

Israel vs. the PLO

Who's Serious About Peace ?

For months now, the Israeli government's refusal to even talk peace has been smoothed over by US-Egyptian diplomacy. The resulting impasse requires the PLO to rethink its current policy.

If anyone thought that Shamir's election plan was a real peace proposal, subsequent events have proved otherwise. Since it was put forth in the spring of 1989, almost a year has gone by with the US, Israel and Egypt quibbling about procedures for furthering what they call the peace process. There has been tons of pressure on the PLO and continued Israeli brutality to eradicate the intifada, but literally no pressure on Israel, only expressions of minor vexation. This is despite the fact that a number of PLO leaders have expressed flexibility about the means of getting Palestinian-Israeli talks underway.

Israel categorically rejected Egyptian President Mubarak's 10 points which aimed to market Shamir's own plan; it accepted US Secretary of State Baker's 5 points of October 1989 only conditionally after insisting on a series of amendments. As of this writing in late February, it was still impossible to convene a meeting of the US, Israeli and Egyptian foreign ministers to discuss the possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian meeting.

Most recently, Israeli officials tried to blame the impasse on the February 5th attack on an Israeli tour bus in Egypt, in which nine Israelis were killed and another 21 injured, but this pretext is too transparent to be taken seriously. The projected US-Egypt-Israel meeting had already been delayed until after a Likud Central Committee meeting originally planned for February 7th. It is to be remembered that last summer's Likud caucus imposed an interpretation of the Shamir plan that ruled out any efforts to develop it in a way that might be minimally acceptable to the Palestinians.

The peace process has been stalled for months, ostensibly due to procedural matters such as: What Palestinians can be included in a delegation to talk to an Israeli delegation? Those from East Jerusalem? Those who have been expelled? What is the agenda? (Shamir says his plan only), etc. But the real catch is the Israeli government's unwillingness to come to terms with talking to the PLO in any form, since it represents the Palestinian people whose existence as a coherent national-political body is viewed as the negation of the Zionist project. This view is shared, to varying degrees, by almost all top Israeli officials. As of now, it has remained basically unaffected by the PLO's concessions and flexibility.

Bolstering the Israeli hardcore

On the background of this Israeli perception, one can analyze the series of minor crises in the Israeli government. The first such issue in recent

months was Ezer Weizman's alleged PLO contacts which led Shamir to try to fire him. Interestingly enough, the messages Weizman sent to the PLO reportedly urged the latter to align with Egyptian policy and accept the Baker plan. In the face of opposition to Weizman's dismissal, a compromise was reached between Likud and Labor in early January, whereby Weizman retains his portfolio as Science Minister, but will be excluded from the inner cabinet. Obviously, Shamir wanted to «protect the integrity» of the Likud-Labor hardline merger that really rules Israel today, despite the divergence of opinion that prevails in the government and Knesset as a whole. At the same time, he succeeded in using the Weizman case to send a message to the US that Israel is not about to talk to the PLO.

The second crisis came from the other side - relatively speaking. The Likud Central Committee finally met on February 12th, and Sharon resigned as minister of trade, transportation and industry, after failing to rally his party fellows around his attack on Shamir for alleged concessions in relation to the peace process. (In the preceding days, Sharon had accused Shamir of accepting to meet with a Palestinian

