

## Editorial

### *Either justice, or war*

In a few weeks, the Oslo peace agreement will celebrate its fourth birthday. Unless urgent measures are taken in Washington, to redirect the process toward negotiation, that birthday may be celebrated with bombs, not champagne corks, exploding. A new era of all-out guerrilla warfare could begin.

The dramatic deterioration of relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) of Yasser Arafat, was not *caused* by the recent suicide bombers, who provoked the deaths of 13 persons and serious injury to over 150. The process has been degenerating by ratchet notches, and such bombings have functioned to hammer home the message, that the peace process is, indeed, dead.

The response on the part of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was predictable: He imposed closure of the West Bank and Gaza, preventing those remaining Palestinians with jobs in Israel, from reaching them; cut off all talks with PA representatives, until Arafat "brings the terrorists under control"; withheld vital funds, tax payments Israel owes the PA, and which account for a large share of the budget; ordered Israeli troops to engage in hot pursuit after suspected terrorists, inside areas under PA jurisdiction; and called for the arrest of the PA police chief.

Such measures are geared to exacerbate tensions, and escalate confrontation to war. Islamist spokesmen lost no time in predicting that further such attacks would occur, if the Israeli government does not show some willingness to compromise. Nonetheless, Netanyahu is displaying the same intransigence that has characterized his regime since spring of last year.

How can the deadlock be broken?

Arafat's approach has been to seek help from outside the region, aware of the fact that the parties involved are so locked in to a dynamic of hatred and revenge, that they cannot alter the dynamic, even if they wanted to. Thus, the PA leader has looked to Jordan and Egypt, the other Arab peace partners of Israel, to mediate some motion toward talks by waving the carrot, while he has also looked to the other regional powers,

including Iran, in hopes they will agitate the stick. But none of them can, in reality, force a change in Israeli policy.

There is only one political power which can do that: the White House. Dennis Ross, the chief U.S. negotiator, was on his way to the region, reportedly with a new initiative, when the bombs went off in Jerusalem. Now, he is to resume his mission.

Whatever the shape of that new initiative, certain facts are clear: There can be no inversion of the trend toward war, unless the Netanyahu government is *forced* to order and implement a halt to its settlements policy. There is simply no way, politically, that Arafat can return to talks with Israel, unless those measures taken in violation of the Oslo accords, be abrogated. This means not only that the settlements must be halted, but that the areas promised the PA, be handed over in effect, and the Israeli military be correspondingly redeployed.

These are the preconditions for any resumption of contacts. But, more deeply, the root cause of the failure of the peace talks must finally be faced: There can be no political peace, unless there is economic and social justice for the Palestinian people. This means, that the economic depression into which the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have been thrust since the Oslo accords, must be reversed. As a recent conference in Gaza laid out the facts, the conditions of life for those Palestinians who are being told to "support peace," have reached the limit.

The PA officially controls 9% of the territory in Gaza and the West Bank, while control over water and other vital resources, is in Israeli hands. With a mere 20% of the ground water given them, only one-fifth of households have running water. A population growing at the rate of 7.44% in Gaza, is without adequate schools, housing, and basic services.

Meanwhile, none of the major infrastructure projects which would provide the start for economic development, such as the Gaza port or airport, has been built.

It is high time to stop the illegal Israeli settlements, and to start building housing, roads, schools, and hospitals for the Palestinians. Otherwise, forget "peace."