Many in the Arab world still see Israel as illegitimate and disingenuous, seeking only to terminate the negotiating process at a particular interim and premature stage before Palestinian statehood. For the Arab world, Shamir personifies Israel's national preference to prolong the diplomatic process. But since Israel controls the territories, it will also determine the pace of the discussions regarding its political and geographic future. On 27 March 1990, Prime Minister Shamir told the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Israeli Parliament that it was his intentional desire to derail the peace process as it was unfolding: "I am not sorry that I managed to arrest it [the negotiating process.] The Cabinet...is not obliged to accept every idea that comes from Washington or Cairo. One should know how to defuse land mines and avoid dangers and examine any move proposed by others accordingly."

Within the Israeli national fiber there remain strong strands of suspicion about Arab intentions. Israel views Arab unwillingness to negotiate directly as a regressive continuity that transcends the peace



**Washington remains
virtually the sole steward
and choreographer
in the unfolding
negotiating process.**

treaty with Egypt. Israel's greatest fear is involuntary territorial concessions made during protracted and controversial public negotiations; it is afraid of being asked or forced to make too many concessions too quickly, thereby jeopardizing current and future security.

D. Political anxiety about the outcome

All sides fear that the end result of negotiations will be less than the optimum desired by any faction. There is distinct anxiety within the PLO, Israel, Jordan, and Syria that procedure will end in ways that are unknown and unwanted. For Israel, the least desirable outcome is an independent Palestinian state. For the PLO, an improper outcome would limit the centrality of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; an unacceptable outcome would stop short of an independent Palestinian state. For Jordan, the ardent preoccupation is to protect the longevity of Hashemite existence and to avoid a political development that is physically or demographically threatening. Each side has a pronounced fear of the future. Each of the potential negotiating partners is powerfully disinclined to release itself to an uncharted diplomatic labyrinth. There is apprehension that once a diplomatic process unfolds, its pace and substance will be uncontrollable and will fall to others to determine. For this reason, most of the Arab states and the PLO favor an international conference mechanism, which is aimed at having prescribed features for regulating the process.

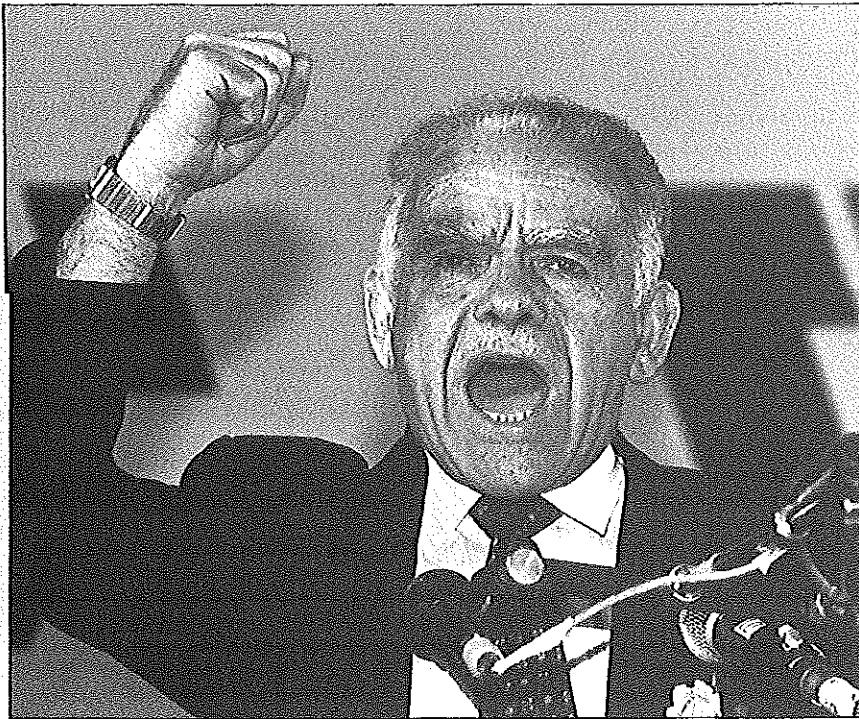
Many Israelis feel that full autonomy for the Palestinians may be just the intermediate stage which ultimately leads unalterably toward the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The Palestinians forbode that, though they may receive self-determination, they may not obtain a state. Syria is worried that its interests in the Golan and Lebanon will become secondary and then totally ignored in relation to a Palestinian-Israeli agreement. Jordan is concerned that it may have to confront the least desirable of all possible outcomes: an independent Palestinian state with a viable military and with full control of foreign affairs that could potentially endanger Hashemite longevity. For this reason, Jordan periodically reiterates the need for a confederation between Amman and the future Palestinian entity—an alliance in which Jordan can somehow decorously circumscribe future Palestinian political behavior.

Conclusions—Washington's role

Recent history of Arab-Israeli negotiations shows that no significant progress nor major changes transpire in the Arab-Israel peace process unless there is either a totally unexpected indigenous occurrence (the October 1973 war, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, or the intifada) or an external intrusion of a continuous duration from the United States (Henry Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy in the early 1970s and President Carter's successes later in that decade). Since the outbreak of the intifada in December 1987, concerted efforts to catalyze negotiations in the Arab-Israel conflict unequivocally demonstrate Washington's central role. But neither the Shultz initiative nor the Baker plan has stimulated noticeable diplomatic progress. By using calculated ambiguity in the choice of terms and time period, both diplomatic efforts avoided total rejection of the ideas they offered. By having the non-continuous presence of a high-ranking American official, both diplomatic efforts partially circumvented Arab intentions of using the intermediary as a substitute for direct negotiations. But both were unsuccessful because they were monitored from Washington rather than managed with attentive tenacity.

What the last two years have indicated about Washington's role is that the Arab countries blame the United States for the absence of progress, for providing Israel all that it wants, and for defending Israel at the United Nations. There is generally significant skepticism that Washington will play an equitable role. Not only is Washington seen as Israel's most loyal supporter and ally; but also within Arab capitals there is the almost ingrained belief that Washington does not understand that Arab nation states have pride, dignity, and honor which must be nurtured in any diplomatic process. Potential Arab interlocutors in Syria, Jordan, and within the PLO greatly fear the periodic nature of the volatile domestic pressures which American supporters of Israel levy upon the congressional and executive branch.

Egyptian-U.S. relations are strong, but deep disagreement over the rescheduling of huge military debts to Washington cloud that connection. Although this is a sensitive issue, it does not threaten Egypt's reliance upon Washington. Syrian-American relations are warming, but President Assad and Washington remain considerably distant on what Assad will do to curb support for international terrorism, somewhat distant on finding a way to negotiate with Israel through an international Middle East peace confer-



Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

(UPN Bettmann)

ence, less distant in re-establishing a national authority in Lebanon, and least distant in solving the nightmare of the western hostage crisis. Compared to their President, Syrian political elites are much less ideological and more pragmatic in their outlook. Washington has an opportunity to increase confidence with Damascus, especially in light of Moscow's changing regional presence and the loss of devout eastern European supporters such as those in Romania and East Germany. Despite a firm perception of institutional bias among middle and lower level American foreign policy-makers against Damascus, the actions of Syria's President Assad in the last eight months suggest a deliberate effort to be more than marginally accepted by Washington.

Jordanian officials have a definitive level of mistrust and suspicion for American foreign policy, particularly in the peace process. There is a caustic dislike for the United States for failing to appreciate Jordan's moderation over the years. There is a general despondency among Amman's political and social elite because of Washington's heavily asymmetrical foreign aid to Israel. While Jordan's economy strug-

gles to maintain a reasonable per capita income, the worth of foreign aid to Israel is challenged. Jordanian political leaders doubt that America will ever urge, let alone pressure Israel into making territorial concessions. Nonetheless, Amman is committed to American initiatives because it is a peace based upon Resolution 242. Jordan actively seeks the support of European nations for its desire to see the convocation of an international Middle East peace conference based upon Resolution 242. For Jordan, the Resolution guarantees territorial integrity of all states in the region; more importantly, it also contains the concept of Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories in exchange for peace. For Amman, both postulates ensure international recognition of Jordan's territorial integrity. Both postulates, if internationally sanctioned, pre-empt a latent Palestinian national intent ultimately to turn the East Bank into the Palestinian Kingdom of Jordan.

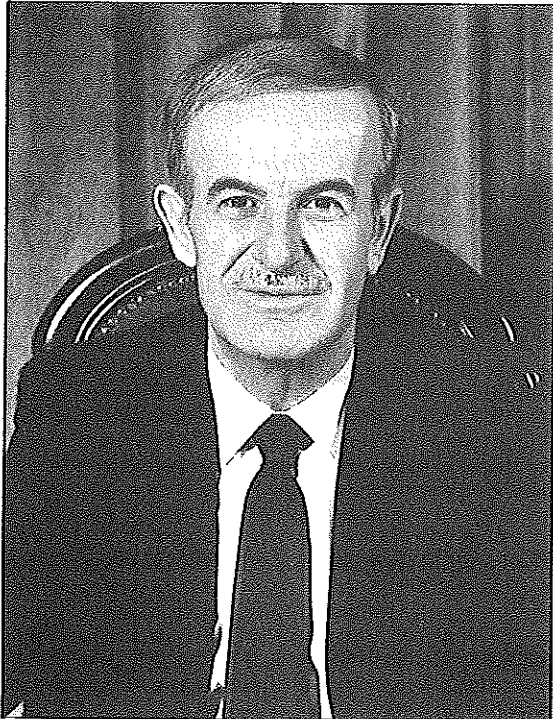
Although frustrated by the content, level, and pace of its dialogue with the U.S., the PLO did not suspend the dialogue in June 1990.⁶ The PLO leadership was disturbed that the dialogue did not discuss issues other than possible Palestinian elections and Israel's viewpoints. It continued to believe that it was the United States' support for Israel which kept it strong militarily and uncompromising politically.⁷ The dialogue's venue was in Tunis and not in Washington, and it was only at the ambassadorial level. Though the PLO wanted Washington to put pressure on Israel to force it to withdraw from the occupied territories (even if it could force Israeli withdrawal, which it can not), Washington refused to sacrifice its status as interlocutor for the purpose of becoming an advocate.

While U.S. diplomatic stature in the region is not at an apex, Washington's involvement in the diplomatic process is wanted by all sides. Moscow has had a phased withdrawal from the region because of domestic requirements and attention to eastern Europe. This has endowed Washington with additional status and diplomatic centrality. Washington remains virtually the sole steward and choreographer in the unfolding negotiating process. There is a collective fear among many Arab politicians that events elsewhere in the world and in the United States divert attention away from the Middle East.⁸ Each political leader candidly acknowledges that the Middle East is

6. See remarks by Faruk Qaddumi, *Fatah* Central Committee member, 5 September 1989, *Al-Majallah* (London), as quoted in *FBIS*, 7 September 1989, p. 3, and remarks by Bassam Abu Sharif, adviser to Yasir Arafat, as quoted on Amman Radio in *FBIS*, 24 May 1990, p. 3.

7. Remarks by Salah al-Khalaf, *Fatah* Central Committee member, *al-Madinah* (Saudi Arabia), 30 August 1989; Khalid al-Hasan, head of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Palestine National Council, *Al-Azba'* (Kuwait), 31 October 1989; and, *Baghdad Voice of the PLO*, 2 December 1989, as quoted in *FBIS*, 6 December 1989, p. 6.

8. See remarks by Nabil Shaath, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 24 April 1990.



President Hafez el-Assad of Syria. (MEI)

competing for international attention with Gorbachev's survival, German unification, the peace dividend, Central American issues, drugs, and NATO's future. But each leader also finds ways to explain why his country, political system, or organization can not do more to advance the diplomatic process. Separately but concurrently, the leaders state explicitly or implicitly that only Washington can generate diplomatic headway.

All sides want some degree of active American participation in the diplomatic process. All sides

expect an external intrusion by the United States, even though there is fear that Washington will not align exactly with the interests of a particular Arab faction to the conflict. All sides remain passive in terms of initiating a diplomatic opening. All expect the United States to formulate procedure in consultation, to move the process forward at an "acceptable pace," and to remove anxiety about the political outcome by guaranteeing its results. Similar to the situation when Great Britain mediated in Palestine 50 years ago, each principal actively strives to cajole, persuade, and influence the umpire.

How should the peace process unfold in relation to these concepts of passivity, pace, procedure, and political anxiety? No side will accept imposed and unwanted concessions. A process needs to evolve which is naturally guided but externally, persistently, and carefully driven by Washington. Any agreement or process must be determined mutually, with the periodic placement of mechanisms for internal confidence and trust to assure success. While timetables should be disregarded, there should be a date to initiate transitional arrangements and a date to interconnect those arrangements with the final status talks and their outcome. But it would be a mistake of tactics to use a diplomatic drawing board to move from the beginning of the talks (which focus on modalities of elections) to designing the end product. On all sides there is justifiable apprehension that respective goals not be fashioned too precisely at the outset of negotiations. This is not what the PLO wants. But lacking a military option and a real pan-Arab commitment to the Palestinian cause, the PLO needs a diplomatic process. Despite their public antagonism toward the Jewish state, several Syrian political leaders and bureaucrats, independently of one another, noted in March 1990 that "we know that Israel wants peace with us."⁹ Although this is certainly not the public articulation of Syrian politicians, it is a nascent truth held by some. Sophisticated and pragmatic assessments of present antagonists and future negotiating adversaries are very apparent. Sensitivity of respective attitudinal axioms is beginning to be understood, if not appreciated by one side or the other. Since the intifada, the diplomatic process has endured setbacks, but it has also illuminated political sensibilities. Regardless of past and present stumbling blocks, there is an acknowledged readiness by all for the United States to continue to move the diplomatic process forward.

9. Personal discussions with Syrian political leaders and high-ranking bureaucrats during the visit of President Jimmy Carter to Damascus, March 16-18, 1990.