

To Our Friends Who Support the PLO: an Open Letter

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THE object of this letter is not to urge that you discontinue supporting the PLO. Our purpose is rather to suggest that you build on your support of the PLO to influence it in directions which are most calculated to achieve its fundamental objective, namely, a Palestinian state.

Essentially, we shall be outlining an approach not much different from that which many of you have urged on progressives like ourselves in our attitude towards Israel. For some years, because of our concern that Israel survive, we have indeed been striving to change the policies of that state towards Palestinians. Because of the dramatic changes within Israel which we shall describe in this letter, it is now urgent for you to do comparable work within the PLO.

We assume that you share our view of the ultimate resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue — the two-state solution, a Palestinian state existing peacefully alongside the Jewish State of Israel, basically the partition idea promulgated by the UN in 1947 — and that the only useful question is when and how this solution will be achieved. Obviously the sooner and the more peacefully the better, so that the Israeli and Palestinian peoples may move together towards achievement of the economic and social advances for which both yearn.

If you still harbor the view that somehow the State of Israel can be made to disappear, then this letter is not directed to you; yet if you read on you will understand why we believe that the practical consequence of your position, if adhered to by the Palestinian leadership, would prevent your major objective, the creation of a Palestinian state.

The two-state solution is today, even more clearly than in 1947, the only answer to the otherwise intractable confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians. To be sure, during the 1930's and even until 1947 there were some leading Jewish figures and also political parties in Palestine who urged a bi-national state for the entire area. Continuous violent confrontations with Palestinians whose leadership had bitterly fought

against growing Jewish presence made it obvious that a single state would merely set the stage for a bloody civil war.

Andrei Gromyko stated the conclusive argument for partition before the UN in 1947. Referring to the general support of partition within the UN, he said:

“This can be explained only by the fact that any other possibility of solving the Palestine problem seemed unrealistic and impractical. I refer also to the possibility of establishing a single Arab-Jewish independent state with equal rights for Jews and Arabs. A study of the Palestine problem... has indicated that the Jews and Arabs in Palestine do not want to and are unable to live under one rule. The logical conclusion of this is that if the two peoples residing in Palestine — each with deep historic roots in the country — cannot live together within the same framework, the only thing left to do is to set up, instead of one state, two states — an Arab and a Jewish one...

“Those who oppose the partition of Palestine into two independent democratic countries contend that such a decision aims at injuring the Arab population in Palestine and the Arab countries. The Soviet delegation cannot agree with this point of view. The partition proposal is not aimed against the Arabs... On the contrary, in the view of the Soviet delegation, it intends to benefit the basic national interests of the two peoples, in the interest of both the Arab people and the Jewish people.”

It is pointless to belabor the refusal of the Arab peoples to implement the partition plan of the UN. The fact is the Israelis accepted it and achieved statehood. The Arabs rejected it and brought about first the 19-year-long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by Jordan and Egypt. The tables turned in 1967 and for the past 12 years it is Israelis who have prevented a Palestinian state from coming into being. But no matter who is obstructing the creation of a Palestinian state, fundamentally partition remains the only plan presenting a chance for peace and for the achievement of the national aspirations of *both* peoples.

How is the elusive two-state solution to be brought about? Discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict almost invariably involve digging up past claims or pointing out present wrongs to establish that both sides have rights and that neither side is blameless. There was Deir Yassin, but also Hebron; villages in Lebanon are being bombed and innocent persons are being killed while athletes in Munich and airline passengers in Lod Airport were also slaughtered. There are endless disputes about the alleged denial of human rights to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and equally heated discourses about the security threat to Israel by the PLO as necessitating Israeli occupation. The tales of horror suggest no solutions; they merely underscore the need for finding a solution.

The solutions offered generally come to, “Why doesn’t Begin do thus

and so?" or "Why doesn't Arafat make such and such a pronouncement?" These seem to presume that a single action or statement by one leader can elicit a hoped-for response from his counterpart and voila! an instant resolution.

It should by now be clear that any such approach leads to a deadend. Mr. Begin and his political supporters do not believe in a two-state solution. More than 30 years ago Mr. Begin led the unsuccessful opposition to a Zionist acceptance of the partition plan and he has not modified his views since. No one we know can say with certainty how Mr. Arafat and his close supporters really feel about a two-state solution. But regardless of their personal feelings, they are so hemmed in by the delicate political balance within the PLO, and so effectively imprisoned by years of their own propaganda calling for the destruction of Israel, that even if they believed a two-state solution was appropriate, they would probably not be able publicly to state that position to their constituency.

In our view, the starting point for any serious discussion of an approach to peace must be not the actions or pronouncements of political leaders but rather political movements among the people — Israelis and Palestinians. We suggest that there is an historic opportunity at this time and in the immediate future to resolve this bitter conflict.

Within the past year and a half there has developed in Israel a broad-based mass movement directly confronting the Begin government and the other political forces within the State of Israel that are opposed to an accommodation with the Palestinians. The Peace Now movement includes many groups of varying ideas all seeking such an accommodation. Every element of the Peace Now movement opposes the government's settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza; there is considerable support for a two-state solution, and many are searching for a formula acceptable to the people of Israel by which negotiations with the PLO can be undertaken.

Recently this Peace Now movement undertook the responsibility of communicating with Jewish people in the Diaspora to explain why the Begin policy is unacceptable and threatens the State of Israel. Peace Now representatives have visited Jewish communities in practically every major city in the United States, as they had done in Europe, meeting with Jewish rank-and-file and leadership to urge a break in the hitherto uncritical support of the Begin government's policies. And they are succeeding. The beginning of a change in the position of American Jews is well illustrated by the comment of Theodore Mann, president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, in Montreal last Nov., "... The present Israel cabinet is beyond the consensus within the American Jewish community and maybe in Israel."

Despite the fact that the PLO and most of the Arab world have attacked the Camp David agreement, there is no question that the Israeli Peace Now

movement grew out of Mr. Sadat's visit. When he went to Jerusalem and said plainly and convincingly that he accepted Israel's existence (thus far the only Arab leader to do so since the creation of Israel in 1948), he started a train of consequences which led directly to the peace agreement and now to the steady withdrawal which will eventually require the removal of Jewish settlements from that area. These agreements were achieved despite Mr. Begin's reluctance and the campaign promises he had made only six months before. His hand was forced by massive peace demonstrations in Tel Aviv which, in terms of percentage of population participating, made the American peace demonstrations during the Vietnam War seem comparatively puny.

The simple fact is that Mr. Sadat offered the Israeli people what they have always striven for: recognition and peace. This offer, regardless of the doubts raised by some Israelis, aroused such an overwhelming response within the Israeli people that Mr. Begin had to move towards accommodation with Egypt even against his wishes and against the program of the political party which put him into power.

The Peace Now movement in Israel showed extraordinary strength during the negotiations with Egypt, but while it is able to mount huge demonstrations against new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, it cannot *at this time* call for the evacuation of those areas by Israel military forces because the PLO has not given the signal which Mr. Sadat gave — an assurance of the acceptance of the State of Israel in a form and with an earnestness which the Israeli people can find believable. In the present posture of the PLO, Israelis have some reason to consider that withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza would simply give the enemy a chance to move rocket emplacements closer to urban centers.

What a response would be forthcoming from the Israeli people if the PLO leadership were to state clearly and unequivocally that it is willing to accept the State of Israel and thus allay the fears of the Israeli people with respect to their own security! An overwhelming political pressure for peace would take shape within the Israeli body politic and the Israeli political leadership would be forced — exactly as it was with respect to the Sinai — to yield to the wishes of the Israeli people, vacating the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in exchange for peace.

It is argued by some PLO supporters that because of ancient historical affinity the Israeli people simply could not, in a peaceful way, do for the West Bank what they did for the Sinai. Opinion polls in Israel as recently as Sept., 1979, some time after the Camp David agreement, show that by a large majority the people understand that peace is not possible without a settlement with the Palestinians. Beyond that, the Israeli Peace Now movement, having forced Mr. Begin's hand in the Sinai, has shifted its focus to the West Bank, and the physical evidence of Israeli popular

opposition to the government's settlement policy has been as large as it was when its attention was directed to Egypt.

The scenario for peace from the Israel side is thus clear and the political machinery for achieving peace is discernible. Reassured of their security, the Israeli people would readily once again accept the two-state formula which they accepted from the UN in 1947. But this scenario at present still appears to be an impossible dream. The leadership of the PLO doubtless understands the dynamics of public opinion in Israel, yet it refuses to address the essential audience — the people of Israel — to show that it understands their concern for security and their own nationhood. Such an address would certainly permit the Peace Now movement to call for withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Instead the PLO leadership has embarked on a brilliant world-wide diplomatic campaign, speaking to everyone but the Israeli people. Recently some West Bank mayors ready to attend the *New Outlook* symposium in Washington, D.C. met such intimidation that they withdrew.

PLO statements so far focus entirely on the theme of recognition for the PLO and negotiation with it. Of course peace will require negotiation with the PLO. But exclusive concentration on that procedure rather than on the *content* of negotiations seems to emphasize concern about political leadership among the Palestinians rather than about a basis for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Beyond that, some of the recent statements by PLO leaders, in their subtleties and nuances, seem designed to discourage any idea that the PLO would ever accept a two-state solution; naturally these undercut the Israeli Peace Now movement.

For example, the Rev. Jesse Jackson reported that Mr. Arafat is flexible because he does not seek "to exterminate Jews." Many Jews, in or out of Israel, must read that as a reaffirmance by the PLO leadership that it *does* want to exterminate the *State of Israel*. The excitement generated by the Middle East travels of important American Black leaders, following Andrew Young's resignation, quickly evaporated when it became clear that PLO leaders were not prepared to give the unambiguous statements, sought by the Black leaders, accepting the existence of the State of Israel. Every time a PLO representative makes what appears to be a conciliatory statement it is directed to an American or other foreign newspaper or politician — never to its own constituency or their allies (and Israelis read these statements very carefully); their pronouncements continue to be brutal. Thus on Jan. 1 the PLO representative Hani el Chasan declared on Radio Iran: "We derive our main support from the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini. In five years we shall proclaim a Palestinian government and in 15 years we hope to destroy Israel... It is our hope that the leaders of Iran and Palestine will enter Jerusalem arm in arm."

The current strategy of the PLO leadership seems rooted in the idea that

Israel can be so isolated and pressured (even by the United States) that it will have to sue for peace with the PLO on any terms, without the minimum assurances of security its people must demand.

The strategy will not work. There are limits to the pressures that Israel's friends can impose, oil or no oil. Recent developments involving those with whom the PLO had allied itself will significantly affect the PLO's image within the United States. Thus the Iranian turmoil, which is likely to have long-term impact, has undoubtedly made Israel's concern for its own security much more meaningful not only in Israel but among most Americans. The Palestinian people themselves are the best proof of how a determined group dedicated to nationhood can outlast and overcome any amount of external pressure.

Although the PLO leadership is, at present, either unwilling or unable to address the concerns of the Israeli people and its Peace Now movement, there is a wide spectrum of opinion among the Palestinians, including many of those within the leadership of the PLO, who recognize that just as Israel needs peace with the Palestinians in order to secure its existence, so the Palestinians need peace with the Israelis in order to achieve their statehood. For more than 50 years — antedating the creation of the State of Israel — Palestinian policy has been controlled by those who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the rights, first of Jewish people, and then of the State of Israel, in any part of Palestine. It is pointless to reargue that issue. As of today, Israeli statehood exists and cannot be wished away. The vast bulk of the Palestinian people must understand the reality of Israeli statehood. Similarly, the majority of the Israel people must understand that, whatever may have been the situation previously, the Palestinian people has now achieved a national consciousness which will not rest until it comes to fruition in statehood.

The problem for the Palestinian people then is no different from the problem for the Israeli people: How can Palestinians move their own political leadership so as to bring about acceptance of a two-state solution, which is the only way the Palestinian people can achieve their statehood. Rejection of partition in 1947 prevented a Palestinian state from coming into being. Such rejection still stands in the way.

We cannot ignore differences between political forms, nor can we dismiss the terrible impact of assassination as a political weapon. Nevertheless the Palestinian people have to move their own political leadership, as the Israeli people are doing with respect to their own leaders. It is, of course, presumptuous for outsiders to tell any political group how to conduct its internal battles; yet with due deference we suggest that those Palestinians and supporters of PLO who agree that the two-state solution is the only answer should at this time re-evaluate their tactics. Because of

developments within Israel, the time may have arrived when it is appropriate to take a public stand to move the leadership.

The potential for interaction between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples makes it even more clear that the time has come for open debate on this issue within the PLO. The Israeli Peace Now movement is by its *actions* sending clear signals to the Palestinian people. Were the signals to be reciprocated, not by mere phrases but through PLO action — the visible initiation of open debate within the PLO concerning parallel action with the Israeli Peace Now movement and the necessity of a two-state solution — the Peace Now movement in Israel would acquire even greater impact which, in turn, would strengthen similar forces within the PLO.

It is not slogans, rhetoric or word formulae that are involved. To be sure, rewriting the PLO Covenant would be decisive, but obviously that will be the *result*, not the beginning, of a change within the PLO. What is needed within the Palestinian movement now is the initiation of open discussion and debate, and serious consideration of relating to the Israeli people, and acceptance of partition.

That is where you come in. You can help induce that debate. The PLO has turned to progressive forces throughout the world seeking their support. The *quid pro quo* for such support should be a willingness to listen to outside voices, and if, as we assume, you yourself support a two-state solution, you ought to be urging the PLO to take positive steps to debate it openly and finally accept it.

We have been saying to the Israelis that a policy that does not address the problems of the Palestinians is not a viable policy for the Israelis. Should you not be making the parallel point to the PLO? Uncritical support of the Israeli government encourages Israeli intransigence. You should realize that blank check support of the PLO has exactly the same effect on that organization. There are signs, few but significant, that some Palestinians of considerable standing within the PLO are ready for the public debate which is required. At the recent *New Outlook* symposium, the large audience was much moved by constructive statements by Raymonda Tawil. She, and every effort of hers to generate public debate within the PLO on the need to accept a two-state solution, should receive your outspoken support.

The time for you to bring your influence to bear is now. Political activity in Israel is obviously heightened by the weakness of the present government and the elections scheduled for next year. If the present opportunities are missed, if the most promising peace movement in Israel's history is frustrated, if its people are forced to return to the view that "we have no choice," if the Israeli militants and expansionists remain in political power because of the people's fears for security, both the Israelis

and the Palestinians will have lost a chance to enjoy peace and separate statehood in the foreseeable future.

The history of the Middle East conflict includes a sad litany of missed opportunities, of the failures of political leaders to respond to signals from their counterparts. It would be tragic if this were repeated now when people are in motion — and when it is the people, not their leaders, who are signaling.

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