

Mideast peace winds blow

In the next 30 days the Mideast is going to go through one of the most fascinating and dramatic periods of its turbulent modern history — and, perhaps, one of the most decisive.

In Israel, the Mideast's only democratic state, voters will go to the polls on Nov. 1 to choose between the right-wing Likud bloc or the centre-left Labor alliance. The outcome will determine how Israel responds to the current Arab peace offensive and to the seething uprising on the West Bank and Gaza in which more than 305 Palestinians have died.

Some time in November, an equally dramatic event will take place in Algiers. The Palestine National Council (PNC) will meet and most likely vote to declare an independent Palestinian state in exile. Interestingly and rather ironically, the PNC is the only more or less democratic political institution in the Arab world. It functions as an active parliament for five million Palestinians and represents virtually all of their dizzying collection of factions and parties.



YITZHAK SHAMIR

Even more ironically, the main reason the Palestinians and their leader, PNC Chairman Yasser Arafat, have been unable to come forth with a peace proposal for Israel is because of the democratic nature of the PNC. If Arafat were a dictator, he could have long ago imposed his will on his feuding members. Instead, he has had to wheedle, cajole, and try to fashion seemingly impossible compromises with radicals who won't give an inch. And all this while trying to maintain the shaky edifice of Palestinian unity.

Democratic Israel faces much the same problem. Like Palestinians, Israelis are divided, confused and afraid — yet hopeful. But like all Mideasterners, they are so busy arguing and debating that finding the right path to peace seems impossible. Both Arabs and Israelis are split down the middle between the compromisers and the rejectionists.

Now, after months of feverish diplomatic activity, it appears Arafat has won the upper hand over Palestinian radicals and will go full steam ahead with a peace proposal — even, perhaps, if the right-wing Likud wins the Israeli election. In the Arab view, there is little basic difference between the Israeli parties, though they would certainly prefer to deal with the flexible Shimon Peres than the obdurate Yitzhak Shamir.

Firm backing from Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Iraq have given Arafat the power to stare down his own radicals. The Arab states are suddenly showing a maturity and common sense conspicuously lacking in the past. They have also given up the hope that the U.S. will force Israel to the peace table. The Israeli lobby in Washington, re-

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mote-controlled by Israel's right wing, now exercise absolute veto power over U.S. Mideast policy. It's up to the Arabs to do the job.

So the Arab moderates and the PLO have banded together and held out the olive branch to Israeli voters. Never before have the Arabs had any kind of positive influence on Israeli elections. Suddenly, Arab moderates are speaking directly to Israeli moderates.

Israelis most also now think about what creation of a Palestinian state in exile will mean. A large number of nations will recognize the new state.



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The PLO is already recognized, to varying degrees, by as many nations as Israel. Worldwide pressure on Israel to stop its repression of the Palestinians will steadily increase.

It's also likely that the UN General Assembly will vote to seat the new state and perhaps even to reassert the original 1948 partition plan that created Israel and a stillborn Palestinian state. Certainly, proclamation of a state will embolden Palestinians inside the occupied territories to continue their bloody — and increasingly successful — uprising.

At the same time, a Palestinian state will have to modulate its behavior and give up terror attacks against civilians. By joining moderate Arab states, the new Palestinian state will disprove charges by the Israeli right that it is no more than a bunch of murderous thugs bent on exterminating Israel.

Look now for radicals on both sides to try to derail the accelerating peace process. Two leading Palestinian radicals, George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh both assured me personally that they would never compromise an inch and will use terror attacks to stop peace talks. Israel's hard right will also seek a pretext to launch heavy attacks against the Arabs that will disrupt any further peace talks. This has been the tragic course followed in the past.

But the radicals on both sides, who have run things for the last 40 war-torn years, may be losing their grip. *Inshallah* — God willing — as the Arabs say.