

The PLO Peace Offensive

Skillful Tactics or Unilateral Concessions?

The intifada marks a turning point in the history of the Palestinian and Arab national liberation movement. For the first time, the focal point of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This has put Israel on the defensive, more so than the huge stockpiles of weapons in the arsenals of the Arab armies.

The intifada has propelled the Palestinian question to the top of the world agenda, and engendered worldwide support for the Palestinian struggle, as well as condemnation of the Israeli atrocities and brutal repression. There has been a notable change in the position of most European countries, as well as that of the US which finally lifted its 13-year-old ban on dialogue with the PLO. By doing so, the US, much to its own dismay, is acknowledging what the majority of the nations of the world had already recognized, i.e., that the PLO is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, although officially, the US has not yet recognized the PLO or the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

The US is interested in a political settlement now more than ever in the light of the intifada, a phenomenon which if left unchecked, could spill over to other parts of the region - a scenario which US officials would prefer not to contemplate. This is in addition to the US intent to counter the new Soviet initiative for peace in the region and, most of all, the US desire to «save Israel from itself.»

Nevertheless, the US decision to speak with the PLO is a step in the right direction and a victory for the Palestinian cause. It is not that the decision in itself is an asset, but given the role of the US in the Middle East, these talks, depending on their development, could play a significant role towards the achievement of a peaceful settlement.

The first US-PLO meeting took place in Tunis. Robert Pelletreau, the US ambassador in Tunis, headed the American delegation. The PLO delega-

tion included Executive Committee members, Abdullah Hourani, Mahmoud Abbas, and Yasir Abed Rabbo, and the Palestinian ambassador to Tunis, Hakam Balawi. The meeting was more symbolic than substantive. Nevertheless, the US placed the issue of «terrorism» at the top of its agenda, while the PLO placed the international peace conference at the top of its agenda.

The second meeting took place in late March, after months of procrastination by the US that continues to insist on keeping the meetings on the ambassadorial level. The second meeting did not result in any significant change in the US position. Despite a statement by US Secretary of State James Baker that Israel may have to talk to the PLO in the event of failure to find perspective, non-PLO, negotiating partners in the occupied territories, the US administration remains opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state, as well as to a meaningful international conference.

The Palestinian reaction to the dialogue was positive despite the deliberate effort on the part of the US government to equate armed liberation struggle with «terrorism,» while making no mention of Israeli state terrorism which has been responsible for evicting more than half the Palestinian people from their own country, and practiced in a variety of other forms for over four decades.

THE ISRAELI REACTION

The Israeli reaction to the US-PLO dialogue was one of anger and dismay, aside from the positive response of a small number of officials, such as Knesset members Yossi Sarid of the Citizens Rights Movement and Amnon Rubenstein of Shinui. Prime Minister Shamir described the move as «dangerous and painful» and as having a bad effect on US-Israeli relations. The former Israeli representative to the UN and deputy foreign minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, warned that «the US

decision will strain US-Israeli relations, and the complete trust Israel had shared with the US will be shaken badly.»¹

Israel was jolted once again when the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1988 was released. This report is prepared by a joint subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee; 21 pages of the 1,500 - page report were devoted to Israeli human rights violations in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, conveying a grim picture of killings, bone-breaking, home demolitions, as well as the psychological and physical torture of detainees, «including forcing prisoners to remain in one position for prolonged periods, hooding, sleep deprivation and cold showers.» The methods mentioned in the report are but a small sample of what goes on daily in Israeli torture chambers. Torture is employed to extract false confessions to be used in mock trials to convict and imprison Palestinians. A number of the detainees don't survive to be convicted, but die under torture during the interrogation period.

Wayne Owens, the subcommittee chairman, warned Israel that its behavior in the occupied territories is unacceptable and could weaken US support in the future, although Israel will receive its allotted share for this year of over three billion dollars (the largest share of US foreign aid). The discussion of US aid to Israel in the light of criticism of Israeli human rights violations in the territories is unprecedented. It is the first time such discussions have taken place openly at such high levels and among those who make the decisions.

Even the formidable and staunchly pro-Israeli American Jewish community is becoming more and more openly critical of Israel's violations of human rights in the occupied territories, and its refusal to negotiate with the PLO. Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, said, «We are warning Israel