

Thatcher Ends Three-Day Visit To Israel

JERUSALEM (WNS) — Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's three-day visit to Israel was marked by genuine friendship and an acknowledged commonality of interests between Britain and Israel in many areas. But it also underlined sharp differences of opinion with respect to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and ways to resolve the Palestinian issue.

The visit, the first to Israel by an incumbent British Prime Minister, ended with all the pomp and circumstance befitting such an occasion. It reflected not only the demands of protocol but a feeling on both sides that, all-in-all, the visit was successful and that Thatcher and Premier Shimon Peres had achieved a personal rapport.

Thatcher, known as the "Iron Lady" for her uncompromising conservative position in international affairs, elicited a more positive response from Israel doves than from its hawks in her comments on regional political matters.

When she said that most of her Israeli interlocutors had agreed with her that the continued military occupation of Arab populated territories was not in Israel's own interests, she mentioned Peres, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Abba Eban. She pointedly omitted Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the leader of Likud, who will replace Peres as Premier when the rotation of power agreement goes into effect next October.

Thatcher conceded there was no "clear or agreed route" toward a peace settlement in the Middle East but there were "some ideas," and Britain, she said, is anxious to help. She saw eye-to-eye with the Israelis in her unqualified opposition to the PLO and made clear that her government would have nothing to do with the PLO until it renounces terrorism.

The Israeli leaders were fulsome in their praise of Thatcher's forceful stand against international terrorism. But when the British leader urged Peres and Rabin to move toward free elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a way to evolve a responsible, authentic Palestinian leadership, she found her hosts sharply skeptical.

Rabin reportedly rejected the idea on the spot, noting that in the entire Arab world there was not a single elected Arab mayor. The Defense Minister went on to fault the European countries for "talking so much" but "doing so little" to help improve living standards in the administered territories.

Thatcher insisted, at a press conference, that material improvements for the Palestinians in the territories could only be "a supplement, not a substitute" for a political settlement. Her message was, "we must keep trying." Britain in fact may become more actively engaged in the Middle East when it assumes the rotating chairmanship of the European Economic Community (EEC) Council of Ministers on July 1. Thatcher indicated she would extend her personal efforts

to bring about an Israel-Jordanian-Palestinian dialogue when she hosts King Hussein of Jordan in London next month.

Thatcher dined with nine Palestinian leaders, including Elias Friej, Mayor of Bethlehem, former Mayor Rashad Shawa of Gaza, Mayor Mustafa Natshe of Hebron and Hana Senora, an influential East Jerusalem Arab journalist. She told reporters later that they had "made it clear that they reject terrorism" and "want negotiations." She sidestepped a questioner who pointed out that a manifesto handed her by eight of the nine was critical of Britain's support for the American punitive bombing of Libya.

Thatcher visited Ashkelon as guest of Mayor Eli Dayan and the Joint Israel Appeal of Great Britain which is closely involved in Project Renewal, the rehabilitation of slum neighborhoods in Israeli cities. Flanked by Peres and the mayor, she visited some of the Project Renewal sites in Ashkelon as thousands of enthusiastic townsfolk cheered and waved Union Jacks. She laid the cornerstone for a new school funded by the Ronson Foundation of the United Kingdom. Thatcher remarked on that occasion, "By harnessing the talents and energies of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds," Project Renewal in Ashkelon "embodies the best of Israel."

Peres and other dignitaries bid farewell to the British Prime Minister under brilliant sunshine in the Knesset's gardens, as a 19-gun salute boomed across the capital.

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