

Who's really who?

FIRST it was the Intifada which reactivated the world cause about the Palestinian issue. A variety of new groups came forward in response.

More recently, of course, it was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the American deployment to the Gulf, and then the war itself which has kindled new organisations to come forward.

A basic problem, though, is that many if not most of these groups are not what they seem at first blush.

Often times the names of the groups are either misleading or overly seductive. And nearly always those groups that are really tied to others try to present themselves as far more independent than they really are, if for no other reason than to raise more money from many of the same sources already giving.

Take for instance a group headed by Professor Jerome Siegel, an unpaid research fellow at the University of Maryland in College Park just outside of Washington. The new group calls itself, rather pretentiously, the "Jewish Peace Lobby."

JPL has grown out of Siegel's book, published a few years ago, which presents the notion of a small, demilitarised Palestinian mini-state as if the idea is originally Siegel's rather than one the Palestinians themselves have evolved going back to the mid-1970s!

Rather than being a real alternative to the infamous American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), JPL is really a very small liberal Zionist group which works closely with Israel's Peace Now movement as well as the liberal wing of the powerful reform movement of American Jewry.

And since the Peace Now movement is in reality itself an extension of the Leftwing of Israel's Labour Party, the "peace lobby" has either been conceived for the purpose of, or co-opted into, supporting the Labour Party's return as the desirable path to real peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

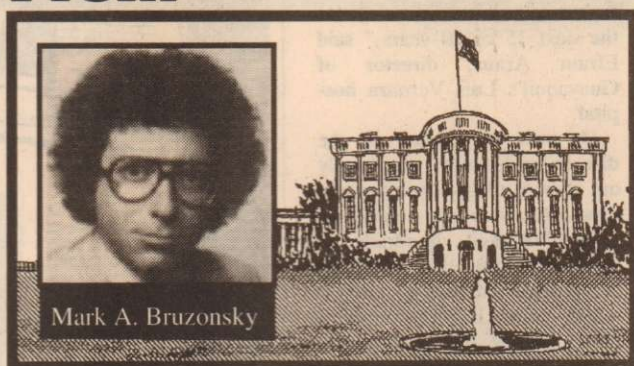
In this context Siegel and his assortment of rabbinic and liberal allies refuses to join — and in fact actively opposes — other American Jews who feel it imperative to raise basic questions about the very nature of the US-Israeli alliance as well as to call for basic cuts in American aid to Israel.

One telling sign of what the Jewish Peace Lobby really is about is the falling out Siegel had when JPL was being set up with *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* magazine to which Siegel had been contributing a column.

It seems that some of Siegel's Jewish supporters didn't want him any longer associated with that "anti-Israeli publication"; and sure enough that relationship was terminated.

In sum, a serious alternative lobby that would be far more sceptical and sophisticated about the diplomatic chicanery currently underway has instead lined up in

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support of the latest Bush-Baker-Shamir proposals. True, the peace lobby agenda is a bit bolder, at least rhetorically calling for some kind of demilitarised Palestinian mini-state — but the gut issues of major changes in American financial and military policies are completely avoided. Moreover, the ever-present thought sometimes under-the-table agenda of the JPL is to help bring Shimon Peres back to power.

Another American group that has recently come forward to finally address issues relating to the Mid-east is Sane Freeze.

This organisation, formerly headed by the well-known Reverend William Sloane Coffin, was instrumental in organising the mass march on Washington last January 26 that brought about a quarter million protesters to the capitol.

But over the past decade, though active on many peace related issues, taking a clear stand regarding Israel and the Palestinians has been avoided by Sane Freeze. Nothing usual in this really, for there are many organisations in Washington that are liberal and progressive on most foreign policy issues but find it difficult if not impossible to speak up when Israel is involved.

The basic reasons are two-fold: First, many of these organisations have liberal American Jews on their boards of director; and in many cases these liberal Jews have traditionally been unwilling to let their organisations get involved on behalf of the Palestinians. Secondly, the contributing financial base of many organisations such as Sane Freeze is also considerably Jewish making it difficult, unless one is willing to get hit in the pocketbook, to get very involved in the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire.

Still facing these impediments, yet wanting to get involved with Mid-eastern matters in the new climate, Sane Freeze has chosen two ways to do so.

The first is being called the Persian Gulf Information Network.

Coordinated by Sane Freeze, this network is trying to loosely bring together many of the Left and pacifist organisations so that collectively they can try to get more attention from the media. It's one way of getting involved without having to take any specific positions.

Palestinians are discovering many more new friends among American political activists, thanks to what can be described as cumulative effect of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, American deployment to the Gulf and the Coalition War itself. New organisations are coming up in support of peace in the Mid-east.

Who are they and what do they want?

A media kit giving information about the new network and the various component organisations was sent out to hundreds of press people a month or so ago. And various meetings with the establishment media, including one with ABC's Peter Jennings, are being arranged.

The other way Sane Freeze is getting involved in matters relating to the Mid-east is through what it calls the "Campaign For Global Security". Basically this is an extension of the ongoing disarmament efforts that Sane Freeze has been working on for some time.

In their latest position paper for this campaign, the following call is made:

"Calls on the United States to immediately institute and vigorously urge others to institute a moratorium on all arms transfers to the Mid-east, as a first step toward a permanent, worldwide halt in arms sales."

A third new organisation calls itself "Middle East Witness".

An offshoot of the Resource Centre for Non-violence in Santa Cruz, California, this group really has grown out of the church communities experience with "witness" efforts in Latin America.

Though useful in itself as a way of demonstrating concern and highlighting developments on the ground in the occupied territories, the Middle East Witness is another of those efforts that have come along as a result of a lot of people wanting to be involved but not wanting to take specific positions regarding the crucial issues of strategic relationships along with fiscal and arms policies.

So the Middle East Witness stays clear of specific calls to change US policy in basic ways; instead advocating such generalities as: "Unless the denial of human and national rights to the Palestinian is addressed, there can be no just resolution of the problems of the region. The United States must act decisively to implement United Nations resolutions regarding the Palestinians".

More in coming weeks about new organisations that have recently established themselves in the US; as well as a few that have sprouted in Israel including the "Rabbinic Human Rights Watch" and the "Institute for Arab-Israeli Affairs".