



WASHINGTON

Many groups now taking a position without saying they're taking one

WASHINGTON - First it was the intifada which reactivated the world on 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 prompted new organizations to come forward.

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

Oftentimes 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 grew out of Siegel's book, published a few years ago, which presents the notion of a small, demilitarized Palestinian mini-state as if the idea is originally Siegel's rather than one of 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 left-wing of Israel's Labor Party, the "Peace Lobby" has either been conceived for the purpose of, or coopted into, supporting the Labor 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 refuse to join — and in fact actively oppose — other American Jews who feel it imperative to raise basic questions about the very nature of the U.S.-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 should be far more skeptical and sophisticated about the diplomatic chicanery currently underway has instead lined up in 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 demilitarized Palestinian mini-state — but the gut issues of major changes in American financial and military policies are completely avoided. Moreover, the ever-present though sometimes under-the-table agenda of 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 Middle East is SANE FREEZE.

This organization, formerly headed by the well-known Reverend William Sloane Coffin, was instrumental in organizing the mass march on Washington last 26 January that brought about a quarter million protestors 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 organizations 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 organizations have liberal American Jews on their Boards of Director; and in many cases these liberal Jews have traditionally been unwilling to let their organizations get involved on behalf of the Palestinians. Secondly, the contributing financial base of many organizations 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 Middle 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 organizations 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.

A media kit giving information about the new Network and the various component organizations 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 Middle 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 Middle East, as a first step toward a permanent, world-wide halt in arms sales."

A third new organization calls itself MIDDLE EAST WITNESS.

An offshoot of the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, California, this group really has grown out of the church communities experiences 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, 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 MIDDLE EAST WITNESS stays clear of specific calls to change U.S. policy in basic ways; instead advocating such generalities as: "Unless the denial of human and national rights to the Palestinians 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 organizations that have recently established themselves in the U.S.; as well as a few that have sprouted in Israel, including "The Rabbinic Human Rights Watch" and the "Institute For Arab-Israeli Affairs."

Mark A. Bruzonsky writes this syndicated weekly column from Washington. He is the director of JCOME, the Jewish Committee on the Middle East.



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