



Sada Alwatan

THE ARABIC NEWSPAPER IN NORTH AMERICA

Established September 7, 1984

Serving the entire Arab American community

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PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY FIRST PUBLISHING CORPORATION
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COMMENTARY

How many times can the PLO Chairman threaten to resign?

By Mark Bruzonsky
Special to Sada Alwatan

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A few hours in Paris and a few days in Tunis can do much for one's spirits if the subject is Israeli-Palestinian peace and if one's normal surroundings are the American capital.

Political life in Washington tends to be oppressive, sometimes fanciful on this subject with small gestures assuming mythical proportions (for instance, "talking" to the PLO) and major developments unduly minimized (Henry Kissinger's penetration of the Bush Administration with Eagleburger, Scowcroft, Rodman, et. al., and his incessant maneuvering to be appointed as special negotiator in the Middle East).

The Paris roundtable on Middle East peace, held in one of the less ornate rooms of the French Senate on January 13th, was an extraordinary event. Major French personalities — including former Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson — boldly focused on the urgency of an international peace conference, Israeli-PLO negotiations, and finally bringing to pass the two-state solution. Four Israeli Knesset members and a top PLO official sat in the front row, participated in the program, often talked positively of each other, but then because of Israeli law didn't actually talk to each other. Cameras were everywhere.

The Israelis who came represented the extreme left-wing of Labor (the long-time advocate of a Palestinian State Loya Eliav) along with Mapam and Ratz (Civil Rights) plus a representative of "Peace Now." The Palestinians sent at the top Nabeel Shaath, Arafat's senior adviser and one of the PLO's most outgoing and capable personalities. At first the Israelis complained a bit that the better-known Hani al-Hassan wasn't there, as they had been led to expect, but after Shaath spoke it seemed everyone realized he was the right man for the job; besides the Israelis weren't willing to talk to the PLO representatives anyway.

Indeed, one of the few sad results of the Paris roundtable was that by acting as they did the Knesset members have further established the precedent that the law barring Israeli-PLO meetings applies to them, even with their Knesset immunity. This is a setback and the Israelis should have in one way or another challenged rather than accepted the law; especially so since behind-the-scenes, major Israeli personalities are meeting with senior PLO persons.

Europe is coming alive about Arab-Israeli peace — thanks to the ongoing evolution of PLO diplomacy and continuing American obstinacy. Credit the continuing intifadeh above all, of course. Even Maggie Thatcher's Great Britain is showing unprecedented friendliness to the PLO in recent weeks, as I discovered when I ran into the PLO's Ambassador in London, a thoughtful man whom the Israelis expelled from Jerusalem shortly after the '67 war.

More than 50 members of Parliament from European countries or the European Parliament were at the Paris roundtable along with a leading adviser to President Mitterand and an important assistant to British shadow Foreign Secretary Kaufman. The tenor of things was to put the onus on Israel, of course. So much so that Shulamit Aloni, the Ratz leader, took to the podium at the end of the morning session to complain that the tone was sometimes so anti-Israeli that she had thought of walking out.

Indeed, it appears the Palestinians are counting on Europe, along with Gorbachev's new Soviet Union, to somehow push the Bush Administration grudgingly forward — and they're not very open right now to hearing it's not very likely to come to pass beyond minor gestures. Few specifics are talked about, and I for one am not very sure the senior levels of the PLO have any specific strategy rather than just "winging it" to use an American idiom. In general the Palestinians think that the combination of European and Soviet pressures, in concert with efforts from their American friends,

including their growing list of American Jewish friends, as well as Arab leaders in Cairo, Amman and Riyadh, can at least frighten the Israeli leaders into worrying that unless they become more reasonable their American connection could be in jeopardy.

It's a bold, very risky strategy of course from a PLO that is showing signs of tiring as well as of what the West calls "moderation". By now revealing so much of their minimal aspirations, plus finally playing the "recognition" card in return for small American gestures, they have started the clock of moderate credibility ticking. Time itself may now become a major factor for if the months go by and Bush's Washington shows itself very much like Reagan's, all the expectations that have been building may begin to dissolve. And furthermore, of course, Israeli repression of the intifadeh is likely to continue to be ratcheted upward, further heightening tensions.

Arafat's enormous stockpile of credibility may very well start slipping under these likely circumstances. And a few U.S. -PLO meetings here and there, even the granting of a few visas should that happen, won't actually give the PLO's incredible Chairman much ammunition to use against his detractors.

But then of course the whole "peace offensive" strategy is hardly less risky than Arafat's unprecedented December performance. For he did indeed threaten to resign in the late hours of the day of his final Geneva press conference, precipitating a most remarkable avalanche of calls to Washington to save the Chairman or risk the alternatives.

In the hours after Arafat's threat and before George Shultz's hastily assembled end-of-the-day press conference, pleas to Washington came from far and wide — from Britain, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Kremlin and more. Finally Shultz relented realizing that he had to do something and that the responsibility for having ended Arafat's restraining role at the head of the PLO was more than even he wanted to bear. He didn't actually give very much of course, not yet; but it is potentially a historic opening and that's the way the PLO and its many friends have decided to treat it. The coming months will tell of course.

No doubt, though, Yasser Arafat has accomplished a stunning comeback in the past few years since his rescues from Beirut and then Tripoli and the dispersal of the PLO's shadow government and army in Lebanon — a comeback of historic proportions. He has gotten much of the world to adopt his formula of a democratic Palestinian mini-state wedged in between the Zionist Israeli state and the Jordanian Hashemite state. The Palestinians have accomplished a world following quite unique in the history of liberation movements.

But this has been accomplished not just because of sympathy for the Palestinian predicament or hostility toward Israel's brutality. Rather the Palestinian cause without Arafat at the helm carries unknown risks for international society, Middle East stability, and even world peace. Arafat and his Fatah have accepted their place within the Arab order — a system of near-feudal dictatorships, militarist regimes, and single-party states. They, and many leaders in Europe as well, pursue his cause — and in a more modest, restrained way he theirs — out of mutual self-interest. Increasingly they know they will succeed together in this bold strategy to de-escalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions through the two-state solution or they will face a wave of change with untold consequences for the entire region.

Rather ironically Arafat has come to represent stability and peace to much of the world, whatever the Americans think.

But how often can the Chairman of the PLO threaten America with resignation? And what can he and his growing friends worldwide do to actually get the Americans to realize that their own welfare, and that of Israel's as well, lies in serious political progress before the clock of moderate credibility strikes midnight?