

A twinkle of hope in the Mideast

What a Christmas full of surprises. First came Mikhail Gorbachev's cuts in the Red Army's offensive formations. On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz grudgingly announced that the U.S. would open direct talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Shultz is rightly known as "Israel's best friend in Washington." At times, he seemed more anti-Palestinian than the Israelis themselves. Why, then, did Shultz, who as late as Tuesday was refusing to talk to the PLO, finally decide to open negotiations?

First, because George Bush and his team put a gun to Shultz's head and said, "Don't leave us with this mess." Now that Shultz has broken the ice, the Bush administration will have a good opening to begin some serious Mideast diplomacy.

Second, because all of America's allies insisted that Washington talk to the PLO. America's international image was being badly tarnished by its unquestioning support of Israel's iron-fisted policy in the occupied territories.

So what next? Does all this mean peace may soon be at hand in the Mideast? No, alas. What the U.S. has done is merely to recognize the facts of life: That the PLO is the only representative of the six million Palestinians and that to make some sort of peace agreement will require engaging the PLO in talks. Israel, it should be noted, still refuses any hint of dealings with the PLO.

Shultz's opening to the PLO is only the first, tiny step forward in what will certainly be a long, rocky, twisting road toward an Arab-Israeli settlement.

Remember, that the U.S. has only agreed to talk. In fact, the U.S. and the PLO have been talking for years,

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through third parties and go-betweens. Each understands the other quite well.

While the U.S. chats with the PLO, Israel will certainly mobilize its supporters in Congress. The Democrats, who now control both houses, are ardent backers of Israel. Democratic senators and congressmen get a big slice of their campaign funds from groups identified as pro-Israel. So, it's pretty certain that Congress will not soon start putting pressure on Israel. And Congress, which supplies more than \$4 billion annually to Israel in aid, is the only power that can force Israel into giving up the occupied territories and their important water resources.

Equally pessimistic, it will take only one crazed fanatic to wreck the fragile U.S.-PLO link. One grenade thrown in an airport, or at an Israeli school bus, will do. Trust Abu Nidal or Syrian intelligence to stage some horrible attack designed to derail negotiations.

The Israelis, for their part, could well do the same sort of thing. Last Friday's Israeli commando raid south of Beirut was clearly aimed at provoking a counter-attack from the target of the raid, the PFLP-General Command (a PLO member), that would have embarrassed Arafat before his Geneva speech. That's the way of the Mideast.

On a more positive note, the U.S. has given what appears to be de facto recognition of the PLO as a legitimate movement—the 103rd nation to do so. By breaking with Israel's right wing, the U.S. government will give Israeli moderates and the left a big and badly needed boost. Yitzhak Shamir and his allies, who seem to prefer a second Masada to compromise, will be left all alone.

Even Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini finally saw that the Gulf War could not go on and allowed the fighting to be stopped. Perhaps the stubborn Shamir may yet decide to relent. Meanwhile, the incoming Bush administration will have exactly two short years in which to produce some Mideast results. After that, a Congressional, and then a presidential, election will be at hand. No one in Washington is going to lean on Israel at election time. So Bush must act swiftly and decisively if he is to get anywhere.

If not, the Mideast will likely continue on its bloody course.

Recently, an Israeli asked me if I thought peace would come to the Mideast if the PLO and Israel somehow made an agreement to live peacefully in two neighboring states. No, I replied, there would not be peace in the ever-turbulent Mideast. But the difference would be that Israel would then become a member in good standing of the Mideast residents association. Instead of fighting the Palestinians, the Israelis might join the Egyptians, let's say, against the Syrians. Or they might ally with Iraq against Egypt.

No, there will not be absolute peace in the Mideast, not in our lifetimes. But at least now there's a tiny glimmer of light—like a Christmas star.