

OPENING STATEMENT

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Precipitous decision to suspend U.S. - PLO dialogue would undoubtedly affect the whole gambit of Arab - U.S. relations. This dialogue serves a useful and constructive purpose and its need must be presumed if any serious peace process is to continue. If any action by a fringe group, however distasteful and isolated, becomes a pretext to cut off the dialogue this means that commitment to it was flimsy and made grudgingly to begin with.

If the act of a military landing is considered a provocation to Israel then at least equal consideration by the U.S. should be given to the pattern of more violent and persistent provocative acts and policies undertaken by Israel against the Palestinians. To jump on the PLO for a single act - unauthorized and strongly criticized by the PLO leadership - must be counterpoised with the sustained violations on a daily basis inflicted by Israel on the Palestinians in the occupied territories for the past 23 years and heightened during the past 30 months.

The commitment by the PLO to the dialogue was a genuine undertaking. It involved a deliberate curtailment of the Palestinian collective memory and an accommodation that envisaged the recognition of Israel's right to exist. Where was the reward for this historical act of reconciliation? More pain, more humiliation, more dispossession, more houses blown, more deportees, more prisoners, more children maimed and more settlements.

The accommodation by the PLO as manifested by the Palestine National Council Resolution of November 15, 1988 and further amplified by President Arafat in Geneva in December 1988 was met by an Israel intent on de-legitimizing the PLO, deliberately contemptuous of Palestinian rights, insisting on denying them forcibly their right to self-determination besides denying them their internationally recognized human and national rights.

What did the PLO get from the United States? A very reticent dialogue, and a slow moving one at that. PLO office in Washington was closed as being representative of a "terrorist" organization; a promise of "talks" between Israel and 'Palestinians' preferably with no 'links' to the PLO. Even this bogged down by an intransigent Israel whose so-called 'election plan' became a shield for immobilism and a preemptive strike against self-determination.

To top it all the U.S. continued its insistent pursuit of the USSR to enable massive Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel with all the concomitant results on the future of a Palestine national entity and the threat it constitute to Arab national security.

Amidst this frustrating environment Israel felt it had a license to strike at will in order that the Palestinians are reduced to hopelessness. Unchecked in its pursuit, Israel acted as if it has a permanent immunity from any sanction or penalty. The murmurs of growing U.S. protests were deemed to be manageable through a Congress willing to use its clout to paralyze any movement - however slight, towards objectivity or evenhandedness in U.S. policy.

This became evident in the orchestrated outrage against the PLO perceived reluctance to discipline a fringe group and the deafening silence towards the proven and documented outrageous Israel behavior condemned repeatedly by the international community.

It is the asymmetry of treatment that compounds Arab skepticism and Palestinian frustrations with U.S. candidacy for a mediation role or an initiator of a 'peace process'. Yet a deference to the global status and role of the U.S. continues meshed with a nagging anticipation that the U.S. is a persuadable entity. For this reason the clamor for disrupting the dialogue is, by all standards, a reckless advocacy and is intended to dissipate the very small gains and improvement in U.S. - Palestinian understanding and relations. What Israel and its professional supporters fear most is the loss of their monopoly and stronghold on the policy and opinion making processes.

Of course, the situation has been rendered more complicated by the recent veto of the U.S. in the U.N. Security Council and by the equivocal position taken on the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. The complication becomes to us more glaring when the U.S. as well as the rest of the international community is faced with Israel's clear-cut policy and position concerning the occupied

territories and massive Soviet Jewish immigration.

So when Mr. Shamir, two days ago states that "Israel will not dictate to Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union where they can live", the question often asked of us as to whether the Arabs oppose Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel or to the occupied territories becomes moot. The real question which, in our opinion, the U.S. should ask Israel is: Does Israel agree with the U.S. that the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights are occupied territories? The U.S. should in our view get a clear and unambivalent answer. For the last 23 years to this day, Israel refused categorically to admit that it is an occupying power.

We would have thought that in the light of such Israeli annexationist disposition and policy, the least the U.S. could do is to declare the Israeli settlement illegal. This would then mean that Israel would realize that it cannot continue its settlements with impunity. It is only then that the U.S. reassurances that its concern for Jewish immigration is an issue of human rights and not the vehicle with which Greater Israel is realized.

The gravity of the Israeli threat cannot be overlooked and Arab determination to explore all avenues for a peaceful settlement explains our continuous resort to the United Nations to redress genuine grievances and achieve justice. It is when U.S. resolution pertaining Palestinian and Arab rights are dismissed or marginalized or rendered ineffective that peace is jeopardized and its process undermined.

Besides our commitment to peace should not be mistaken for passivity or an abdication from an insistent pursuit of Palestinian and Arab legitimate rights. A mistaken assessment at this crucial juncture can be a prescription for continued instability.