

VIEWPOINT

PLO beware: Not all friendly Jews are real friends of yours

By Mark Bruzonsky
Special to Sada Alwatan

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Among the most dramatic and significant moments at the recent Israeli-Palestinian conference in New York was when Nabil Shaath very surprisingly told the audience how he had been deceived by the Reagan Administration in 1982. It was deception that led to the Sabra and Shatila massacres and then to the PLO's temporary eclipse. Resurrection for the PLO, it should be remembered, came only on the back of the intifadeh.

Shaath, Yasser Arafat's personal envoy and Chairman of the Palestine National Council's Political Committee, was reacting in impromptu fashion to suggestions from Rita Hauser, one of the American Jews who had met with Arafat last December in Stockholm.

On the same panel with Shaath, Hauser had just suggested that the next steps in the euphemistically termed "peace process" should be elections and autonomy. In her typically articulate and curt manner, she had just completed an impassioned plea that the Palestinians accept the slow, small steps being peddled as serious policy by the Bush Administration.

Shaath was not offensive, but he was firm. With carefully constrained anger and humor Shaath outlined that at the height of the 1982 war he had last been in the United States also as Arafat's personal envoy, and at that time the Americans had sold him a bunch of falsehoods which he then in turn passed on to the leadership of the PLO. Everyone in the audience knew the result; and Shaath himself had been unable to get a visa to come back to the USA until this conference.

At that time, back in the summer of 1982, the American goal was to convince Arafat to leave Beirut. Consequently Shaath was manipulated by smooth-talking Washington officials as they somehow convinced him that the United States could be counted on to protect the Palestinians left behind and then to take major steps to bring about Israeli concessions. As Shaath explained to the audience he went back to the Middle East thinking that going along with the American plans might somehow lead to a Palestinian homeland.

Of course, the current American ploy in 1989, whatever terms or tactics are used, amounts to little more than glorified autonomy designed to put out the flames of the intifadeh on Israel's behalf and sidetrack, once again, the basic issues. And that's precisely why the apparatchiks of the Bush Administration, nearly universally long-time Israeli supporters, were using Hauser, and she them, to dangle various hopes and expectations in front of the PLO.

It's a disingenuous but typically American gambit designed first of all to avoid hard policy choices and a confrontation with the Jewish lobby; second, to see just how pliable and desperate Yasser Arafat's Fatah really is to come up with something that can be considered "progress"; and third, to help Israel out of the public relations mess brought on by the intifadeh.

Anyway, Shaath wasn't buying this time.

But though the PLO may have learned some lessons from 1982 it is still making a variety of unfortunate, sometimes disgraceful mistakes in dealing with Israelis and some of their new American Jewish supporters. The basic reasons for this situation are two-fold.

First, top leaders in the PLO remain partially naive and uninformed about much that is going on today, and has gone on before, with the Israeli and Jewish left. Facts and details they have in abundance as they meet with growing numbers of visitors and digest large volumes of faxed messages. But they lack the perspective and experience in which to funnel all the information, thus the framework remains sketchy and incomplete.

What happened is another case where image is far more important than reality. There was in fact no joint statement signed by Yasser Arafat, even though Hauser pushed and pushed for one. Nor, in fact, was the effort by Ms. Hauser instrumental in bringing about the American change.

Rather there was a statement signed by the American Jews and a number of PLO persons saying pretty much what the PLO had been saying for some time; and in reality many American Jews had met previously with Arafat and said similar things.

But Hauser's timing was superb; for she knew change was coming and wanted to see how much of the credit she could glean. It's even possible some kind of conspiracy is afoot and that Hauser may have been specifically set up by the U.S. government, "positioning" her for further involvement with the Palestinians, American Jews and Israelis. If so, her recent work with National Security Council Chief Brent Scowcroft and her involvement at both the New York conference and the Interreligious Conference in Washington a few days earlier would serve as circumstantial evidence.

Furthermore, the real reasons for the American shift last December 16 had to do with behind-the-scenes pressures being brought from America's European allies, as well as the Soviets, with a helping hand from Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar who was intimately involved. As one insider notes, "What was happening publicly with the Jews in Stockholm was a sideshow to the private diplomacy going on intensely behind the scenes. And even so, it took Arafat's threat to resign to finally get the Americans to change their posture," as I noted in a previous column last January.

Questioned as she walked out of the conference session in New York where she and Shaath had tangled, Hauser told me that "What I outlined is not my plan, not my preference. But that's what's going to happen so they can take it or leave it."

It was a perfect example of doubletalk and misrepresentation. Just a few days earlier, in a phone interview, Hauser had specifically told me she was indeed fully behind Bush Administration strategy to push aside talk of a Palestinian State and of an international conference and push for small steps, autonomy, local elections, and an end to the intifadeh.

"It's been the one I've been pushing for some months now," Hauser told me just a few days before the conference, completely contradicting her attempt a few days later to suggest she was only a messenger not an advocate. At that time she was referring to the basic policy outlined on March 6 in the *New York Times* by Tom Friedman — an outline that everyone understood represented State Department leaking of Bush Administration thinking.

Here is more of what Hauser had to say just a few days before her public run-in with Shaath:

Hauser: "I share the views expressed in Friedman's article in the *Times*...on what the Administration is planning because it is very much our view and it's been the one I've been pushing for some months now...elections, autonomy, moving forward on that basis, building up some measure of confidence and preparing right after the autonomy for the international conference. (We need to) hold out to the PLO that this is the beginning of a process that will lead to face-to-face talks and if you get the Israelis over the hump of allowing the obvious PLO people to run (in local elections) you are beginning a process of face-to-face and that's what the exercise has got to be because a big international conference is not going to happen."

Secondly, there is so much hypocrisy and doubletalk from so many Jewish voices that it's quite difficult even for Israelis and American Jews themselves to sift through the loud chorus and distinguish who and what is for real.

A good example of this situation came at the New York conference when the workshop on creating a Palestinian state was chaired by Joyce Starr, a woman well-known for her links to the Israeli government and Jewish lobby. Many persons were amazed to see her at the conference. When told she was actually chairing the very session devoted to building a Palestinian state some of the more savvy Palestinians were absolutely aghast. It was nothing less than an insult to those struggling in the intifadeh.

When the Palestinian organizers of the conference were asked about the situation some, including Shaath, said they didn't even know who Starr was. It turns out she was the last-minute choice of *New Outlook* magazine and American Friends of Peace Now, the two Jewish groups who arranged the conference. Starr was simply pushed on top of the Palestinians by their new Jewish and Israeli "friends" without asking...or telling...and for reasons of their own.

Another example of PLO confusion came when Shaath praised *New York Times* reporter Thomas Friedman, not only as an accomplished American journalist, which he is, but somehow as a friend of the Palestinians! Those who know Friedman remember that he is often joked about as Israel's correspondent on the *New York Times*. And he is widely considered to be one of the most crafty apologists for liberal Zionists and their American Jewish supporters — just what his newspaper wants, of course.

But by far the best example of new self-proclaimed friends that the PLO would be well advised to be wary of is Rita Hauser herself.

Publicly Ms. Hauser is usually identified as a senior partner in a New York law firm, and one of the founders of the International Center For Peace in the Middle East (ICPME) in Tel Aviv. The much-hyped Stockholm meeting in December just before the American decision to start talking publicly to the PLO sadly catapulted Hauser to international notoriety. At that time she and her fellow American Jews loudly claimed that their "joint statement" with Yasser Arafat was an important element in the "breakthrough" with Washington; and in the United States the story spread wildly once Secretary of State Shultz reversed himself and ordered the "substantive dialogue" with the PLO in Tunis.

Such self-promotion has long been a characteristic of the opportunistic Hauser. Indeed one of the oldest leaders of the American Jewish community was overheard in Washington recently saying that he "wouldn't trust Rita for a second, but she's a very energetic lady."

Q: "Then your view hasn't changed very much from the November 13 Op Ed that you wrote in the *New York Times* (advocating autonomy)?"

A: "Exactly. I've been pushing it very actively with Scowcroft and with Dennis Ross and others and so I'm glad to see that it is eventuating apparently into the policy."

Q: "Do you have any reason to think the Palestinians are interested?"

A: "I think if promoted appropriately to them, and I think that's going to be some of the subject that's going to be discussed between Baker and Schevernadze, I'm very hopeful. It's a question of packaging and presentation and I think it's going to get there. There is no other way to get there because the Israelis are categorically rejecting any conference. I think this is the way it's going to move."

Q: "Are you speaking for all five of the people who went on the trip?"

A: "Yes. I think (they) share my views... because I did a paper on it and I gave it to Scowcroft. I think this is clearly the way to go because it's the only way to get something to happen... And the Israelis will not move at this point on the idea of a major international conference..."

Q: "I think that the very word 'autonomy' has been so discredited now that it is sneered upon in the territories."

A: "Then if it is, we've got another big problem."

Q: "I think we do have that problem."

The great mistake Arafat made in Stockholm was to allow Hauser — well-known as a front person for both the Labor Party in Israel and the Republican left in the United States — to propel herself forward as a real advocate of peace and friend of the Palestinians. By doing so Arafat helped Hauser and parts of the anti-Palestinian Jewish establishment to undermine the positions of many of the real friends of the Palestinians both in Israel and America.

In a much smaller way the same danger exists with persons like Joyce Starr, Thomas Friedman, and, it must be said, with at least some of the very persons in *New Outlook* magazine and Peace Now with whom the PLO met in New York.

Please understand. It's not that the Palestinians shouldn't be reaching out and engaging in dialogue with more Jews and Israelis. The intifadeh has brought on much change, and there are many persons and groups that need a bit of help. But in expanding one's circles and one's supporters — admittedly an urgent necessity for the Palestinians and for the Arabs in general — it's vital to know who one's real friends are and whom one can really count on. And it's even more vital to know who among one's new contacts might have an agenda other than the one being mentioned and who in fact might be working against you while smiling at you.