

Israelis and Palestinians to meet in New York mid-March

By Mark Bruzonsky
Special to Sada Alwatan

WASHINGTON, D.C. — When the small Israeli monthly magazine, *New Outlook*, and the Palestinian newspaper in Jerusalem *Al Fajr*, jointly hold a peace conference in New York City in early March, it will be the first time these two cooperating publications hold a public meeting outside of Israel.

COMMENTARY

Indeed, the conference organizers indicate that the major goal of the three-day meeting is to demonstrate in the United States that there are Israelis and Palestinians cooperating 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 organizers couldn't deliver the Knesset members they had promised the Palestinian organizers, and thus the Palestinians didn't want to go ahead. It's still possible 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 a few have indicated they will attend. But 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 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-Hassan, 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 Ajlouny, 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 United States 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, Ajlouny firmly indicates he will not.

For the Palestinians then, the whole idea is to get as 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 around.

For the Israelis the goal is at least as much to promote *New Outlook* and raise American Jewish funds as anything else. Even Ajlouny 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 "demilitarized" 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 a recent incident indicates, *New Outlook* is not interested in presenting the more seriously critical views about Israel and the U.S. - Israeli linkage, even in the form of a paid advertisement which it otherwise claims to desperately seek.

Recently, *New Outlook* went so far as to refuse a paid advertisement from the Jewish Committee On The Middle East (JCOME) that has appeared in many American magazines and newspapers. Even though the ad is signed by more than a thousand American 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 Darin found Shur's action "clearly censorship" and has called a board meeting to try to reverse Shur's action later this month.

Like so many things connected with the Arab-Israeli conflict, what will be done and said publicly at this New York City meeting in a few weeks will not be the full story of what has really been going on behind the scenes for some years now. More on the background to the March conference in a further commentary next month.

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