

Clinton's diplomacy keeps Mideast peace on track

by William Jones

The meetings in Washington during the last week of April, between President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and President Clinton and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, underlined the decisive role the United States is playing in forging a Mideast peace. Despite the recent disastrous developments in Lebanon, the Middle East peace process has been kept on track, with President Clinton taking major responsibility.

On April 24, the Palestinian National Council, the ruling body of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which Arafat convened in Gaza, voted overwhelmingly (504-54, with 14 abstentions) to strip all clauses from the PLO Covenant that were in conflict with the 1993 Oslo agreement between the PLO and the Israeli government, i.e., clauses that called for the destruction of Israel, thereby recognizing for the first time the legitimate existence of Israel. As Arafat pointed out, the vote of the PNC was "an indication of the commitment of our people to the peace process." Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanfani said, "We have an agreement and we have fulfilled our part." Israeli Prime Minister Peres hailed the vote, saying, "This is one of the greatest ideological transformations in this century. This shows that the Palestinians have honored their commitments."

The response of Peres's Labor Party was equally dramatic. It approved a draft of a new party platform that eliminates a clause opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state, thus eliminating a major obstacle to Palestinian statehood. Nissim Svili, a senior Labor Party official, said that the PLO amendment would make it possible to hold negotiations on a final peace agreement on May 4, as scheduled.

The changed nature of the situation in the Middle East was indicated by the Arafat visit to the United States beginning on April 30, at the same time that Prime Minister Peres was in the

United States. On May 1, Arafat met with President Clinton in the Oval Office, his first private meeting with the President. Although Arafat is not yet a head of state, the nature of the reception was a clear recognition of his enhanced status, and that of the Palestinians.

When Peres met with Clinton at the end of April, they signed a series of agreements aimed at enhancing the security of Israel. The United States has agreed to spur development of the Nautilus Tactical High-Energy Laser, which would offer a defense against short-range rockets such as the katyushas. In addition, the United States agreed to provide nearly instantaneous "real-time" information from American satellites to Israel if any of its neighbors launched ballistic missiles. Such an early-warning system has long been sought by the Israeli government. The two nations also signed an agreement establishing a Joint Counterterrorism Group that would enhance cooperation between counterterrorist agencies in both countries.

The enhanced security will provide Israelis with more confidence in the land-for-peace solutions of the Rabin-Peres peace plan, and will help to prevent Peres's domestic opponents and their Republican backers in the United States—who will stop at nothing to derail the peace process—from whipping up hysteria over defense.

The Lebanon debacle

The Syrian green light to Hezbollah to start shelling civilian areas in northern Israel at the beginning of April, and the massive Israeli "Grapes of Wrath" retaliation, including an air strike on Beirut itself, had cast an ominous shadow on hopes for peace in the Middle East. The graphic photos of the killing of Lebanese civilians by the Israeli artillery bombardment that were flashed around the world, did not improve the

image of Israel in the Arab world, where the Mideast peace process had begun to produce a thaw in the “cold war” between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

The Hezbollah shellings did, however, indicate the ability of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, and his string-pullers in the West, to stir up trouble. When the rockets started hitting Israeli villages, violating an unwritten agreement made in 1993 with Assad, the situation became untenable. The Israelis “threw all the cards in the air to let them fall where they may,” noted one observer. Somebody simply had to “re-shuffle the deck,” and that somebody could only be the United States.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher, attending the Group of Eight nuclear summit in Moscow at the time, was dispatched by President Clinton with the explicit task of stopping the killing of civilians. But Christopher wasn't the only diplomat to suddenly depart Moscow: French Foreign Minister Herve de Charette and Russia's Yevgeni Primakov were also courting the Syrian leader. This allowed Assad to thumb his nose at Christopher. In one instance, he suddenly canceled a scheduled appointment with him entirely, and on two other occasions, kept Christopher waiting for hours while he met with his other diplomatic “suitors.”

An agreement of sorts was reached, which put into writing what had only been an unwritten agreement, in effect since 1993, which said that Israeli forces would not attack civilians or civilian targets in Lebanon and that the Shiite Hezbollah forces would not fire katyusha rockets on Israeli communities. The Lebanese government agreed to prevent Hezbollah guerrillas from using any civilian areas or industrial and electrical installations as “launching grounds” for attacks inside Israel.

The agreement was lauded by all parties as a major breakthrough, although it is as only as good as Assad's word. As Democratic Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche commented regarding Assad's inclusion, “You don't invite a cannibal to a cooking school!” The demise of the Soviet Union had left Assad high and dry, economically and politically, but the Bush administration resuscitated Henry Kissinger's favorite “sparring partner,” making Syria a party to the Madrid multilateral Mideast talks.

Assad became increasingly troublesome in the context of Anglo-French machinations aimed at undermining U.S. policy in the region. Although President Clinton diplomatically mentioned France for its role in achieving an agreement, Assad's ability to thumb his nose at the U.S. secretary of state was enhanced by the independent French—and Russian—maneuvering in Damascus. Assad will adhere to an agreement only when he has no choice in the matter. A separate Anglo-French agenda aimed at sabotaging the Clinton-brokered peace policy would give the Syrian leader the room he needs to renege on any agreement.

The economics of peace

A more serious threat to the peace process, however, has still to be dealt with: the increasing economic misery of the

population in the former occupied territories—a misery that has been compounded by the closure of Gaza and the West Bank by the Israelis in response to terrorist attacks in Israel. This was a prime focus of Arafat's discussion with President Clinton. Arafat described the situation on May 1 at the National Press Club: “Our net results—net losses, as a result of those closures, amount to about \$6 million daily. And this is a very big loss for an emerging state like ourselves. We are not an oil-producing country. The prolonged Israeli military occupation destroyed the infrastructure of Palestine, and we are starting from below zero. Every aspect of our life is affected—water that we drink, schools, hospitals, roads, telecommunications, electricity—everything.” Arafat indicated that Clinton had proposed setting up a U.S.-Palestinian Commission, similar to what the United States has with other countries, to deal with “all issues of mutual concern.”

Less encouraging, however, was the fact that Arafat went from the White House to the World Bank to discuss economic “assistance” with World Bank President James Wolfensohn. World Bank involvement in the area governed by the Palestinian Authority portends even greater difficulties for peace, since the World Bank is blocking any meaningful assistance for the industrial and infrastructure development of the Palestine Authority.

One initiative that promised hope was the proposal of the so-called Redwig group, comprising Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinians, for a Mideast Development Bank, an independent entity that could finance projects that would transform the desert into a garden. The proposal was accepted by President Clinton, but as State Department-led negotiations were conducted to bring that institution into being, the bank was transformed from a “development” bank into a “merchant” bank, as it was so designated by Assistant Secretary of State Joan Spero, who shepherded the process on behalf of the department. A real development policy was “dead on arrival” by the time the bank took final shape.

Zeev Ma'oz, director of the Tel Aviv Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, said that there was a “general skepticism” toward the bank. Responding to a question from *EIR* at a recent Washington forum, Ma'oz commented dryly, “I don't think the Mideast Development Bank, as it is evolving, addresses those issues”—meaning, economic development.

At the same forum, Jeff Feiffer, a State Department official with responsibility for the Middle East, “spilled the beans” on department policy. “There is not enough money for projects of desalination and water . . . but we can work on smaller projects,” he said.

“Small” may be “beautiful” for a State Department pruning itself to join Prince Philip and his World Wide Fund for Nature's “green revolution,” but it won't ensure peace. Unless President Clinton starts issuing marching orders to spur real economic development, the combination of economic stagnation and Anglo-French manipulations will quickly undo the good that has been done.