

Israelis and Palestinians to meet in New York on March 11

New horizon for peace

WHEN a small Israeli monthly magazine, *New Outlook*, and the Palestinian newspaper in occupied Jerusalem *Al-Fajr* jointly hold a peace conference in New York City in early March, it will be the first time these two co-operating publications hold a public meeting outside of Israel.

Indeed, the conference organisers indicate that the major goal of the three-day meeting is to demonstrate in the United States that there are Israelis and Palestinians co-operating together and mutually supportive of what is now widely referred to as "the two-state solution."

The conference was originally scheduled for December but had to be cancelled at that time because the Israeli organisers couldn't deliver the Knesset members they had promised the Palestinian organisers, and thus the Palestinians didn't want to go ahead. It's still possible that the same could happen this time, for *New Outlook* is only of marginal importance in Israel. But in recent months, some Israeli Knesset members have been attending meetings in Paris, in the Hague, and in other off-the-record encounters — with persons from the PLO. So there is no novelty in this any longer.

The novelty is rather in the setting — New York City, the very heart of the American Jewish establishment. According to *New Outlook's* American representative, Hillel Schenker, about 20 Israelis and 20 Palestinians are expected and the conference is going to be held at the School of International Affairs at Columbia University.

The reason for this location, rather than the traditional hotel setting, has to do with the intricacies of the Israeli law that still prohibits Israeli citizens from meeting or speaking with "terrorists" in the PLO. There is

some kind of a loophole in the law having to do with "academic conferences." And so by holding their meeting at Columbia University and in association with the International Affairs School, there the Israelis think that this might encourage at least some interaction among the PLO personalities and the Israelis and get them off the legal hook.

Some of the Israelis whom *New Outlook* has contacted are Knesset members and so far few have indicated they will attend. But the most, it seems, have not as yet committed themselves, preferring instead to wait and see who will be coming on the Palestinian side and what reaction there will be from the Israeli government. It appears that most of the Israelis will be traditional leftists with a long record of meeting with Palestinians, many of whom are connected with *New Outlook* or the sponsoring Mapam Party in one way or another.

The Palestinians — working through Nubar Hosapian who heads up a new Palestinian group in New York which itself is partially designed to get around the PLO designation — are hoping such PLO personalities as Khaled al-Hassam, Um Jihad, and Nabeel Shaath will come in addition to a large number of American Palestinians, among them Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, and a delegation from the occupied territories.

It's a bit of an uneven situation though. According to *Al-Fajr's* publisher, Paul Ajlouni, he will call off the conference if the Israelis don't come through with important Knesset personalities, but not if the PLO persons are denied visas to get into the US or decide not to come for one reason or another. When asked if he would change locations or delay the conference if important PLO persons cannot attend, Ajlouni firmly indicates

he will not. And as far as the Israelis are concerned they'd like to go ahead come what may, largely because for *New Outlook* almost anything will be a success.

So in the end the Israelis are not insisting on involving important PLO persons, though they claim to be very eager to have them there. But strangely even Ajlouni himself seems very ambivalent about the PLO. He took great exception, for instance, to a passing reference by this writer some weeks ago that *Al-Fajr* is a "Palestinian Fatah-oriented newspaper in East Jerusalem."

Though nearly all political observers I have discussed this with consider this an accurate assessment, Ajlouni himself was furious about it insisting that his newspaper is "to serve the Palestinian people" and that's that. Indeed he went so far as to call back this writer to indicate that if that is how his newspaper is written about he will not speak with me any further.

In many ways, it's a shame the auspices of this conference aren't more substantial; for the time is certainly right to try to do something of this kind with maximum political sophistication and results. In Israel *New Outlook* has no serious influence and doesn't even appear in Hebrew. Actually most of its efforts are spent in the Jewish diaspora, especially the US, attempting to show the good face to Israel, raise liberal Jewish funds, and sometimes, it seems, keep diaspora Jews in check so that they don't go too far in their criticism of Israel.

Recently, for instance, *New Outlook* went so far as to refuse a paid advertisement from the Jewish Committee on the Mid-east (JCOME) that has appeared in many American magazines and newspapers. Even though the ad is signed by more than a thousand of Amer-

ican Jews including Jewish Professors at over 100 universities the fact that it calls for an end to the special relationship with Israel and a reduction of aid to Israel apparently made it unacceptable for *New Outlook's* Editor, Chaim Shur.

On the other hand, Chairman of the Board Dan Drin found Shur's action "clearly censorship" and has called a Board meeting to try to reverse Shur's action later this month.

Al-Fajr on the other hand, especially if one judges by the publisher and financier Ajlouni, is not a very politically sophisticated publication though it does seem to be quite nationalistic. Editor Hannah Sinoria has come under considerable criticism in recent years, including last year in Washington when he decided not to attend the largest Washington demonstration and rally ever held here, but rather to attend a pro-Israel Peace Now meeting where he was the token Palestinian. Activist Palestinians in fact noted that Sinoria was so compromised in their view that he would not have been welcomed at what turned out to be a very large parade through downtown Washington followed by speeches near the White House, which might explain why he chose to stay at the Jewish meeting which opened with the Israeli national anthem.

Indeed, in discussing the reasons for the conference earlier this month, Ajlouni showed considerable ignorance about some of the major political players dealing with Mid-east matters in George Bush's administration and a lack of basic familiarity with many key issues. Furthermore, he seriously insisted that in the context of the coming peace settlement "the Palestinians are going to demand \$90 billion from the US to compensate them for properties taken by the Israelis."

Whether misguided or not,

From



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Ajlouni is far more sure of the future than many others insisting that "in the next four to five years at the most there will definitely be a Palestinian state."

For the Palestinians then, the whole idea is to get many persons from the Israeli Knesset and establishment as possible into some kind of public dialogue with Palestinians, including PLO personalities, and to do this inside the United States. It's a generally sensible extension of what else has been going on in Europe in recent weeks. But it remains to be seen whether *New Outlook* and the Israelis will use the Palestinians more, or the other way round.

For the Israelis, the goal is at least as much to promote *New Outlook* and raise American Jewish funds as anything else. Even Ajlouni notes that *New Outlook* is a "very opportunistic" group of people. Indeed, when Camp David was popular that's what *New Outlook* endorsed. And when the Jordanian option was back in the news as late as 1985 *New Outlook* was quick to jump on the joint Jordanian-Palestinian approach. Now *New Outlook* is lined up behind the notion of a "demilitarised"

Palestinian mini-state in the occupied territories. But interestingly, back in Israel, *New Outlook* is not accepted by the more progressive Israeli or Palestinian groups. And as the recent incident with the JCOME ad further indicates, *New Outlook* is not interested in presenting the more seriously critical views about Israel and the US-Israeli linkage, even in the form of a paid advertisement which it otherwise claims to desperately seek.

And for many Jews who have been associated with *New Outlook* over the years, including this writer who resigned from the Editorial Board some years ago, the association has often proved very politically frustrating and unproductive. *New Outlook's* efforts are considered by many who know the publication best as oftentimes hypocritical, sometimes heavy-handed and usually only marginally effective.

After holding two conferences in the late 1970s — one in occupied Jerusalem in 1977 and the other in Washington in 1979 — *New Outlook* has been out of the conference business for almost a decade.