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PAGE A-1

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# U.S., PLO: 7 Years of Secret Contacts

## Reagan Continues Behind-the-Scenes Relationship Despite Official Policy

By DOYLE McMANUS, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—Despite public pronouncements emphasizing that negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization are prohibited, the United States has been in secret contact with the PLO for at least seven years—holding discussions under four Presidents, from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan, on subjects ranging from the safety of American diplomats to the chances for Middle East peace, The Times has learned.

The official policy of the United States is that it will not deal with the PLO as long as the guerrillas—“a gang of thugs,” in President Reagan’s words—refuse to recognize Israel’s right to exist.

But the true pattern of U.S. intelligence operations and secret diplomacy has been quite the opposite. Beginning with clandestine talks initiated by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in 1974, according to well-placed sources in Washington and Beirut, the United States has been talking to the PLO more often than not. The Carter Administration made two concerted attempts to bring the PLO into peace talks with Israel, carrying on extensive indirect negotiations with PLO chief Yasser Arafat. And, despite his rhetorical condemnations of the Palestinian guerrillas, Ronald Reagan’s Administration has quietly continued low-level contacts with the PLO through both the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Embassy in Beirut.

### Secret ‘Back Channel’

The history of contacts, more frequent and extensive than previously known, suggests that official dealings between the U.S. government and the PLO, are not the exception—as it generally thought—but the rule.

Some of the talks have gone through a secret “back channel,” an established line of communication between the CIA and the PLO intelligence organization, the “Jihaz al Rasd,” or “Surveillance Department.”

But there is a “front channel.”

made direct contact with PLO officials several times for conversations on the security of the embassy, which is in a Palestinian-patrolled area. According to some sources, those security talks have occasionally slipped into wide-ranging discussions on the situation in Lebanon. And the United States has negotiated indirectly with the PLO; President Jimmy Carter carried on a long, secret round of talks through officials of several Arab countries to try to prod Arafat toward recognizing Israel, but failed.

Whether the United States talks with the PLO, and on what basis, are issues that go to the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most Palestinians—Arabs whose ancestors inhabited the land on which Israel stands—say they will accept no peace negotiations that do not include the PLO.

### Diplomats’ View

Many American diplomats in the Middle East maintain privately that no peace is possible without the participation of Arafat and his men. “It is not possible to get support for a settlement on the (Israeli-occupied) West Bank without the PLO,” former Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders said recently, after leaving office.

But Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Menachem Begin and the opposition leader, Shimon Peres, insist that they will never sit down with the guerrillas. “This organization is killing men, women and children, and it cannot be a party to negotiations,” Begin said earlier this year.

Arafat and other PLO officials boast that they already have the de facto recognition of most of the world, but they still want the United States to recognize them openly, for that would greatly strengthen their claim to a place in negotiations.

Israel opposes any such recognition, for the same reason. In 1975, the Israelis even exacted a written promise from Kissinger that the United States would “not recognize

or negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization so long as the PLO does not recognize Israel’s right to exist and does not accept (U.N.) Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338,” the two basic U.N. resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. That self-imposed prohibition remains in force today but, in practice, four successive administrations have found secret contacts with the PLO to be, in the words of one State Department source, “absolutely necessary.”

In early 1974, several sources said, Kissinger and President Nixon decided that it would be useful for the United States to talk secretly with PLO officials, to size them up first-hand and get a sense of how flexible they might be in future Middle East peace talks. On at least two occasions, Kissinger dispatched a member of his staff to meet with an Arafat aide, apparently in Europe. Israel and Jordan were notified of the contacts, a former official familiar with the talks said. “Nothing substantial came out of it, but Kissinger prided himself on keeping the lines open,” he said.

The former secretary of state refused a request by The Times for an interview on the 1974 contacts. “He never personally had a meeting with the PLO, but beyond that he feels he cannot make any comment,” Chris Vick, a spokeswoman for Kissinger, said.

Ironically, some of Kissinger’s critics faulted his Mideast diplomacy for apparently ignoring the role of the Palestinians. In the light of the 1974 contacts, Kissinger now appears to have been more attentive to the Palestinian problem than the critics knew—even though he decided that there was little to be gained from serious negotiations with the PLO.

### Kissinger’s Promise

In the very next round of U.S.-Israeli-Egyptian negotiations—the second Sinai disengagement pact, in 1975—the Israelis demanded, and got, Kissinger’s promise that the United States would not negotiate with the PLO. Kissinger gave the pledge readily, a source said, because his limited contacts with the guerrilla organization had already convinced him that there was no immediate hope of bringing Arafat into peace talks.

But the secretary did not interpret his promise as meaning that all contact between U.S. officials and PLO members was prohibited. In 1976, when President Gerald R. Ford ordered the Navy to evacuate American citizens from Beirut during the Lebanese civil war, U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers enlisted the PLO’s help in providing security for the operation, and Kissinger later sent Arafat a message of thanks for his cooperation.

The CIA link with the Palestinians was used for wider purposes, well-placed sources said, including informal

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