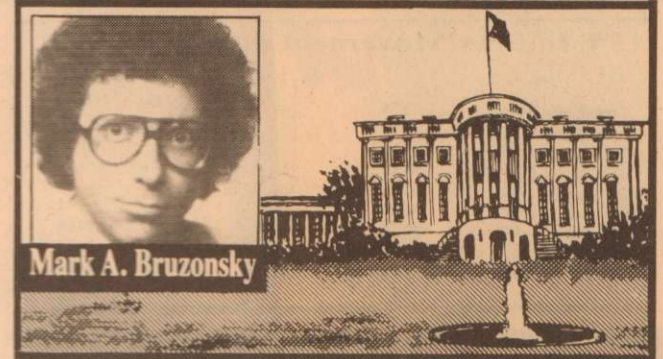


Out of growing disillusionment with the policies of Shamir-Peres government and increasing frustration, the groups of Israelis began discussing the need that Israel must negotiate directly with the PLO.

From



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The impending march to the PLO

A FEW weeks ago, while Peace Now along with many other Israeli peace groups were engaged in the "1990: Time for Peace" demonstrations that took place on Friday and Saturday just before the New Year, another group of Israelis began planning another event.

Out of growing disillusionment with the policies of the Shamir-Peres government, as well as increasing frustration with the small steps being taken by the mainstream peace groups including Peace Now, this group of Israelis began discussing the need to dramatically demonstrate that Israel must negotiate directly with the PLO.

Wanting to take some public steps to help bring this about, this group of Israelis who are primarily connected with the Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz movement, began discussing what kind of grassroots efforts might be undertaken. The initial discussions also focused on taking some step that would call into question the law prohibiting talks with the PLO.

At first it was just an idea that originated with these kibbutz activists many of whom are themselves associated with the small Mapam political party which still has a few seats in the Knesset.

Mapam is a socialist Zionist party which has always been to the progressive left of the Labour party and which historically advocated a binational; Jewish/Arab state back in the mid 1940s. Previously some persons associated with Mapam, including Latif Dori, have been prosecuted for having contact with the PLO; but this case has still to be reviewed by the high court.

The basic idea to take some kind of new symbolic action began to spread quickly. And then when a meeting was called a few weeks ago to begin serious planning the focus quickly became a peace march of a large number of private Israelis to Egypt to talk with the PLO. Furthermore, to the surprise of the initial organisers, more than 500 persons turned up at the meeting — far more than had been expected.

Interestingly, Ezer Weizmann

addressed the meeting, though he did not commit himself to endorsing such a march or participating in it. It is unknown, though, if Weizmann may have been one of the channels for getting the PLO's quick enthusiasm for this idea. According to some of the organisers the PLO was indirectly contacted in a number of ways and everyone including Yasser Arafat himself seems enthusiastic, which is hardly surprising.

Now the specific plan that is taking shape is for as many as a thousand Israelis to take a three-day trip to Egypt, as early as a few weeks from now, for a kind of international conference which will include the PLO.

Of course, it can't really be a march — the distances are too great. So it might actually be something of a caravan of some 20 or more buses.

As this is being written in the early days of January, some of the organisers are backing up a bit, no longer sure that they want to actually break the Israeli law prohibiting talks with persons in the PLO.

Rather, some of the organisers are looking for ways to accomplish their goal without breaking the law, arguing that can have a significant impact on Israeli public opinion if they both go to Cairo for a conference that includes the PLO while staying within the actual letter of the law.

Thus the main way under discussion for essentially getting around the Israeli law is by having various delegations at such a conference and thus call-

ing it not an Israeli-PLO meeting or dialogue but rather an international conference.

Whether this means that all or some of the Israelis will not talk directly or shake hands with PLO persons is unclear at this point. Moreover, a large gathering of this kind tends to have spontaneous dynamics that are very difficult to totally choreograph in advance with any cer-

The meeting, addressed by Ezer Weizmann, also focused the law prohibiting talks with the PLO.



tainty.

Whatever the details, it now appears that take a "march to Egypt" will take place and the organisers believe that everyone will understand that what's really involved in having this unprecedented group of Israeli citizens coming to Cairo in this way is more pressure from within Israeli society for direct talks with the PLO and support for a Palestinian state — the long-discussed "two-state solution."

Whether this will mean that all or many of the Israelis will not actually talk or shake hands with PLO persons, remains to be decided. Just how to control such a large group of diverse Israelis from different political persuasions is another matter under discussion. It seems pretty clear that an international gathering of this kind will have its own internal dynamics, whatever specific decisions are taken in advance.

But more important at this

point, say the organisers, is that they want to get the Israeli grassroots involved. And thus they are making efforts to contact various Israeli peace groups, including Peace Now, to see just how many people they can get to participate and what symbolic and actual boundaries of action and gesture should be decided upon.

The event itself will not carry the sponsorship of any particular group; but rather the desire is to have it viewed as a march by many Israelis coming from different peace groups and different political affiliations.

As just noted, the organisers have already made indirect contact with Yasser Arafat through a variety of intermediaries, including Faisal Hussein, the best-known Palestinian leader of the occupied Palestinian. And the general word has been that the PLO is quite enthusiastic about the idea and they can count on President Arafat himself appearing in Cairo to greet them.

Still, at least some of the organisers are worried that how can they be sure the PLO will keep to whatever arrangements are agreed upon, can they really count on the Chairman to come, and can they count on him to "say something new" so that Israeli public opinion will swing further behind efforts of this kind.

As the coalition of groups coming together grows, all these considerations become more open for ongoing debate of course. And as days and weeks go by, of course, there's more and more opportunity for the



Arafat — enthusiastic!

Israeli government to infiltrate the planning group and turn this draft event into another non-happening as has happened before.

For instance, some remember here the fate of the peace ship that was to have sailed from a European port to Haifa but which the Israelis somehow managed to undermine so that it never did sail. The PLO has spent a lot of money bringing people from throughout the world for this event — yet in the end the Israeli government managed to sabotage it.

But there is still one major hurdle — and a very unexpected one for many of the Israelis. Though the organisers have been in touch for some time now with the Egyptian government through Ambassador Bassiouni in Tel Aviv, it seems the Egyptians may not be as enthusiastic about this march as everyone else seems to be.

It's not that the Egyptians say "no", it's only that they don't say "yes". And of course without substantial Egyptian co-operation something of this kind becomes all but impossible in Cairo.

It could be that both the Israeli and American governments are applying behind-the-scenes pressure on the Egyptians not to approve and facilitate this demonstration. The argument would be that the Egyptians should hold back while plans are underway for the Egyptian-Israeli-American talks in Washington. Anyway, it certainly wouldn't be the first time something of this kind has occurred with diplomats saying one thing in front of the camera, another behind closed doors.

Still, it's hard to believe that Hosni Mubarak and his key assistant Osama El-Baz will in the end stand in the way and prevent this potentially important political event from taking place.

Whatever, we should know within a few days or weeks because it's not likely the Israeli organisers are going to drop the idea, unless they are forced to. Yet because of the Egyptian hesitations some discussions are already beginning about alternative venues — such as Cyprus or even a boat at sea.