

Palestinians Need Viable Political Solution

by Carl Osgood

Less than a month after President Bush took office, Palestinian legislator Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, then serving as a spokeswoman for Palestinian Authority president Yassir Arafat, warned an audience at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., that the violence between Israelis and Palestinians could only stop if Israel withdraws from occupying Palestinian land. Instead, the victims of the occupation were being blamed for the violence resulting from the presence of Israeli troops, the checkpoints and the illegal settlements. In a Feb. 12, 2004 return appearance, sponsored by the Council for the National Interest, Ashrawi reported that the already-bad situation has only worsened since her previous Washington report, with the continued Israeli siege, targeted assassinations, and the construction of Ariel Sharon's wall around the West Bank.

Ashrawi warned that conditions are "extremely critical"; that continuation of the status quo is "untenable"; and that "conditions are converging to make peace more difficult." She noted a "strange ideological alliance" of Christians and neo-conservatives in the United States who are speaking the same language as "the absolutists in our part of the world." She warned that this "is not conducive to peace."

Making matters worse is the hands-off approach of the United States, which has, she said, put peace "on a back burner," managing the crisis instead—a de facto accommodation to Israeli measures. Ashrawi warned that the vacuum left by United States inaction is being filled by power politics, meaning Israeli unilateralism. She reported that even Palestinians who understand the nature of what she called the United States-Israeli strategic alliance, are still seeking United States involvement in finding a solution that leads to peace.

"The United States has to understand," Ashrawi said, "that the Palestinian question has to be solved," and is the key to bringing stability and prosperity to the region. Solving the Palestinian question is also a test for the global rule of law and the credibility of the international community. She warned that the double standard in the treatment of Israelis and Palestinians "has served to create feelings of injustice and support for the kinds of political moves that rule out dialogue." Nonetheless, it is only the United States, Ashrawi maintained, that can hold Israel accountable for its actions. Neither the UN, Europe, nor any other power will take the

necessary steps, without United States involvement.

The United States's lack of will led to the failure of the road map, put forward by the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia, last Summer. The United States acceptance of the Israeli cabinet's 14 reservations leaves the text remaining, but there is no integrity of behavior. Israel has made its security a pre-condition for implementing the road map, Ashrawi noted, while insisting that the Palestinians fully implement it, without any reservations. "The Palestinians perceive multiple standards," she said "and there are feelings of injustice and inequality. There is an overall need to release the region from the grip of war."

Ashrawi described the "rampant unilateralism" of Israeli actions, giving as examples, in addition to Ariel Sharon's wall to divide the country, the expansion of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory, the ongoing confiscation of Palestinian lands, and the building of even more checkpoints. This unilateralism extends to Sharon's disengagement plan for Gaza. As much as the Palestinians want the Israelis to leave Gaza, Ashrawi said, "There can be no unilateral solution." Many serious issues have to be addressed. Gaza is the most congested area in the region and Palestinians there have many problems, including access to water, sewage, trade, and movement. "These things need a counterpart to negotiate. If you remove all the settlements from Gaza, it is fine, if you use this as a model for the West bank. It should not be seen as a license for Israel to tighten its hold on the West Bank." Ashrawi noted that the West Bank is the land of ideology for the settlers' movement, not Gaza, so they don't care about holding onto Gaza.

Not surprisingly, the United States invasion of Iraq and the United States pre-emptive war doctrine have had a detrimental effect of the region. Ashrawi said that the war has "confirmed the Arabs' worst fears" about the United States, and has encouraged extremism and violence. She said the United States instead needs to make an intervention into the region as a peacemaker. What the Palestinians need, she said, is a political process that provides a path to a solution, and the chance to use their own resources to build their nation.

Achieving a political process among the Palestinians has proven to be exceedingly difficult. Much has been said in recent years, including a lengthy piece in the March 1 *Washington Post*, blaming the supposed corruption of Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority for the lack of political progress in Palestine. Ashrawi agreed the PA is very much in need of reform, noting that under siege, it has become obsessed with its own survival. However, unlike many of the PA's critics, Ashrawi pointed to the conditions imposed by the Israelis as a major factor in the PA's problems. "We need to have elections that are capable of producing credible leaders," she said. Palestinian leadership problems cannot be solved under present conditions. "How can you have elections when you are under a state of siege?" Elections cannot be held unless there are the physical conditions to allow them, and a climate so people can think rationally.