

PLO policy

Initially, the PLO dealt with Mubarak's 10 points as questions directed to Israel. The Baker plan, for its part, was presented to the PLO only via the Egyptian government. In this situation, the PLO Executive Committee and the Palestinian Central Council advanced five points summing up the Palestinian position on the peace efforts:

1. Palestinian-Israeli talks should be a preliminary step towards the convening of an international peace conference under the auspices of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the participation of all concerned parties, including the PLO.

2. The PLO has the sole right to form any Palestinian delegation to such talks, without preconditions.

3. The projected elections would be only a first stage of a comprehensive settlement aimed at establishing peace.

4. The agenda for talks should be open.

5. The Palestinian position is based on the Palestinian peace initiative which is grounded in international legitimacy.

After a series of meetings of the PLO Executive Committee in Cairo and Tunis, four questions were addressed to the US administration in relation to the Baker plan; they were:

- a. Does the PLO have the authority to appoint the Palestinian delegation and to include Palestinians from inside and outside the occupied territories?

- b. Is the US ready to accept the Palestinian peace initiative as a basis for a Palestinian-Israeli meeting, along with other proposals that have been forwarded?

- c. Is the US ready to accept an open dialogue without preconditions?

- d. Does the US agree to the talks as being a preliminary step towards the convening of an international conference with the participation of all parties, including the PLO?

Subsequently the PLO decided to respond by saying that it agrees on the Baker plan only in the context of the Palestinian Central Council's resolutions. The PLO was subject to intense pressure from the Egyptian regime to accept Baker's points unconditionally.

In the process, the Egyptian regime exhibited its bad faith by misrepresenting the US position to the PLO, to make it appear more attractive, and also misrepresenting the PLO's stance to the Bush Administration, to make it appear more conciliatory. The Egyptian regime has exerted all efforts for a settlement, but not for one that fulfills even minimal Palestinian rights. The fallacy of its efforts has been proven by reality, for the PLO has dealt flexibly with the political efforts to find a solution, but the Israeli and US stands have remained virtually unchanged.

All along, there have been forces within the PLO pointing out that the concessions given by the PLO go beyond the principles of the Palestinian peace initiative decided by the PNC, and that this could endanger Palestinian rights without eliciting reciprocal concessions from either the US or Israel. With the deadlock in the efforts to arrange a Palestinian-Israeli meeting, the Palestinian leadership as a whole grasped this fact. It realized that responding to the US-Egyptian pressure was not leading to any change in the situation, much less towards real peace. It perceived that dealing with the various plans floated by the US, Israel and Egypt could only lead to undermining the historical gains made by the Palestinian struggle over the years, and the status of the PLO itself, as the leader of the Palestinian people and their sole representative.

It has become obvious that there will only be more pressure put on the PLO, and the Israeli repression aimed against the intifada increases rather than decreasing parallel to this point-less diplomacy. Meanwhile, Israel is creating new facts on the ground with the influx of Soviet Jewish immigrants, as well as efforts to bring more Jews from Ethiopia to occupied Palestine. Not only are these developments a blow to the peace process; they push in the direction of «transfer» - i.e., expelling large numbers of Palestinians from the occupied territories to Jordan, based on Likud's idea that this is the site for a Palestinian state. Of course, carrying out this plan could only occur in the context of a major new Israeli aggression which could spark an explosion in the whole area.

The question now is: Was it necessary for the PLO to undergo this experience, wasting so much time, in order to realize these facts whose broad outlines were apparent long ago? In the light of the need to protect and develop the intifada, does the PLO have the possibility or the right to lose time running after the illusion of a change in the US policy of unconditional support to Israel? Or to make repeated trips to Cairo, that result only in being subjected to pressure against the interests of the Palestinian people and cause? Most recently, the PLO was the target of a campaign in the Egyptian media, reprimanding it for not having unconditionally condemned the attack on the Israeli tour bus. The real motive of this press campaign is not so much connected to the PLO's position on this military operation, as it is an expression of the Egyptian regime's irritation that the PLO did not accept the Baker plan as it was.

For a new PNC

With the purpose of reviewing all these developments and PLO policy in this regard, the PLO Executive Committee, along with the leaders of the Palestinian resistance organizations (PLO-members), held a series of meetings in Tunis in late January and early February. One of the important decisions adopted at these meetings was to convene the Palestinian Central Council in mid-March. A special committee was established to determine the membership of the upcoming PNC, that should be convened within six months. A number of other resolutions were adopted related to supporting and escalating the intifada, and launching a campaign to face the dangers of the mass immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.

The significance of these resolutions is not only that they could pave the way for a more correct PLO policy; they could also contribute to crystallizing more effective Arab support to the confrontation of the Israeli plans and aggressive policies, as well as providing a firmer base for increasing international solidarity with the Palestinians' struggle for their national rights.