

# Did he or didn't he?

I WON'T keep you in suspense. He didn't; just as he and his spokesmen have been saying. But he did leave things sufficiently ambiguous after a meeting with many Arab-American representatives in Tunis so that at least some were confused and a lot of phones and faxes around the world worked overtime before he finally said no clearly and finally just a few days ago.

What's this about? Chairman Arafat's aborted visit to the US in April to address the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee's annual meeting of course.

The fault this time, though, mainly lies not with the Chairman or his staff. Yasser Arafat, even more than in previous months, has been a very busy man of late and he's getting advice and requests from far and wide. He's indeed trying to run a fledgling State apparatus and needs all the help he can muster. And there's no way he can be responsive to everyone or make even all his friends and supporters happy. This isn't to say there aren't a lot of problems with the administration of the PLO or the PLO's operations in American — but those are subjects for another time. Right now, it's enough to say that the Chairman has enough of very difficult and troubling problems so that his real friends should be very careful not to cause him more.

This time, the Chairman got caught up in inter-American, actually inter-Arab American, rivalries and no doubt he didn't see it coming when he humbly smiled and in very general terms accepted invitations from at least four US organisations during a general meeting in Tunis the week of January 16. It was more an "acceptance" that the invitations were appreciated, maybe a general acceptance in spirit, at best an acceptance that needed serious follow-up in view of the important implications involved.

But the phones and faxes started just minutes afterwards and only ended in recent days with a short Fax to ADC from the Chairman himself saying very simply, "I will not be able to come to your convention" and not even mentioning the issue of whether or not a meeting with Bush or Baker was relevant to this decision.

After the "great" George Shultz "don't come to the UN" visa fiasco, it was natural of course that the world's press would again focus on the idea of Chairman Arafat arriving some day on US shores. So when ADC President Abdeen Jabara told his Washington office that the Chairman was coming and that office rushed to spread the news, world headlines understandably ensued.

Behind it all of course lies the grander, historically important question whether or not the Americans have really changed toward the PLO, toward the issue of Palestinian nationalism, or whether what they are about is more cosmetic than that. Granting Arafat a visit to come to the US in April would be another sign of seriousness,

turning him away, another argument for those who think a different strategy than Arafat's is called for.

Behind the ADC announcement is a multi-year pattern of competition and rivalry among Arab-American organisations, especially former Senator Jim Abourezk's ADC, and Jim Zogby's Arab-American Institute (AAI). For no sooner was ADC finished announcing Arafat's impending American visit to their convention than Zogby's AAI was undermining rival ADC.

There was a time, not that long ago, when Zogby was ADC. After running the Palestine Human Rights Campaign, Zogby worked closely with Abourezk as ADC's Executive Director. But that relationship quite literally blew up in the early 80's and Zogby was out on the street. With the help of the other ADC rival, NAAA, the National Association of Arab Americans, Zogby then built AAI, an organisation whose primary mission has been involvement of Arab-Americans in American politics. With the coming of the Intifada AAI also swung into gear promoting the Palestinian cause.

So the stage set for the past few weeks' confusion over whether or not Chairman Arafat



James Zogby

did or did not accept ADC's invitation.

After checking with usually reliable sources in Tunis, Cairo and Washington, here's what apparently did take place in a bit more detail.

Arab-Americans as a group were invited to Tunis to help the Chairman and the PLO Executive Committee strategise about what to do in the USA now that the Bush-Baker-Eagleburger troika is in power.

I refer to the new US Administration in this way, as noted in a previous column, because when it comes to foreign affairs Larry Eagleburger, along with Brent Scowcroft as head of the National Security Council — two of Henry Kissinger's most trusted confidants — are playing decisive roles, especially relating to Mid-east issues.

This meeting was not planned very well, and indeed some of the participants, including Jim Zogby, didn't know that others thought there was a specific agenda. Anyway, after meetings with some important PLO officials a meeting for everyone with the Chairman was arranged. And it was at this meeting that four organisations, including ADC and AAI, invited the Chairman to the US in future months to speak at upcoming events.

## From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

## Washington

Only ADC it now appears rushed to announce that the Chairman was coming to their convention. Clearly this was done in a competitive way, thinking that any of the other organisations might take this step and wanting to be first. But within days, hours in some cases, reporters were receiving phone calls — no one will specifically identify from whom but I have learned at least some of the calls were made by Zogby — telling them that the Chairman hadn't accepted the invitation, wasn't going to apply for a visa, and the ADC had jumped the gun.

According to ADC spokesman Faris Bouhafa, "the story broke on Tuesday (January 17), and by Wednesday morning I was being told by a friend of mine at a wire service that he had gotten an unsolicited call from someone else at the meeting to let him know that in fact Arafat had never accepted the invitation." But this reporter checked further, according to Bouhafa, and found that others at the meeting said the Chairman had accepted the invitation.

Meanwhile, among the Arab diplomatic community in Washington, rumours were circulating about what the Chairman had done or hadn't done and that there was a lot of competition and jealousy among Arab-American groups. Furthermore, a quick consensus seemed to be growing, possibly stimulated by ADC's competitors and detractors, that the Chairman should only come to the US at a time when he would be received by American officials, not to just talk to an Arab-American group. Clovis Maksoud, Arab League Ambassador in the US, apparently took it upon himself to let the Chairman, and other senior PLO persons know these views.

Events then took a behind-the-scenes course. ADC knew the whole thing was becoming a mess and tried to get confirmation from Tunis though the Chairman was in Europe. According to Bouhafa, though he refuses to give any names, PLO officials confirmed the Chairman's acceptance on the 18th of January but added the following "clarifications":

- 1) The Chairman would not apply for a visa until he had firm assurances it would be granted;
- 2) Neither the Chairman nor others in the PLO would lobby for the granting of a visa to attend the ADC convention;
- 3) ADC should do everything it could to quickly get assurances about the visa; and ADC "has full authority to do so";
- 4) If there are assurances then the Chairman is committed to attending the ADC convention.

On Monday the 23rd ADC officials met with State Department officials specifically to try

to save the situation and get some kind of assurances that a visa would be granted. Now called "a preliminary" meeting by ADC it was a fruitless and unproductive last-minute attempt to salvage a deteriorating situation.

Two days later in the *Washington Post* long-time PLO spokesman Hassan Rahman surprised ADC — for they were given no advance warning by Rahman — that the Chairman had not accepted ADC's invitation and that in fact he would not come to the US unless he would be able to meet either President Bush or Secretary of State Baker. And the next day, Arafat's close adviser Nabeel Shaath was quoted in Cairo saying the Chairman had not accepted the invitation and was not applying for a visa. The same day the very short message from the Chairman came by Fax to ADC simply saying he would not be able to come.

According to Bouhafa speaking two days after the *Washington Post* article, "I got four phone calls yesterday by people who were at the meeting who were outraged by Hassan's characterisation of the meeting." Two of those people were identified as Ambassador Andrew Kilgore at the American Educational Trust (AET) and Abdul Hamid Salem, Editor-in-Chief of Wafa in Washington who was said to be "absolutely livid" about Rahman's characterisations of what has happened.

So April is off with all this tadoo. But lesser tests of the new Administration are ahead in March when *New Outlook* (the small English-language Mapam publication in Tel Aviv) and *Al-Fajr* (the Palestinian Fatah-oriented newspaper in Jerusalem) hold a joint meeting in New York city. Major PLO personalities are supposed to be coming — among them Khaled Al-Hassan, Um Jihad and Nabeel Shaath. And Israeli Knesset members are said to have been invited by *New Outlook*. It's not quite the same, of course, as a visit to the US by Chairman Arafat; but it will be a small test of how the Bush-Baker-Eagleburger troika are going to handle such things. Stay tuned to this newspaper.



James Abourezk's