



US blocking Palestinians from coming to New York

ONE more example of American bad faith in regard to fair dealings with the Palestinians is underway. The Bush administration is blocking most important Palestinian personalities from attending the first conference being jointly co-sponsored by Israelis and Palestinians.

The conference is scheduled to begin next Saturday evening, March 11, at the Columbia University School of International Affairs. It is co-sponsored primarily by *New Outlook* magazine, a small English-language publication in Tel Aviv, and *Al-Fajr*, a small pro-PLO newspaper in Jerusalem. In recent weeks an American Palestinian group headed by Professors Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu Lughod has become involved, as has the Peace Now organisation.

The conference itself is not of any major political importance. Each of the groups involved has for some time been involved in meetings with their counterparts on the other side, though it is of some significance that the Peace Now movements, having split over the issue of the PLO, is becoming more and more assertive. Indeed it was the Palestinians themselves who encouraged the expansion of the sponsorship of the conference.

What is of more significant is that the Bush administration is once more demonstrating that it is following in the footsteps of the Reagan administration in making the Palestinians pay in blood for every small gesture. By blocking participation from major Palestinian personalities, the Americans are once again proving their total lack of balance in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio. And since

From



Washington

this is taking place in the aftermath of a ongoing, unprecedented PLO peace offensive — including the video tape appearance by the PLO's No. 2, Abu Iyad, in Tel Aviv late last month with a major political message of extremely moderate dimensions — the attitude of the Americans is especially unreasonable.

The Palestinians had initially wanted Bassam Abu Sharif to attend the New York conference. But American officials were so discouraging that he did not even apply for a visa. They had also counted on Faisal Hussein from Jerusalem, the pro-PLO figure recently released from an Israeli prison who has become the most prominent personality willing to talk with the Israelis about coexistence among those living in the occupied territories. But the American consulate in Jerusalem has so far refused to grant even Hussein a visa. Hussein hopes may get the visa in London.

The conference organisers are

scrambling to get any major PLO personalities they can. The hope is that Nabeel Sha'ath, one of Chairman Arafat's most senior advisers and one of the primary architects of the PLO's peace offensive, will come. But Sha'ath's visa was withdrawn by the Reagan administration in 1982 after he has been very effective in his emergency representation of the PLO in the US during the 1982 war; and he has not been able to visit the US since.

The organisers are also hoping that Afif Safiyeh, the PLO's ambassador in The Hague will come; and possible Faisal Awaida, the London ambassador. But it remains doubtful visa's will be issued for them either.

Of course there can be no doubt that the American steps are being closely co-ordinated with the Shamir government in Israel which vehemently opposes any dialogue among Israelis and Palestinian nationalists.

If the important PLO personalities are blocked from coming there is some talk of either rescheduling the conference or even changing its location to outside the US. But this is unlikely because the two main groups organising the meeting have their own agendas. *New Outlook*, not having held a major conference in a decade is most eager to conduct more fundraising among American over the years far more concerned with self-promotion than politics.

And among the Palestinians there is considerable tension with one of the main organisers actually cursing and swearing at the very name of Paul Ajlouni, the politically naive publisher of *Al-Fajr* who lives on Long Island and who is said to be unhappy that other Palestinians got involved in a conference he has originally expected to be co-sponsored just by *Al-Fajr* and *New Outlook*.

As things now stand a group of Palestinians not affiliated to the PLO and acceptable to the Americans, and Israelis, is likely to attend the conference. This group include Sari Nusebah, Ziad Abu Ziad, and Hanna Seniora. From the US a number of Palestinian intellectuals and academics are expected, as well as the PLO's UN representative, Zedhi Terzi, and his deputy.

On the Israeli side two small left parties — Ratz (Civil Rights) and Mapam, the party that sponsors *New Outlook* — will be represented by Knesset members who have already participated in many similar meetings in Israel and Europe. Very surprisingly though, even the dovish wing of the Labour will not be represented as Lova Eliav and others have all declined the invitation to attend.

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