

Why the US Talks to the PLO

The Bush Administration's continuation of the dialogue begun by the Reagan Administration with the PLO, though belated, shows that such contacts have become a component of the US's Middle East policy under the impact of the uprising. With this in mind, one should analyze the US's motives in continuing this dialogue.

The second round of the US-Palestinian dialogue, which took place in Tunisia in March, did not produce the desired result of breaking the deadlock and paving the way for peace negotiations. The Bush Administration decided to continue talks with the PLO following a waiting period of three months. During the time between the first and second meetings, the intifada did not subside or slow down. Rather it maintained its momentum despite the escalation of Israeli repression. The decision to hold a new round of talks, like the US's original decision to talk to the PLO, was prompted by the intifada, its escalation and the unprecedented international support it has galvanized for the Palestinian cause. This in turn has isolated Israel and the US which has continuously vetoed and threatened to veto any UN Security Council resolutions which condemn Israeli brutality in the occupied territories.

It is no surprise that the latest US-PLO talks did not produce any tangible results. The US Middle East policy did not change substantially with the changing of administrations. On the eve of the second round of the US-PLO dialogue, US Secretary of State James Baker, speaking before a congressional committee on foreign aid, reaffirmed the US government's opposition to a Palestinian state, as well as its commitment to the Camp David accords, including the section on the Palestinians, which calls for «self-rule» under Israeli occupation, a plan very similar to the bantustans created by South Africa, and which has been emphatically rejected by the Palestinian people.

The US does not recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; nor does it recognize their national rights of repatriation, self-determination and the establishment of an independent state.

Why then does the US continue the dialogue with the PLO? The answer to this question lies in the US agenda for the Tunis meetings and in the statements of US officials.

Charles Redman, State Department spokesman during the Reagan administration, spelled out the three main points which the US would stress in the dialogue with the PLO. The second meeting with the PLO confirmed that the Bush Administration has not changed the emphasis on these three points:

First and foremost is the issue of «terrorism.» By placing this issue at the top of its agenda, the US is attempting to kill two birds with one stone: putting the PLO on the defensive in order to limit its maneuverability, while gradually transcending from renouncing terrorism to a denunciation of any kind of «violence,» i.e., the intifada; in addition to asking the PLO to cooperate with the CIA and FBI.

Secondly: The US intends to keep its representation at these meetings at the ambassadorial level.

Thirdly: The US views these talks as a forum for presenting its point of view vis-a-vis a settlement, rather than for dialogue in the real sense of the word.

The US's preferred mechanism for achieving a settlement is direct negotiations. If there is to be an international peace conference, then it should be a prelude to direct negotiations. Furthermore, such negotiations are to be conducted between Israeli officials and Palestinians from the 1967 occupied territories rather than PLO officials. The negotiations would ultimately lead to the withdrawal of Israeli troops from certain populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the Palestinians would then be granted «autonomy» within the framework of continued Israeli military occupation; this is in accordance with the section of

the Camp David agreement which stipulates «self-rule» as the solution for the Palestine question. After a period of three years, the PLO can participate in the second phase of negotiations, along with the Jordanian regime that would be given the major role in running the bantustan.

KISSINGER'S LEGACY

Although the uprising broke through the 1975 ban on speaking to the PLO, the basics of US Middle East policy have not changed radically since Kissinger's step-by-step approach began creating the conditions for Camp David. By the early seventies, Israeli military superiority was already considered of paramount importance in this strategic area. Israel was increasingly viewed as a strategic asset, safeguarding the interests of US big business by keeping the Arab nationalist countries and forces in check. Overall imperialist interests were translated into a concrete policy where virtually all Israeli positions were deemed correct - an orientation that encouraged Israeli aggression and intransigence over the years; meanwhile US imperialism strove to extract concessions unilaterally from the Arab side. In the US's geopolitical view, the Palestinian liberation movement, the PLO and, by extension, a potential Palestinian state are viewed not only as threats to Israel but as destabilizing elements in the Middle East of subservient oil monarchies which the US aspires to maintain.

The continuity of the Kissinger legacy is particularly apparent today with Bush's appointment of Brent Scowcroft as national security adviser and Lawrence Eagleburger as deputy secretary of state; both have worked closely with Kissinger in government and in his consulting firm. Here it is relevant to recall Kissinger's «consultations» on the uprising. According to the *New York Times* of March 6, 1988, he told US Jewish leaders at a private gathering, «The insurrection must be quelled immediately, and the first step should be to throw out television a la South Africa.» According to him, the uprising should be suppressed «brutally and rapidly.» Although US officials do not say such things public-