

Persons of questionable political judgement represent PLO in Washington. The primary criterion is personal loyalty — everything except loyalty has been forgiven or overlooked. The PLO has only a 'yes-sir' diplomatic cadre, but of course such a system breeds followers rather than leaders, cronies than advocates, persons overly motivated by personal aggrandisement and political survivals rather than the cause itself.

From



Washington

Send senior PLO diplomats

office. These two PLO operatives were the late Dr Isam Sartawi, a heart-surgeon by training who was educated in the US and Dr Sabri Jiryis, a highly regarded intellectual trained in law at Hebrew University, before he had to flee Israel in advance of Israeli agents who were on to him, and begin working openly for the PLO in Beirut.

I remember that particular initiative well for I became friends with both of these gentlemen at that time and tried to help them get established in Washington.

They came close to accomplishing their mission.

But early in the morning hours, around 1 am, of the very day they were to hold a major press conference and announce establishment of a new PLO office in Washington with themselves heading it, Henry Kissinger and the Israelis teamed up and sent the FBI to grab them and order them out of the country.

The ruse used to abort the PLO's plans at the last moment was to accuse both Jiryis and Sartawi of technical visa violations — i.e., not telling the whole truth on their visa applications to enter the US.

Jiryis had been born in Palestine, but he was travelling on a Sudanese passport that said he was born in Khartoum. Sartawi as well as on some kind of diplomatic passport and in a similar situation as are nearly all Palestinians.

But the excuse was enough to derail the establishment of a serious PLO office in Washington with top-flight Palestinian representation: and neither Jiryis or Sartawi were ever again able to enter the US to my knowledge.

With the FBI quite literally pounding on Sartawi's door the Egyptian ambassador, Ashraf Ghorbal, sent his personal limo to the Sheraton Carlton Hotel in downtown Washington to get the PLO emissaries in the early morning hours of that fateful day.

Hours later when Washington had come alive Ghorbal and other Arab ambassadors attempted to intervene and get the initiative to plant senior PLO representatives in Washington back on track. But Kissinger, the Israelis, and the Jewish lobby were adamant. Sartawi and Jiryis had to go. It was one more startling success for the pro-Israeli anti-Palestinian camp.

Unfortunately, it seems in retrospect, the PLO didn't really understand the basic political message of this episode. The attempt to send top people here

— people of stature and personal credibility — was vehemently subverted precisely because it was a very important step, a very needed step. The Zionist lobby, and the pro-Israeli elements in the US government were afraid of the influence representatives like Jiryis and Sartawi might be able to wield if they were here day to day meeting with congressmen and senators and members of the press. Hence, they pulled out all stops to get this plan subverted and to get these people away from American shores.

The magnitude of the counter-attack should have been understood as proof of the importance of the step Chairman Arafat was then taking.

But instead Arafat accepted



Yasser Arafat

what had happened and went on to other concerns, leaving Palestinian representation in the US the province of second and third cadre Palestinians who happened to have American Green Cards (residence permits) or were otherwise "acceptable" to the Americans and the Israelis.

Names aren't important at this point. What is important is to understand how the PLO has in recent years quite literally sent an assortment of loyalists to Washington and paid out millions of dollars with little result.

At the very time when the PLO is in need of maximising the use of every dollar and every chance for effective representation, the people in charge of Palestinian representation have often been counter-productive to the cause.

Moreover, a climate of mistrust, corruption, and political depression has been created because of this situation in which the Palestinian struggle has been officially represented by largely persons of questionable political

judgement.

With significant amounts of money the leadership of Fatah has dished out quite literally millions yearly in the US, the primary criterion is personal loyalty. Everything else, except loyalty it seems, has been forgiven or overlooked.

Beyond that, of-course, the very people who have found themselves rewarded and enriched are those who have been willing to accept whatever political twists and turns come from Arafat's circles without question or dissent — one year military engagement with the Israelis in Lebanon; the next year an alliance with Jordan; the next playing the recognition card with Israel that previously it was said must be held in reserve; today accommodating the Americans and Israelis with political chess-playing in regard to the Shamir-Rabin plan for "elections."

In that sense the PLO already has in place a loyal "yes sir" diplomatic cadre as do so many other Third World countries. But, of course, such a system breeds followers rather than leaders, cronies rather than advocates, persons overly motivated by personal aggrandisement and political survival rather than the cause itself.

And the end result is that here in Washington at the very time the PLO desperately needs the best minds and the best representation is a veritable political wasteland of incompetence.

In short it is a system based on loyalty rather than competence, personal enrichment rather than struggle, internal bickering and backbiting rather than serious political formulations carefully conceived and carried through.

A few examples can give the flavour of the situation. The primary PLO representative in Washington now working out of the Aab League offices after the forced closure of the PLO Information Office — is widely the subject of derision and scorn from many Palestinian themselves. Yet year after year Arafat has keep him in the US even though quite literally many people have come to him urging that this particular person be promptly replaced.

Worse yet, is the man Arafat sent, according to knowledgeable sources, to make things better, he is quite obviously out-of-place in this political capital.

In his years here this person has managed to cause great dissension and bickering among Palestinians in the US and in recent months has managed to spent more than a million dollars promoting a movie about himself and more money corrupting

a formerly independent Palestinian writer to write a book about him.

Still another case is that of a Palestinian woman formerly of the occupied West Bank who has gotten Arafat to give her a sum totalling more than \$10 million in recent years. It hasn't been a total waste; but on the whole the money has been squandered with the woman appointing her children and inlaws to various positions, buying property in a number of countries, and portrayed herself as a great personality in the cause of Palestinian liberation.

Things are not totally bleak, however. In the process of diversifying and setting up competing "Palestinian shops" as they are known here, some serious Palestinian representatives are now available to the press and government officials. Edward Said, with his intellectual credentials at Columbia University, is a special case; as is his colleague Ibrahim Abu-Lughod in Chicago at Northwestern University. Muhammad Hallaj, editor of *Palestine Perspectives*, is another. And so is Khalil Jahshan, who recently left working with Hallaj for the National Association of Arab Americans.

But all of these persons are academics, intellectuals, writers. And the time is quite overdue for senior, sophisticated, high-level, political Palestinian representation here in Washington just as was contemplated back in 1975 at the time the Sartawi-Jiryis initiative was attempted. Moreover, there is an urgent need for a senior personality who can both clean house from what has been and co-ordinate the activities of the various groups that already exist.

Of course, it will be said that the US (and Israel) won't allow this now, just as it was derailed back in 1975.

The answer to such thinking should be that if the Americans want a serious dialogue with the Palestinians then they have to at least accept gestures of evenhandedness and reasonableness.

If there can be representation and meetings in Washington. And if the Bush administration can't (or won't) even manage this small step after the Intifada's success and the PLO's acceptance of Israel, then that should be sign enough there's no real chance the Bush administration can play a significant role in bringing real peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

In such a case the PLO should reassess the entire situation accordingly.