

Vatican holds the key to Middle East peace

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The first week of February was an extraordinary week of diplomatic activity concerning the Middle East. It began with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's long-delayed state visit to Washington, D.C. to discuss, among other things, his comprehensive proposal for a six-month "ceasefire" between Palestinians and Israeli occupation forces, and ultimately for the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

From Washington, Mubarak shuttled to Europe, intersecting an official visit by Jordan's King Hussein with Pope John Paul II. Mubarak and his foreign minister, following consultations in Paris with Hussein, themselves went on to confer with the Pontiff.

King Hussein and the Pope issued a joint statement at the conclusion of their meeting on Feb. 2, emphasizing the unique holy status of Jerusalem for all three of the world's major religions. Mubarak and the Pontiff issued a joint statement on Feb. 5, calling for a solution to the Palestinian crisis.

The Pontiff had sent a dramatic signal of his commitment to forge a short-term solution to the Palestine crisis when, just before Christmas, he appointed a Palestinian to the position of Archbishop of Jerusalem, for the first time in the history of the Church.

Shifts in Israel

In Israel itself, even as renewed rioting was breaking out across the occupied West Bank, leading to the deaths of at least two more Palestinian youths, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres went on Israeli Armed Forces Radio to announce that the United States had launched a new regional peace initiative that could bring about a settlement of the Palestinian crisis within three weeks.

Perhaps the most extraordinary, and most significant event from the Israeli side, was an interview given by former Israeli

Defense Minister Ezer Weizman to the *Washington Times* Jerusalem correspondent, Andrew Meisels. "Let the Palestinians run their own lives. Let them have their respect. Let them have an identity card. Let them have a bloody passport. What am I worried about? I want to see this part of the world a Garden of Eden. I want to see open borders as in the European Community."

Shocked at the dramatic shift in outlook of a man once called Israel's "superhawk," the *Times* reporter pressed Weizman on what brought about this rethinking. "I haven't changed," Weizman responded. "The situation changed, and I changed with it. Anyone who doesn't change with the situation is an idiot."

In fact, within Israel, the security crisis precipitated by the December outbreak of serious protests and civil disobedience by Palestinians living on the occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem, is forcing to the surface a deeper moral and social crisis, created by the post-1967 Israeli occupation. That crisis of conscience was concretized in late January when Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered Israeli soldiers to club Palestinian demonstrators as a "humane" alternative to shooting unarmed protesters. Israeli Defense Force chief of staff General Chamron and Central Command chief General Mitzneh (West Bank) refused to implement the Rabin order. In late January, 50,000 "Peace Now" demonstrators marched in Tel Aviv backing this rejection of Rabin's order and calling for a negotiated solution to the Palestinian crisis.

New factors at work

High-level Israeli sources have reported to *EIR* that three factors have contributed to the potential for a genuine solution to the crisis. The first factor they cite is the emergence of an

organized civil disobedience movement among Palestinians in the occupied territories. West Bank newspaper editor Hanna Siniora has emerged, according to these sources, as a credible leader of this movement. The potentially enduring quality of this protest effort, unlike previous "flash in the pan" efforts, is viewed by the Israeli sources as the single most significant catalytic factor in the new opportunity for a solution to the Palestinian question.

The sources also cite the transformation of the Israeli Peace Now movement from its historical form as a protest movement, into an organized political force that will be a key to an overall political realignment in Israel. The shift of both Ezer Weizman and former Begin cabinet secretary Naor to the Labor Party is viewed by these sources as further evidence that new political combinations are now coalescing around the existential crisis faced by Israel.

The third factor is the growing sentiment within both the active duty and reserve ranks of the Israel Defense Forces that the occupation policy must end under terms that secure Israel's borders, while at the same time establishing some kind of Palestinian entity.

Hideous alternative

The other factor impelling a reasoned approach to the Palestinian dilemma, for the first time since the imperfect Camp David accords of 1979, is the equally vocal alternative to a Palestinian entity: the mass expulsions of all Palestinian Arabs from the occupied territories and the permanent annexation of that territory by Israel. Minister of Industry Ariel Sharon, Housing Minister David Levi, and Rabbi Meir Kahane have all voiced the view that the only solution to the Palestinian crisis is mass expulsions, forcing Jordan to become, in effect, a Palestinian state.

Such an action, which enjoys the enthusiastic support of fanatical "fundamentalist" groupings inside Israel, would plunge the region into a Thirty Years War.

Even in Washington, where political unreality has become the order of the day, there were groping signs of a serious Reagan administration effort to move the peace process forward. On Feb. 2, Secretary of State George Shultz, testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, announced a new U.S. initiative for a solution to the Palestinian crisis and the overall Middle East situation. Citing the necessity for Palestinian self-rule, Shultz proclaimed that the status quo had become an impossible situation, requiring immediate action.

Just what form that action will take remains to be seen. There are at present at least three standing proposals for a course of action leading to some form of Palestinian self-rule. The Mubarak proposal centers on a six-month period of ceasefire, interim self-rule by Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza, and, eventually, a referendum on independence or confederation with either Jordan or Israel.

King Hussein favors an international conference drawing

in the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, a proposal that Israeli Prime Minister Shamir has rejected in favor of direct negotiations between representatives of Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

With good cause, some Middle East players fear that the United States, caught up in the summit-mania, may tend ultimately to subordinate the Palestinian and Middle East peace issue to superpower horse trading. Palestine Liberation Organization head Yasser Arafat has warned since 1984 that he fears a superpower "New Yalta" deal in which the Palestinian people would be sold out.

Soviet silence

Most striking in this recent period of highly charged diplomatic activity between Washington, the Vatican, and the Middle East is the absolute silence of Moscow. Apart from a continuing stream of Radio Moscow attacks on the brutality of Israeli treatment of Palestinian protesters in the occupied territories, the Soviet Union has said nothing.

This silence is not necessarily unusual. When the Reagan administration launched the tanker escort policy in the Persian Gulf last summer, Moscow was temporarily taken off guard by the decisive nature of the American deployment, and waited weeks before taking any counteractions.

Two factors will tend to determine whether or not fears of superpower interference jettisoning the peace opportunity are justified. First, Pope John Paul II must continue to play the decisive role in bringing all the key players together around a commitment to honestly settle points of dispute and reach a common agenda for moving the peace process forward. Given President Reagan's obsession with the Reykjavik agenda and a superpower deal, only the Pope is in a position to steer the Middle East negotiations while keeping a watchful eye on the imperialists in Moscow.

One encouraging factor is that, in addition to the recent visits to the Vatican of Mubarak and Hussein, sources in Rome report that PLO Foreign Minister Farrouk Khadoumy has also been in regular contact over the recent weeks with high-level Vatican officials. Even Israeli Prime Minister Shamir is now expected to stop over at the Vatican en route to Washington in March.

Second, as the Schiller Institute's late January "New Bretton Woods" conference in Andover, Massachusetts underscored Pope Paul VI's statement, the "new name for peace must be development." Ultimately, the guarantor of peace in the region is a full-scale program of economic development, what then Israeli Premier Shimon Peres called in 1985 a new Marshall Plan for the region, and what Ezer Weizman has called for in invoking the image of the "Garden of Eden."

The Reagan administration's failure to date to genuinely take up the issue of economic development as the key to peace in the Middle East must be overcome, if the current peace efforts are to succeed.