



Middle East Peace Priorities in the US: Seven Perspectives

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Middle East Peace Priorities in the US: Seven Perspectives

Eqbal Ahmad

The PNC resolution, the Stockholm communiqué, Arafat's speech to the UN in Geneva and finally the start of US PLO talks—these constitute a major step forward, but in only one of several parts of the Palestinian-Israeli strategic equation. Zionist leaders have always assumed that to succeed in their goal of colonizing Palestine they must have the support of Western public opinion generally and the paramount Western power particularly. It is in maintaining the support of international public opinion, primarily its linkages to the US, that the recent events have potentially made a big difference. At least they have removed the burden of rejectionism from Palestinian shoulders and shifted that burden to the Israelis. This is, given the history of this struggle, a major advance.

The other issues remain: who controls the land, who controls the water, and who is gaining organizational hegemony in the contested territories. The *intifadah* has asserted that the Palestinians have not been defeated after 20 years of occupation. But it has not asserted clearly the defeat of the Israelis. The outcome on these levels will depend on what the PLO does to insure economic activity, organizational strength and an infrastructure within the occupied territories. For this, some continuation of the relationship between the PLO and Jordan will remain quite crucial. Both have an abiding interest in economically sustaining and demographically consolidating the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Displacement or even significant emigration would be a national disaster for the Palestinians and a dynastic disaster for King Hussein.

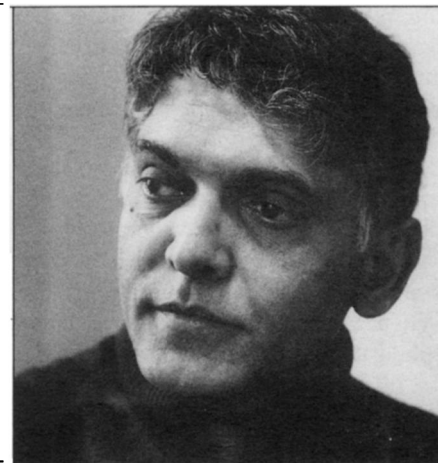
What has stimulated US interest in a settlement of some sort is that they see it as necessary to achieve stability. More than one American official has

privately described the October 1988 events in Algiers as an Algerian *intifadah*. They fear that the *intifadah* may have a demonstration or contagion effect in the rest of the Arab world. The *intifadah* is an expression of Palestinian nationalism, but it is also an expression of Arab nationalism. There is no Arab today, anywhere in the world, who is not proud of being an Arab because of the *intifadah*. So there is a desire in

“The other issues remain: who controls the land, who controls the water, and who is gaining organizational hegemony in the contested territories.”

Eqbal Ahmad is a contributing editor of this magazine, and teaches at Hampshire College in Massachusetts.

I am also concerned that more should be done to prevent increased repression in the West Bank and Gaza. Instead of concentrating on an international conference as the condition for negotiations to begin, it would be better to concentrate on the end of settlements and the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces as a major Palestinian condition for anything further. Finally, the PLO must address the question of Jewish



Jean Mohr

Washington to contain it.

There is also an immediate material interest. In 1990, the Saudis will be back again in the world arms market. The Americans would be very unhappy to lose six to ten billion dollars worth of arms sales to the Europeans—as might happen if the Israeli lobby again campaigned against such sales. For all those reasons I think the Americans are interested in defusing the situation.

They are not interested in a Palestinian state. They will continue the dialogue with the PLO and try to extract more concessions from its leaders. The PLO, like the Arabs generally, has a tendency to confuse tactics with strategy. PLO leaders may respond to pressures to do this and that in order to maintain this dialogue.

immigration, especially the Russian-Jewish immigration, and de-legitimize Israel's claims to it.

We should do more in the area of public education, more than organizing teach-ins at the universities. No spurious media report or newspaper column should go unanswered. I have generally opposed taking out newspaper ads, but we have reached a situation where I think it would be useful. They ought to be provocative, including critiques of journalists and columnists who are doing a horrible job. More importantly, they should concentrate on developments in the occupied territories and progressive Jewish Israeli and Jewish American circles. In other words, we have to work in civil society: teach-ins, op-eds, letters, delegations to Con-

gress—these work more effectively than we often think. ■

Jeanne Butterfield

The *intifadah*, the Palestinian peace initiative and Washington's decision to talk with the PLO are historic developments with significance not only for the peace process in the Middle East but for our peace and solidarity work in the United States as well. Polls now indicate that 70 percent of the American public supports the US-PLO dialogue. During the first year of the *intifadah*, the debate over Palestinian rights and statehood reached trade unions, ballot initiatives, and even the Democratic National Convention.

Several pressing tasks lie ahead.



rights abuses against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The report is now officially part of the Congressional debate on US aid. US law prohibits the granting of aid "to any country the government of which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights." US aid to Israel is clearly illegal under this standard. Perhaps more significantly, US aid provides important leverage in pressuring Israel to negotiate. We must mobilize public opinion in the coming months to push the Bush administration and Congress to apply that pressure. NGOs are calling on Congress to convene public hearings on the human rights situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Such hearings can set the stage for a fuller campaign around the aid question in the coming year.

"Public sentiment in favor of a Palestinian state needs to be expressed in a focussed and dramatic way, so that the administration and Congress can no longer ignore it."

Jeanne Butterfield is National Chairperson of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, and Chair of the North American Coordinating Committee of NGOs on the Question of Palestine.

First, public sentiment in favor of a Palestinian state needs to be expressed in a focussed and dramatic way, so that the administration and Congress can no longer ignore it. To this end, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which collaborate with the United Nations on the question of Palestine have taken steps to launch a major, national petition campaign entitled "Peace for Palestine and Israel in 1989." The campaign will culminate in presentations of signatures to the White House and Capitol Hill next November, the anniversary of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, along with media ads and visits to Congress.

Secondly, the State Department's 1989 human rights report has for the first time highlighted Israeli human

Finally, we need to target Israeli policy as never before. Now that the PLO has made important commitments and concessions, Edward Said's question is particularly apt: "Why is Israel not asked whether it is willing to coexist with a Palestinian state, or negotiate, or accept 242, or renounce violence, or recognize the PLO, or accept demilitarization, or allay Palestinian fears, or stop killing civilians, or end the occupation, or answer any questions at all?" We must pose precisely these questions to the Israeli government and its supporters in the US.

It is time to step up our own dialogue with our government, to make our voices heard, to ensure that the first tentative gestures toward peace become a bold and decisive initiative. ■

Noam Chomsky

To be properly understood, recent US diplomatic moves in the Middle East should be placed in historical context.

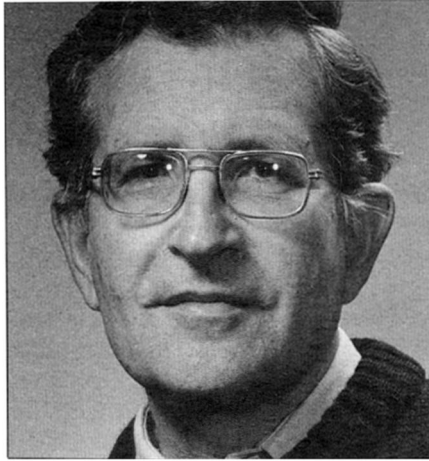
In February 1971, Egypt's Anwar Sadat offered Israel a peace treaty in accord with official US policy, offering nothing to the Palestinians. Israel rejected it with US backing, based on the idea of a powerful Israel as a "strategic asset" in the region and as a mercenary state elsewhere.

Unexpected Egyptian and Syrian success in the October 1973 war led to a policy reassessment culminating in the Camp David agreements. Their effect was to exclude Egypt, the major Arab power, from the conflict so that Israel, with expanding US support, would be "free to sustain military operations against the PLO in Lebanon as well as settlement activity on the West Bank," in the words of Israeli strategic analyst Avner Yaniv. Sadat could now be presented as a "man of peace." His 1971 offer, by contrast, disappeared from history, because the US rejected it.

Israel's failures in Lebanon also led to a US reassessment of its policy of support for Israeli aggression in the region. Washington still assumed, though, that Israel could control the occupied territories by repression and violence. The *intifadah* has challenged this assumption. US analysts can see as well as Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld that "what used to be one of the world's finest fighting forces is rapidly degenerating into a fourth-class police organization."

States respond to the efficacy of force: humanitarian sentiments can be invoked as needed to disguise policy choices made on other grounds. With Israel's ability to serve as a strategic asset in doubt, Washington is reassessing its position, with articulate opinion again following along.

There has long been general agreement on how the Arab-Israeli conflict might be settled. The basic terms were expressed in a UN Security Council resolution of January 1976 calling for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with "appropriate arrangements . . . to guarantee . . . the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political indepen-



“The US reverted to a standard diplomatic maneuver: claim that the adversary has capitulated to your demands and count on the media to adopt the official version of reality.”

Noam Chomsky is a contributing editor of this magazine and teaches linguistics at MIT. For a more extensive consideration of these questions, see “The Trollope Ploy,” in Z magazine. (March 1989).

dence of all states in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries”—the crucial wording of UN 242. The resolution was introduced by Egypt, Jordan and Syria, and “prepared” by the PLO, according to Israel. It was vetoed by the US.

Since that time, there have been numerous proposals by the PLO and major Arab states calling for a political settlement in similar terms. Arafat has repeatedly called for negotiations with Israel leading to mutual recognition in the framework of UN 242, extended to include the Palestinians. Israel and the US have barred all such moves, while the unacceptable proposals have been removed from the historical record.

By the end of 1988, it was becoming difficult to evade the facts. At a press conference on December 14, Arafat repeated the familiar positions, which had been clearly articulated by the PNC in November. In a last-ditch effort to block a political settlement, the US reverted to a standard diplomatic maneuver: claim that the adversary has capitulated to your demands and count on the media to adopt the official version of reality; then insist that the adversary keep to promises invented for him—in this case, abandonment of all Palestinian rights. And so the press applauded Washington’s “diplomatic coup” in forcing the evasive Arafat to succumb by repeating the magic words.

This was the opposite of the truth, as a moment’s inquiry reveals. At the press conference, Arafat repeated his acceptance of UN 242 with the usual “qualification” that it must be extended to include a Palestinian state. He refused

to accept Israel’s abstract “right to exist.” And the PLO made clear that it would not forego the right to struggle for self-determination.

The sole effect of the US move in December is that Washington extended its diplomatic options by asserting falsely that the PLO had accepted its demands. It can now use this fabrication as a weapon, if needed, against the Palestinians. The same device, with the same media support, enabled the US to undermine the Vietnam peace treaty of January 1973 and the Esquipulas Accords signed by the five Central American presidents in August 1987, to mention two relevant examples.

As in these cases, however, there are factors that even a superpower cannot control. The *intifadah* continues, with remarkable courage and determination. US public opinion might become a force that must be weighed in the balance. Every effort will be made to construct a version of reality that serves the needs of state power, but it remains possible to resist. ■

Denis F. Doyon

We should not be complacent now that the US government is talking to the PLO. After all, a “substantive dialogue” cannot alone bring about a peace settlement. What’s needed are substantive peace negotiations, involving all parties to the conflict. The task before us, then, is to push US policy further in the somewhat encouraging direction it has lately taken, to bring the US into the international consensus on the frame-

work for negotiations and the principles for a just and lasting settlement.

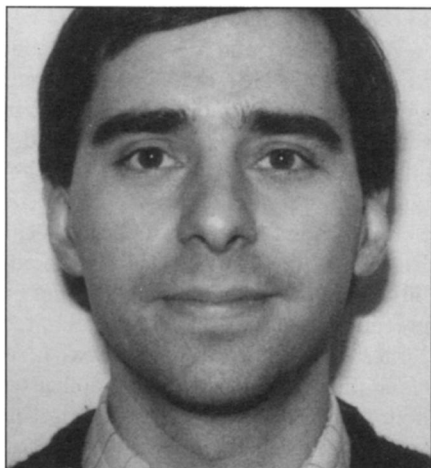
Organizations addressing Middle East issues in the US can help build public support and political pressure for such changes in US policy. Over the past few years, a number of these groups have begun to share information and plan strategy. A “Middle East peace movement” has emerged, including Arab-American and Jewish-American organizations, peace and human rights groups and religious denominations. The points of unity for this movement have become quite clear: while maintaining its support for the existence and security of Israel, the US government should recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, encourage a negotiated settlement between Israel and the PLO, and support a “two-state solution” to the conflict.

Despite this political unity, the various Middle East peace groups use very different strategies, in part because the groups themselves are so different. Some are Palestinian solidarity groups, while others support the Israeli peace movement; some focus on immediate human rights issues, and others on diplomatic maneuvers. There is no simple political demand, no common strategy. We have no functional equivalent of “No Contra Aid,” no single objective that is at once central to the issue, easily grasped and politically winnable.

Until December 15, 1988, “Talk to the PLO!” was an effective common demand. Now that the diplomatic dialogue has begun, a new organizing focus must be developed. Otherwise, the tremendous growth in public interest and participation since the beginning of the *intifadah* will be dispersed among competing strategies, and divisions so recently bridged will reemerge.

A new call might be for “Middle East Peace Talks Now!” A broadly-based campaign seeking to change US policy toward peace negotiations could be an effective rallying point for the Middle East peace movement, and could help push the US government into taking the next essential step. Such a campaign would make clear at least four points. The United States should:

- Work with the United Nations, the Soviet Union, European states and oth-



“A ‘substantive dialogue’ cannot alone bring about a peace settlement. What’s needed are substantive peace negotiations, involving all parties to the conflict.”

Denis F. Doyon is coordinator of the Middle East Peace Education Program of the American Friends Service Committee.

ers to bring about negotiations under international auspices.

- Use its “special relationship” with Israel to urge political leaders there to participate in these negotiations.
- Accept the participation of the PLO (or the provisional government of Palestine) in peace negotiations.
- Accept the participation of all relevant Arab countries in the peace process.

All segments of the Middle East peace movement could stand behind these demands. They unite those concerned about the US-Israeli relationship with those addressing the US-Palestinian relationship within a framework that keeps the attention focused on US policy. They address the central issue—a negotiated settlement—in a way that can be easily understood. And it is not unreasonable to think that we could win. ■

Deena Hurwitz

Political opportunity is rarely made-to-order for progressives, but in the case of the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the series of events beginning last November with the PLO peace initiative and leading most recently to the US State Department’s Human Rights Report are almost too good to be true. The 17 months of the *intifadah* have indeed produced real political pressure on the United States, Israel and the PLO.

A lesson of the *intifadah* is the power of popular movements to change public opinion and even government policy.

The new situation affords us great opportunities. We have scored at least one significant victory: US recognition of the PLO. But we can’t afford to be idealistic. Riyadh Mansour, deputy of the UN Palestine “embassy,” put it well. “Before, we were illegitimate enemies,” he said. “Now we are legitimate enemies. Things are actually tighter under Bush, as we are forced to function within the negotiator mold, and being pressured to stop the *intifadah* as proof of our good intentions.”

Our priorities remain the same: ending the occupation; recognition of the Palestinians’ right to national self-determination; and an international peace process involving all parties to the conflict. Now the *intifadah*, Israel’s “iron fist” response and the PLO’s peace initiatives make it possible to mobilize public opinion and focus Congressional strategies.

Using the State Department’s surprisingly fair Human Rights/Country

Conditions Report, we can draw attention to the untenable conditions of the Israeli occupation. An important lobbying effort is underway to get key Congressional subcommittees to hold open hearings and to see that important testimony gets heard there.

We still have to work on legitimizing the PLO. It is vital that we continue to expose the American people to PLO diplomats and spokespeople, correctly interpret their peace initiatives and political processes, and vigilantly counter anti-Arab racism. Support for normal relations and meetings between Israelis and PLO representatives goes a long way to challenge both legal and psychological barriers.

A priority now is to insist upon an international conference involving all parties to the conflict as the only viable peace formula. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has no intention of involving the PLO, and we can explain why this dooms his proposals.

Ultimately, we must generate a thorough reassessment of US foreign policy in the region. The same three conditions put to the PLO must be answered by both the US and Israel: Do these governments recognize the national rights of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples? Do they accept UN resolutions 242 and 338. Do they agree to renounce terror?

Examining US priorities in the region inevitably raises the controversial issue of economic and military aid to Israel. Minimally, Israel must be held to the same standards and certification processes set for other aid recipients.



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Deena Hurwitz is Middle East Program Staff of the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz and Co-Chair of New Jewish Agenda’s National Middle East Task Force.

This means a thorough review of the civil, political and human rights of its citizens—and, by virtue of the Geneva Conventions, of those citizens under Israeli occupation as well. Representative David Obey and Senator Patrick Leahy have already indicated that human rights might factor into future foreign aid decisions (although Leahy subsequently modified his remarks).

But the aid question runs the risk of polarizing our limited forces. We can be more effective if we find a strategy that unites us while addressing the essential issues. In framing the problem, an important question is whether aid restrictions are intended to be punitive or re-directive. The debate usually focuses on *levels* of aid. A more constructive strategy should have us pressing Congress to evaluate what would best serve Israel's real security, forcing into the open the question which Israel holds as its bottom line. Constructive aid to Israel would not underwrite its occupation, settlements or militarization—all of which threaten not only the peace process but Israeli domestic stability and ultimate security as well. Economic and social justice programs for both Israel and the new state of Palestine would ensure a genuine regional security.

We have benefitted greatly from the atmosphere of optimism, but it essentially means more work than ever before. Our task now lies in working closely together to mobilize and nurture the growing national consensus, so that politicians and policy makers get the clear and consistent message that we will settle for nothing less than a just peace for both Palestine and Israel. ■

Sheila Ryan

The decision of the Reagan administration, in its final days, to “open a dialogue” with the PLO was a significant but, I fear, insubstantial change in US policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

It is significant because it signals recognition of a thick crack along the wall which Henry Kissinger had erected in the early 1970s to isolate the PLO. The plausibility of the premises underlying that policy have been visibly under-

mined by the *intifadah* and the Palestinian political initiatives taken at Algiers. The pro-Israel lobby in the US and its friends in Congress caused the whole wall to totter by attempting to extend it to absurd heights—by the so-called Anti-Terrorism Law which closed the Palestine Information Office in Washington and by the successful petition to Secretary of State Shultz to deny a visa to Yasir Arafat.

These efforts to isolate the PLO had the paradoxical effect of isolating Washington internationally. The decision to make an overture toward the PLO was largely an effort at damage control, to pull the US back from an untenable international position.

A substantial, constructive change in US policy must include a shift from support of the occupation to support for a Palestinian state alongside Israel. If this is to be more than a change in rhetoric, it means serious pressure on Israeli decision makers. No verbal pressure can be convincing while present aid levels are held sacrosanct. It is necessary to drive a wedge between the US and Israeli governments.

The potential for such a wedge must alarm US strategists. It would open fissures in the Israeli polity, “destabilizing” the arrangements of the political elite. It is not at all clear that a successful “peace process” would leave in place an Israeli government politically, financially and militarily dependent on the United States. Such a change could shake US strategic structures in the region, which accounts for four-fifths of US security assistance and arms sales. The Bush administration is not likely

to risk such a change.

We need to build a broad movement to push for such a shift—a movement similar to those which played a part in securing US withdrawal from Indochina, an end to aid to the Pinochet government, sanctions against the South African regime and limits on the Reagan administration's ability to intervene in Central America. At least 94 percent of the population of the United States is neither Arab nor Jewish. A clear plurality, according to poll after poll, favor establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, alongside Israel. Public opinion is much closer to the position of Jesse Jackson—who was viciously attacked for his allegedly “marginal” position on the issue—than to that of George Bush.

The problem is that the opinion of this plurality is a passive sentiment. It is not mobilized, so it cannot recognize its own strength. It is not organized, so elected officials need not respect it. The formula to activate this favorable opinion and expand it from a plurality to a large majority is not a secret one. The route is already well-trod: from church basement to campus lecture hall, from polling place to congressional office, from occasional demonstrations to the pursuit of media opportunities, gaining and retaining the leading edge in intellectual discourse. The crucial step now is to identify how to effect change on Middle East policy through the democratic process. ■

James Zogby

The US decision to open a “substantive



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Sheila Ryan is a contributing editor of this magazine and coordinator of the Middle East Peace Network in New York City.

James Paul

dialogue” with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is not in itself a fundamental change in US policy towards the Middle East. The State Department has gone to great lengths to emphasize that the dialogue does not imply recognition of the PLO, nor of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinians. Rather, what we are seeing is Washington, in response to mounting international and domestic pressure, making certain accommodations to changing political realities.

Yet even as an “accommodation” the US move should not be dismissed, for it is an opening that we can use to achieve real change. The dialogue is stirring internal Israeli debate. It is accelerating the effort among European states to convene an international peace conference. And, by more formally acknowledging the role of the PLO, the US adds to the legitimization of that organization in the US. The dialogue also reinforces the Soviet drive to extend *glasnost* to include the resolution of regional conflicts. Finally, it lends greater legitimacy to our work here in the United States, increasing support for Palestinian rights while at the same time deepening the debate within the American Jewish community over Israeli policy.

So while there is no fundamental change in policy, these US gestures and



“Rather than allow the other side to create the ‘terms of debate,’ we must move into the public arena and define forthrightly such terms as ‘substantive dialogue’ and ‘terrorism.’”

James Zogby is executive director of the Arab-American Institute in Washington, DC.

accommodations—themselves the result of pressures from Europe, the Soviet Union and not least from the uprising itself—in turn strengthen and reinforce those same pressures.

To make the most of this new opening, we need to popularize the US-Palestinian dialogue through citizen action. This means broadening the support base here in the US for those international and regional pro-peace, pro-human rights forces that do support a change in US policy.

We must institutionalize this opening and thereby make it more difficult for the administration to retreat from this step. We should demand visas for PLO representatives to visit the US while at the same time making better

use of the PLO representatives and PNC members who are here and able to travel. Meetings with these PLO representatives should be organized nationwide with religious leaders, union leaders, leaders from ethnic constituencies, academics and peace activists.

At the same time, we should anticipate the campaign by the opponents of the “dialogue” by pressing for a clear definition of terms. What will be the substance of the US discussion with the PLO? Rather than allow the other side to create the “terms of debate,” we must move into the public arena and define forthrightly such terms as “substantive dialogue” and “terrorism.” ■

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