

Middle East International

Palestinians Seek a Hearing

by Mark Bruzonsky

Until now, the Zionist lobby has had things virtually all its own way on Capitol Hill; there has been no concerted attempt to put the Palestinian point of view. Mark Bruzonsky writes that Palestinians living in North America have set out to remedy this imbalance by creating a single body to represent them in the United States and Canada.

Approximately 300 delegates and a roughly equal number of observers and guests met in Washington last month (17-19 August) and formally created the Palestine Congress of North America. For the first time the Palestinian communities in the United States and Canada are constituted under a single umbrella organisation and able to speak with a single voice.

"We are a support group of the PLO and of the struggle to liberate Palestine." Conference co-ordinator and Washington attorney Jawad George told a press conference on Sunday at the conclusion of the constitutional convention. "We have succeeded this weekend in creating an organisation for cooperation and co-ordination of the Palestinian community." That he made no mention of the rancour, discord, and even physical fighting that erupted during some of the closed debates was to be expected.

Creation of this Palestine Congress has been many years in the making and was substantially hastened by the negative reaction within the Palestinian communities here to the Camp David accords and the Israel-Egypt Treaty.

The formative meeting which led eventually to last month's adoption of a constitution and the election of an executive committee took place shortly after last September's Camp David Summit. At that meeting late last November, which ironically took place at New York's Biltmore Hotel, the same hotel where in 1942 American Jews declared their support for the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine, a preparatory committee was delegated to draft a constitution and prepare a ratifying conference.

In July, regional meetings took place throughout the US and Canada, where delegates were selected to the Washington Constitutional Convention. In addition to these, approximately 70 national, regional and local Palestinian organisations were in attendance at the Washington deliberations,

which took place at the Shoreham-Americana Hotel. In all, over 15,000 Palestinian Americans were represented, either through their membership in one of the founding organisations or their participation in a regional meeting.

Perhaps the choice of the Shoreham was also symbolic, since the umbrella organisation of American Jews — the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, popularly referred to as 'AIPAC', and informally known on Capitol Hill as 'The Jewish lobby', holds its annual meeting in the same conference rooms.

The keynote address was given by the Mayor of Ramallah, Mr Karim Khalaf. The PLO representative in Kuwait also addressed the gathering (though he entered the US as a private citizen) and a message from Chairman Yasser Arafat, urging the Palestinians 'in exile' to unite in their struggle, was read to the enthusiastically applauding audience.

Congressman Walter Fauntroy, who represents Washington DC in the Congress, also sent a special message of support. "The PLO must be a party in order to settle the Middle East Problem," the Congressman insisted. "The time is upon us right now," Fauntroy urged, "to negotiate a non-violent solution before less calm heads prevail and the strained tensions escalate into increased fighting." "Emotions are running high because of the loss of Andy Young," the black Congressman added.

Mayor Khalaf spoke with bitterness of American policy towards the Palestinians. "From 1948 until now there has been no change in the American position toward the Palestinian issue," Khalaf stated. "They buried peace at Camp David and they buried peace at the White House, because they shied away from United Nations resolutions and from the Palestinian problem in its trinity: the people, the land and the leadership." --

Asked if he hoped to have any meetings with State

Department officials during his six-week visit to the US, Mr Khalaf said he would refuse such meetings. "They should knock at the right door - the PLO. I will not meet with them."

But Khalaf offered recognition to Israel in response to probing questions from journalists. "If the Israelis will recognise our rights, I have no objection to recognising Israel," he stated after saying that he was not a member of the PLO. "If they will recognise our national rights and recognise the PLO as our leadership, then I have no objection to recognising Israel."

Even before the newly established organisation actually

came into being on Sunday, the first political action was taken on its behalf. A letter was sent by the preparatory committee to President Carter protesting at the part played by Zionist influence in the resignation of Andrew Young, and insisting that US policy "not be hostage to any foreign country, especially one having such a parasitic relationship to this country".

"One of our main concerns," Jawad George noted at Sunday's press conference, "is just taking the true facts and bringing them to the American people. We have great confidence in the American people, but the media has distorted the true facts which we will seek to make known."

The PLO, Camp David And the US Political Circus

Mark Bruzonsky describes the encouraging atmosphere for a firm White House initiative.

At least one national columnist, George Will, has suggested that August 1979 may be recorded in the history books as the month Jimmy Carter became regarded as a lame duck, and American politics became fixed on the presidential transition only 15 months ahead.

Another prominent commentator, Joseph Kraft, while lamenting Carter's possible retention of office should Reagan be the Republican candidate, lambasted the Administration's record, urged the President's abdication and insisted the US would continue to "pay and pay and pay", in terms of its crucial national interests, should Carter remain at the helm.

The possibility of any firm initiatives from the White House, spurred on by the positive swing in public attitudes toward the PLO, has to be weighed against the circus into which American politics degenerates at election time. Uncertainty over who comes next may persuade the PLO to bite the bullet of co-existence sooner than expected, thus severely pressuring the American government to fulfill its public and private pledges to respond. But it is also possible that the US-PLO dalliance will resume in earnest only after November 1980 when the political fog here lifts.

Certainly, the PLO's position in America has never been better, Camp David notwithstanding. As pressures build up in the press and from citizens' organizations, the American government can finally be said to have a mandate of sorts to deal directly with the Palestinian nationalists, despite the many obstacles strewn everywhere by Jewish and conservative lobby groups. Just as in late 1976 the PLO recognised the crucial significance of the presidential transition period and sent two first-class emissaries to make contact with the incoming administration, a similar appreciation of the current period in American politics may eventually yield the rewards Fatah has been seeking.

And so the changes in American public attitudes unleashed, but not initiated, by the Andrew Young affair, continue to generate a receptive climate for US action. On 7 September, for instance, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* carried columns calling for US involvement with the

PLO. Stanley Hoffman, Professor of International Relations at Harvard University, noted the "inevitability of US dealings with the PLO". And the *Post's* Stephen Rosenfeld, who also contributes monthly to a magazine published by the American Jewish Committee, proclaimed that "Palestinian nationalism is authentic and surging".

"Israel's crucial requirement," Rosenfeld emphasised, "is to recognise the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism. Once the principle were granted, the 'details', large and painful as they are, could be worked out. Everything else is temporising and gimickry."

At the same time, however, actual Palestinian policies and ideology are still little understood here, even among the elite, partly because of Israel's continual harping on the outdated 1968 charter, and partly as a result of the failure of the PLO to explain, in terms Americans can appreciate, the shifting realities of Palestinian politics. Yasser Arafat's appearance on TV in ABC's *Issues and Answers* last Sunday once more proved his ineffectiveness in dealing with both language and concepts. And the PLO's Washington representative, Hatem Husseini, often does more harm than good with his simplified references to 'democratic, secular state' concepts, which provide no substitute for a thorough discussion of the evolution of Palestinian thinking and attitudes.

In the next two months, three important conferences will be taking place in Washington, all of which will focus further attention on the need to bring the PLO into the Middle East negotiations. First, the Palestine Human Rights Campaign is holding a two-day national conference featuring a number of prominent West Bank mayors (though at least one, Bassam Shaka'a of Nablus, has so far been refused Israeli permission to attend).

A fortnight later, the prestigious Middle East Institute will convene its 33rd Annual Conference with this year's theme, *The Middle East after Partial Peace: What Lies Ahead*. Former Under Secretary of State George Ball, who recently wrote that "no durable Arab-Israeli peace is possible without PLO participation in the negotiations," will be principal speaker. And three weeks after that, the liberal Israeli magazine, *New Outlook*, which favours recognition of Palestinian rights, will stage a large symposium which has already been loudly denounced in Israel as a conspiracy to pressure the US government to deal with the PLO.

To sum up, it's a time of cautious hope here. It's not inevitable that the Americans will finally acknowledge that only the PLO can save the much-touted "Camp David process," but it is becoming more and more likely.

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