

US-PLO Dialogue Suspended

The US decision on June 20th, to suspend the dialogue with the PLO, was expected and inevitable in view of Washington's arrogant stance from the beginning of the talks in December 1988. Still one should ask: Why did the US administration agree to talk to the PLO in the first place, and then suspend the dialogue after 18 months of unproductive meetings? To answer this question objectively it is not enough to listen to US officials' statements. Rather one must understand their practice which reveals their real intentions.

by Ahmad Halaweh

It is a fact that the intifada in the 1967 occupied territories had single-handedly restored the Palestinian cause to the top of the Middle East agenda. Its far-reaching achievements had enforced positive changes in international public opinion in favor of the Palestinian people and their legitimate struggle for their rights. It created a new situation on the Palestinian, Arab and international levels. The most important international victory for the intifada was imposing isolation on the position of both the Reagan Administration and Israel, in particular after PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat's historic speech at the special UN General Assembly session in 1988, which was convened in Geneva after the US denied him a visa to attend the session in New York. A few days later, the US administration backtracked: It decided to embark on a «substantive dialogue» with the PLO, having been forced into this decision by the worldwide support of the Palestinian peace initiative. The US found itself in a situation where it had no choice but to give up, at least temporarily, its previous refusal to talk to the PLO. The US ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Pelletreau, was entrusted to begin the talks.

Clearly, the decision to start the dialogue was made as a form of damage control, attempting to refurbish the US's image as a «peace broker» in the Middle East. It was basically a maneuver to avoid further isolation, allowing the US to embark on a new tactic for diverting international pressure away from itself and towards the PLO instead.

Thus, the talks were opened at a particular time to serve certain aims. Nonetheless, the US move was mistakenly viewed in diplomatic circles as paving the way for a breakthrough in the political deadlock in the Middle East. Such faulty views were based on

the belief that the US administration is serious about seeking a just solution to the crisis in the area, even though the US Secretary of State at the time, George Schultz, made it clear that talking to the PLO did not mean US recognition of the Palestinian right to an independent state which, in the US view, remained out of the question. The course of the talks served to confirm the US's hostile policy vis-a-vis the Palestinian people. It became obvious that the US was not serious in its intentions. Reviewing the dialogue from the first meeting in 1988 to the fourth and last one in 1989, a set of points emerges which, taken together, spell out the US's real intentions. These points can be summarized as follows:

1. The US administration dealt with the dialogue as a forum for presenting its own point of view concerning how the Middle East conflict should be settled, rather than engaging in dialogue in the real sense of the word. Accordingly, it was not interested in upgrading these talks above the ambassadorial level, but rather kept them in a framework that could not yield positive results. Meanwhile, Washington was pressuring the PLO via the Egyptian regime, using it as a mediator between the US and the PLO.

2. The US stand, as indicated by Ambassador Pelletreau, is that the Shamir plan is the only vehicle for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. To attain progress in the «peace process,» the PLO was called upon to be more «pragmatic,» allegedly in order to convince the Israeli public that it was worthy of being a negotiating partner; otherwise Israel would not deal with the PLO at all. The US insisted on the PLO facing up to this «fact,» maintaining that it would not pursue any other than the Shamir plan.

3. The US's mechanism for achieving a settlement in the Middle

East is direct, bilateral negotiations, but on its own terms. Namely, the US and Israel must essentially hand-pick the Palestinian «negotiators,» refusing anyone named by the PLO. It views an international peace conference, at best, as no more than an introduction to direct negotiations between the Israeli government and selected Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The PLO should take this into consideration and not be an «obstacle» to the so-called peace process.

4. Meetings between Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israeli officials were considered by the US as being important for restoring «order and peace» in the area. Yet, many of these meetings took place because Palestinians were «invited» to them by military government officials, whose invitation was delivered by armed soldiers «requesting» their attendance.

The last demand presented by the US ambassador in the final meeting was that the PLO should agree to the above-mentioned points in order not to jeopardize the dialogue.

The US objectives

From the above, it should be obvious that the Tunis meetings failed to touch on the heart of the matter, namely the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and independence. The fact is that the US cannot accept the Palestinian right to self-determination simply because this would mean an independent Palestinian state - rejected by Washington and Tel Aviv. Since opposition to Palestinian national rights is essential to the US's Middle East policy, why, then, did the administration continue the dialogue with the PLO for 18 months and what were its objectives? The answer is found in Pelletreau's statement after the second round of talks in Tunis, saying that the discussions focused on practical steps which could be taken to ease tension in the occupied territories and pave the way for direct negotiations. His statement confirmed that foremost among the US aims in the dialogue was pressuring the PLO to halt the intifada.

Another major US objective apparent from Pelletreau's statement is the attempt to create an alternative Palestinian leadership in the occupied territories, which the US and Israel could recognize in place of the PLO. This explains the US's insistence on the resumption of meetings between Palestinians in the occupied territories ►