

# Washington and the PLO

by

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**R**elations between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the United States now recall the "ping-pong diplomacy" which ushered in a new era in American-Chinese relations. At a very informal level there is an embryonic relationship that could grow into some form of American recognition in the coming months.

Intense pressure for US acceptance of Palestinian national rights is coming from the entire Arab world. There is also a growing awareness in Washington that little real progress can be made towards an overall Middle East settlement without bringing the Palestinians into the process. Meanwhile the PLO itself is facing unprecedented Arab insistence that it clearly indicate its willingness to accept a West Bank and Gaza Palestinian state in co-existence with Israel.

Recent meetings between PLO representatives and Israeli "doves" in Paris, and with American Jewish leaders in New York, Washington and Chicago, constitute one of a growing number of public manifestations of the unfolding drama. Most significant of all was the November mission in the US of two PLO representatives to work out a process of US acceptance of PLO participation in this year's political process. Press reports in late November regarding a PLO information office in Washington largely missed the importance and symbolism of what is unfolding and why.

These recent events have deep roots in the diplomacy of the past few years. Further, they are a direct result of the October 17-18 Riyadh Arab summit conference and the Cairo summit which followed. The diplomatic

process appears to be circuitously leading first to public PLO moderation toward Israel, then to US recognition of the Palestinians' right to self-determination, and finally to a resumed Geneva Conference where the PLO will be represented. Down the road is a possible agreement for an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The US, of course, remains the pivotal player in this international intrigue. The Riyadh summit was a restatement by the Arabs that only the Americans can convince the Israelis to accept the PLO as a negotiating partner at Geneva. Israel's unyielding reluctance so far to do so is not really determined by the terrorist stamp with which the PLO has been branded. It is the Israeli realization that such a step means *de facto* acquiescence in the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories to be evacuated that is making the issue of the PLO at Geneva so traumatic.

Though there are increasingly outspoken voices in Israel urging negotiations even with the PLO — most recently including Moshe Dayan and right-wing Reserve General Arik Sharon — it is really up to the US to break the stalemate.

Through various intermediaries, the US has now had contact with the PLO in Lebanon since mid-1975. But the State Department continues to deny any "substantive contacts." Officially, American policy is that only when the PLO recognizes Israel's sovereignty and agrees to negotiate on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338 will the US reconsider its position.

But the real US position is already one of gradual *de facto* recognition

and the indirect discussions in Washington during November were proof of this. Since Riyadh the matter has become more one of timing than policy. Carter's assumption of the Presidency is unlikely to alter such basic political strategy. For as State Department spokesman Harold Saunders indicated more than a year ago before a Congressional subcommittee, "The Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the heart of the conflict."

At that time, Saunders went on to note that since "the PLO does not accept the United Nations Security Council resolutions, does not recognize the existence of Israel, and has not stated its readiness to negotiate peace with Israel . . . , we do not at this point have the framework for a negotiation involving the PLO." This language was an open invitation to the process which is now unfolding and which has already resulted in contacts between US government officials at the highest levels and persons speaking to and sometimes for the PLO.

Acceptance of Palestinian national rights and of the PLO as the party representing Palestinian interests is something the Carter Administration may not be able to avoid if the PLO follows through with the plan Yassir Arafat accepted at Riyadh to have the 153-member Palestine National Council (PNC) modify previous positions when it meets in Cairo.

Faced with the impending political confrontation between moderates and rejectionists at this approaching PNC meeting — the first since June 1974 — Arafat authorized the two PLO representatives, Sabri Jiryis and Issam Sartawi, to meet with Israeli doves in Europe. In this way an indirect dialogue has been taking place for the past few months between Prime Minister Rabin and the PLO. Though Rabin has felt it necessary to criticize these meetings in public, he has met with a number of the doves — who include Knesset member Meir Pa'il of the Moked party, Reserve General Mattityahu Peled (who is the closest of the group to Rabin), journalist and politician Uri Avneri, and former director-general of the Ministry of Finance Ya'acov Arnon.

Rabin is consequently well aware of developments and of the US-PLO courtship. Indeed, he began preparing Israelis as far back as May of last year, when he publicly discussed the possible "erosion of the US position on the Palestinian issue in the Geneva peace talks."

After these meetings with Israelis, Jiryis and Sartawi travelled to the US. Here they had a series of unprecedented exchanges with American Jews, some highly placed in American Jewish organizations. More importantly, through two intermediaries they were directly in touch with top officials at the State Department. Secretary Kissinger himself appointed a retired former diplomat who now heads a Washington institute to act as a liaison with Arafat's emissaries. Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Alfred Atherton has also been involved on a daily basis for weeks and has had numerous meetings with an American university professor who has been advising the PLO.

The PLO would like to open an office in Washington. What the US Government has apparently been waiting for, beyond the assumption of power by Carter, are the political gestures expected from the PNC meeting. Then the US would have the requisite "excuse" to show a somewhat more open attitude toward the PLO.

What now appears most likely in 1977 is a resumption of the Geneva Conference with PLO participation within a single Arab delegation. Farouk Kaddoumi, head of the PLO's political department, recently indicated that once there is US recognition the PLO would consider such an approach. It is a formula, of course, designed to allow face-saving by the Israelis, who have insisted for years they would never allow the PLO to represent the Palestinians at Geneva.

Kaddoumi's clear indication, for the first time, that "We accept establishment of a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip" and that "This means that we stop armed struggle when we have the state", has changed the entire complexion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If the PNC acts as expected, the US has given assurances it will find some



At the centre of an international storm: Abu Daoud in Algiers, January 1977

way to follow. Israel will then have no choice but to attend the resumed Geneva conference with the PLO in attendance. Recent Israeli statements about Geneva can be taken as preparation for such an eventuality. And though the Israeli government continues to insist that the Arab and Palestinian moves are little but sophisticated propaganda ploys, various personalities and groups of differing political persuasions are no longer so sure.

All of this manoeuvring must be seen in the light of the Riyadh Summit. Riyadh was the moment of truth for the Arabs from which all subsequent events have been flowing. It was a triumph for pro-American moderates, especially President Anwar el Sadat of Egypt and King Khalid of Saudi Arabia. The Cairo-Riyadh-Washington axis -- so painstakingly constructed during the post-Yom Kippur War period by Henry Kissinger -- was re-activated and extended to embrace Damascus when, at the insistence of the Saudis, President Hafez el Assad of Syria agreed to a long overdue reconciliation with Egyptian President Sadat.

Assad also had to face PLO leader Yassir Arafat in Riyadh for the first time since the Syrian thrust against

the Palestinians in Lebanon. The Arabs -- urged by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait -- reaffirmed Arafat's leadership, which Assad has tried to undermine, but at a price. In no uncertain terms the PLO leader was instructed that the Palestinians had to become partners in a united peace effort.

As a result of Riyadh, the moderates within the PLO found it imperative to begin taking the bold moves of the past months and to make preparations for the National Council session. It is possible that the PNC will be asked formally to amend the Palestine National Charter, ideologically opening the door for the first time to more than pragmatic coexistence with Israel.

During 1976 the Arab League promoted the PLO to be its 21st member. This was a move designed to encourage the PLO to opt finally to become a government-in-exile. Such a status would then allow the PLO to make a more forceful claim to a role at Geneva and a relationship with the US. It is just such a move, coupled to a public gesture of willingness to coexist with Israel, that the US has sought. If the PNC can now make it, 1977 could see a serious effort to shape the future of the Middle East.