

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### The PLO's new horizons

*The pieces now appear to be falling into place for a new peace initiative from the Reagan administration.*

**T**he meeting on Dec. 24 between Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres and the mayor of Bethlehem, Elias Freij, was the first public meeting ever between an Israeli Prime Minister and a leader of Palestinians. It was a serious indicator of the new trends which have developed since the Palestinian National Council met in Amman, Jordan on Nov. 22.

That meeting came off successfully, under the chairmanship of Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat, despite a boycott by Syrian-backed Palestinian terrorist organizations, Syrian threats against the PLO leaders who attended, and at least three known terrorist deployments against the meeting—all foiled. Though criticized inside Israel and in many places abroad for such a meeting, there is little doubt that Peres intended to send the right kind of signal to the Palestinians, and Arafat's PLO in particular—answering the numerous signals sent by the PLO, especially the decision of Arafat to completely break with the Syrian-controlled radicals who boycotted the Nov. 22 meeting and have made no secret that they want to eliminate him physically.

Little noticed has been the new kind of declarations which Yasser Arafat began to issue immediately after the Palestinian National Council meeting, complementing the proposals pushed forward by Jordan's King Hussein. For example, in an interview published on Dec. 14, Arafat shocked a journalist by stressing: "I am pre-

pared to accept a state with incomplete sovereignty, and not only one part, but two parts."

The statement has not yet been elaborated on, but indicates that Arafat may accept the proposal for a Palestinian state in confederation with Jordan. This was part of the contents of Jordanian King Hussein's proposal, and was therefore certainly discussed by him and the PLO leader when Arafat arrived in Amman on Dec. 24.

The elimination of the Palestinian radicals from the executive bodies of the PLO was not the catalyst for such a new orientation, however. The consolidation of relations between the PLO moderate leadership around Arafat and the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt first made the elimination of the terrorists possible, and then created the momentum in which negotiations with the United States and Israel are becoming actual.

Abdel Rahim Ahmad, executive member of the PLO, explained these points in a Dec. 14 interview with the Egyptian Middle East News Agency (MENA). He first stressed that there "is a complete Palestinian consensus for Egypt's return to the Arab fold. . . . The Palestinians are making the necessary efforts to ensure such a return."

Ahmad added: "Contacts with Egypt were never actually cut. Arafat's visit to Cairo was the culmination of these contacts."

Another step in that direction will occur when a conference of Arab or-

ganizations is convened in Cairo in January 1985. The conference will be chaired by Yasser Arafat—his second official visit to Egypt.

A few weeks later, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will fly to the United States. He fully expects the Reagan administration to be ready to launch a new peace initiative in the region at that time.

Meanwhile, there is little doubt that the Palestinian movement has come out of its conference in Jordan stronger than ever. The hopes of the Syrian-backed radicals that the movement would splinter and that Arafat's authority would be rejected were dashed. Among Palestinians, Arafat's prestige is higher than ever. He is their leader.

Syria itself has been vocal in its disappointment. The regime of Hafez al Assad has resorted to typical mafia tactics, such as forcing the chairman of the Palestinian National Fund, still based in Damascus, to withdraw all Palestinian assets from banks and transfer them to the Syrian government—a robbery which was denounced as such by Arafat on Dec. 16.

The Palestinian rebels around Abu Musa, on Syrian orders, were reactivated in Lebanon, becoming the prime movers in a new wave of internal fighting, while at the same time sponsoring terrorist actions in Southern Lebanon against Israel, with obvious provocative aims.

However, short of a green light from the Soviet leadership—which has by no means decided to break with Arafat yet—there is actually little the Syrians and their puppets can do. This is doubly the case should the United States fulfill the hopes of Mubarak, Hussein, and other moderate Arab leaders by launching an early, comprehensive Middle East peace initiative, for which all the pieces now seem to be falling into place.