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BUS TO PEACE OR ROADBLOCK

DESPAIR and cynicism among the Palestinians in occupied Jerusalem is thicker than hope; but these emotions are buried deeply underneath an increasingly thinning veneer of hope.

Many Palestinians eagerly express their "hope" giving the impression, upon superficial contact, that such is the prevalent mood corresponding to the latest diplomatic dancing.

But after spending a few intense days here meeting with Palestinians ranging from the underground to the establishment my own conclusion would be that a kind of demoralising despair has taken over. And it could still erupt.

As Faisal Husseini told me last time I was here, the current negotiations might well be the last gasp of the current leadership. The time could well come when, to use Husseini's own words, the people you will have to meet here to discuss politics will have much longer beards and will talk a very different language.

Indeed, it is no doubt such considerations of possible future, as well as all the other pressures facing the American empire at the moment, that propel James Baker forward against such overwhelming odds.

After all, as Israeli activist General Matti Peled reminded me last Wednesday morning, Baker is the fifth American secretary of state who has tried in recent memory to bring the truculent parties to the peace table — and as far as Peled is concerned, America's refusal to face the real issues and brutally pressure Israel will inevitably lead to another deadlock.

From



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The peace bus, Peled is quite sure, is headed to a roadblock not far down the negotiating highway, even if it does leave the station.

This "peace bus" American Secretary of State James Baker keeps talking about may indeed be the only one on the road at the moment, yet the road may itself disappear in coming weeks even should all the passengers invited decide to board, in some cases without those they expected as traveling companions.

Still, the basic question for the Palestinians is do they really want to get on a bus driven by Americans with Israelis riding shotgun; a bus going to an unknown destination with a driver not fully familiar with the terrain and known for a long history of shady dealings with the most mistrusted of the passengers; an unairconditioned bus likely to run out of gas in the desert.

And furthermore, once boarded and with doors closed, there may be very few oases along the way of this bus and few places to successfully get off unharmed.

True, the Palestinian bourgeoisie seems pretty much resigned to saying okay, we'll go ahead with you, even on this rickety bus and even if we have to enter by the back door and quietly stand facing the back.

But at the same time the current Palestinian interlocutors so much in the news seem to be accepting this fate not because they expect to travel very far on this peace bus but rather because they're sick of staying in one place and because they have allowed themselves to be convinced they can't risk giving their enemy the chance to take the bus anywhere they want it to go without trying to speak up and redirect its course.

Others within Palestinian rul-

ing circles have come to prefer, maybe always did prefer, but were reluctant to admit, some kind of limited autonomy in tandem with Jordan. They say they prefer this to the continuation of strict Israeli military rule and because this is a "feasible" and "realistic" goal; but deeper down they might also prefer this to the likelihood that true Palestinian independence would quickly push them under.

As Secretary Baker arrived in Israel on his current shuttle and headed to another meeting with the Palestinian team I sat with a couple of senior Palestinian personalities who joked that we were witness to the re-joining of the West Bank to Jordan.

Among the intellectuals' awareness of how many times the Palestinians have been tricked, deceived and sold out over past decades is more dominant, but still not decisive. For the overwhelming feeling prevails in many quarters, right or wrong, that no matter what in the past the Palestinians just can't risk saying "no" to the Americans even to the demeaning role offered them, that it's better to take the risk of going to such a lopsided conference than not going, seems fairly prevalent though hardly universal.

Just a few days ago I stopped in on a discussion at the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (Passia) to hear a small group of Palestinians plead with former American presidential candidate George McGovern.

As well-meaning as many of the participants might have



Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin, left, and US Secretary of State James Baker in occupied Jerusalem just before announcing the date of the Mid-east peace conference

felt, it was a very lacklustre even pathetic affair with McGovern mouthing all kinds of platitudes while the Palestinians recited the familiar litany of gross human rights abuses and desires for self-determination. Pathetic, I concluded, not only because of the shallowness of the words exchanged in the midst of historic developments, but also because of the method and forum — a former Democratic candidate truly sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians reduced to supporting George Bush's mostly pro-Israeli positions and urging the Palestinians to take a deep breath and make sure to get on the rickety and most uncomfortable peace bus.

Like Israel's Labour Party, McGovern's Democrats really

have no serious alternative policy to present — no wonder the voters in both countries can't get very enthusiastic about changing leaders.

The Palestinian "street" too is anxious and divided. Among some of the activists the feeling of despair and the deference to leaders such as Faisal Husseini and the Fatah wing of the PLO which he represents is indeed the prevalent political reality. But the current in-the-news political leaders are being watched with eagle eye by a new and still toughening generation of Intifada leaders. And they will not be able to step too far on the substance of things without facing growing public opposition. Procedurally the activist street has acquiesced; but it's not likely to do so as well

when it comes to the substance that dominates and consumes their lives.

For there is a growing uneasiness among the generals and officers of the Intifada about what the whole Arab establishment, including some of the PLO leadership, is up to — a suspicious uneasiness that manifests itself in such actions as slogan-painting on the walls of Faisal Husseini's Jerusalem home while he is privately warned not to go too far.

Whatever the events of coming days and weeks, another historic phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict is upon us.

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