

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Will U.S. scuttle Middle East peace?

Jaffee Center scholar says unique opportunity for Israeli-Palestinian settlement now exists.

The visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens to Washington March 14 revealed that the U.S. may not be as interested in an Israeli-PLO dialogue for peace in the Middle East as its rhetoric might indicate. Arens complained, in remarks to the Washington Institute on Near East Studies, of too much pressure from President Bush and others in the U.S. administration for the Israelis to come up with a plan for a "final settlement" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israelis, he said, insist on "confidence-building measures" as a precondition for any accord.

Insiders here comment that the U.S. pressure on Israel to go for a "final settlement" is an effort to torpedo the progress that is now possible between Israel and Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization to reach an eventual bilateral agreement.

The Bush administration is upset that Israel and the PLO may set their own conditions for an accord. The Israelis and the PLO alike want to thwart the suffocating pressures of the new U.S.-Soviet condominium to dictate the future of their region.

Shai Feldman, a spokesman for the Tel Aviv University-based Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, spoke to the Wilson Center here March 13 on the eve of the Arens visit, and made it clear that a period of "interim autonomy" for the Palestinians could result in successful long-term peace. The co-author of a Jaffee Center study, "Israel, the West Bank and Gaza: Toward a Solution," Feldman said a limited period of conditional autonomy will be needed to build trust.

"It will be a period of testing," he said, "Such things as the ability of both sides to abide by concrete, negotiated security arrangements, and the ability of Arafat to be the master of his own house, to assert leadership over the Palestinian movement as a whole." Overall, Feldman said, he felt optimistic that a unique window of opportunity has now been opened for real progress toward peace.

In Israel, he said, the attitude toward the Palestinians has changed as a result of the 16-month uprising, the *Intifada*. This has come, he said, from a combination of growing respect by Israelis for the struggle of the Palestinian people for independence, using a means other than terrorism, and a growing sense that it is untenable for the present situation to continue indefinitely.

"Either we must crush them completely, or get out," one Israeli soldier, returning from the Gaza strip, told him. Beyond concern about the high cost of the West Bank and Gaza occupation, he said many Israelis are expressing sympathy for the Palestinian cause because "they can identify with a struggle for independence."

This new attitude comes, he said, from the mass-based character of the *Intifada*, and is much different than the fear and paranoia that terrorist acts induce. He cited polls in Israel showing that 53-66% of the people want Israel to negotiate a peace with the PLO.

Feldman was challenged to give any signs that Israeli government leaders shared this new attitude. He responded that Prime Minister Yitzak

Shamir used to be an intelligence officer for the Mossad, and good intelligence officers "can't allow ideological leanings to stand in the way of reality." Reality, he said, is that the Israelis cannot crush the Palestinian uprising, and that, for all practical purposes, Israel has already been pushed back to its 1967 borders, because no Israeli living on the West Bank feels secure there.

Feldman said, Arafat's Geneva pronouncement acknowledging Israel's right to exist should have been greeted in Israel with celebration. "It allows Israel to declare victory over the Arabs for the first time in 40 years," he said, "because it confirmed that the final challenge to Israel's existence is now out of the Arab agenda."

"There are three major challenges to the U.S.," Feldman noted. The first is in the area of U.S. relations with the Soviets. "The U.S. must convince the Soviets to keep their clients in the region under control," he said, referring to Syria, in particular.

The second is to convince the PLO that it must be willing to permit local Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza to negotiate on behalf of the PLO in the opening phases of talks with Israel. This is essential, he noted, to by-pass Israeli concerns about direct talks with the PLO.

The third is to convince Israel of its need to engage in the process, by supporting the idea of a period of "interim autonomy" while the security arrangements and ability of Arafat to keep the PLO in check can be tested. "This is an opportunity which cannot be missed," Feldman said. Friends of Feldman at the Wilson Center commented they had never seen him so optimistic. If what Feldman outlined is true, then the main blame for failure to bring peace to the Middle East will fall squarely on the U.S.