

MIDEAST

Palestinian Issue Near Resolution

Exclusive to NSIPS

The final major impediment to the rapid reconvening of a Geneva conference for a settlement in the Middle East is the thorny question of the participation of the Palestine Liberation Organization in peace talks. The crucial linked question of the PLO's continued existence as an autonomous political entity, is on the way to being resolved, due to delicate pro-PLO intervention by Egypt and Saudi Arabia within the Arab sector, and due to the international support for the PLO by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

In an uncharacteristically informative report, the New York Times' Henry Tanner from Beirut, Lebanon, claims today that Egypt, backed up by the Saudis, has won a battle within the Arab world for a recognition of the ultimate independence of a Palestinian state formed in the currently Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza strip territories. Tanner reports that the Egyptian position prevailed over attempts by Jordan and Syria to subsume any Palestinian entity under the umbrella of a Syrian-controlled confederation. Syrian domination of the PLO has been the key ploy in Secretary of State Kissinger's efforts to manipulate Syrian dictator Hafez Assad for the creation of a continuing crisis in Lebanon.

Tanner further reports that three of the four largest Palestinian commando groups — El Fatah, the leftist Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Damascus-based Saiqa group — have reached an agreement on working towards an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, a policy that implicitly recognizes the state of Israel and departs from previous Palestinian policy calling for a "democratic secular state" in all of Palestine, which had been consistently rejected by the U.S. and Israel. Tanner reports that a "virtual consensus" has been reached throughout the Arab world on the independent state policy. Tanner includes Iraq and Libya in this consensus, a highly unusual gesture from a newspaper which has repeatedly sought to implicate Iraq and Libya in extremist Palestinian terrorist activity.

The Egypt-Saudi-PLO diplomatic efforts coincide with a series of significant shifts within both Jordan and Israel that are rapidly creating the conditions for a Geneva conference by early March, 1977, the date upon which both the governments of Egypt and Israel came to agreement during this past week. According to yesterday's Baltimore Sun, a substantial faction of Jordanian bankers and ministers, congregated around Prince Hassan, the brother of Jordan's King Hussein, want to relinquish any Jordanian claim over the West Bank and to allow this area to be handed over to Palestinian leaders. This faction, which is believed to be closely connected to British banking houses from the days of British control over Jordan, is reportedly more concerned with Jordanian national development than with the various schemes for joint Jordanian-Israeli control over the West Bank that have repeatedly been floated by Rockefeller-linked U.S. policymakers and Israeli warhawks in the past few weeks. An important input into the Jordanian internal situation over the past month has been the unprecedented visits to the country by delegations from Poland, the German Democratic Republic, and Hungary, all to discuss economic development.

Simultaneously in Israel, Premier Yitzhak Rabin over the past week has initiated a decisive and noticeable turn toward

advocating policies for overall settlement of the Mideast crisis based on regional economic cooperation and development. Rabin is reliably reported to be backed by a strong Israeli nationalist faction that is favorable to relinquishing the territories occupied by Israel since 1967. While Rabin has dangerously maintained his public refusal to deal at all with the PLO, informed sources in the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee — the key institution in the U.S. Jewish Lobby — suggested this week that in the changed atmosphere evolving now in Israel, a solution may soon evolve in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. If the Arab countries propose that Israel negotiate with the Damascus-based Palestine National Council, "70 per cent controlled by Fatah," rather than the PLO itself, Israel would have no choice but to open negotiations with the Palestinians, since a vast majority of Israelis support discussions with the Palestinians, "no matter what the right wing thinks," the source insisted.

In totality, the above developments seriously undercut the Kissinger scheme to have Assad control the Palestinian movement and the plans to use Syrian pressure on the PLO as a means of igniting further combat in Lebanon. This policy line was conducted by West Germany's *Suddeutsche Zeitung* today, which reported an Assad-Arafat "power struggle" for the PLO. On Nov. 24, Syria's government-controlled *Al Baath* newspaper editorialized in favor of surgically cutting the PLO away from the Palestine National Council, i.e., destroying the PLO as an institution. This policy would have necessitated a new round of Palestinian-Syrian warfare in Lebanon, as the Palestinians leadership would never accept such liquidation. Reliable observers reported that Assad only ordered the editorial in terror of Kissinger-conducted threats that Israel would launch an attack against the Syrian army if Syrian forces did not "restrain" the PLO.

After Nov. 24, Syrian leaders and rightist forces openly threatened to provoke such combat over the issue of Palestinian and leftist refusal to unilaterally disarm themselves in Lebanon by today, as the Syrians were demanding. On Dec. 1, in an obviously staged affair, Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, an architect of the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, survived an assassination attempt that was immediately attributed by the New York Times to the "Black June" terrorist group and to Iraq. When the bogus "Black June" group committed a terror raid on a Damascus hotel in September, a major Syrian intervention into Lebanon was begun against the PLO and left, and it was widely assumed later this week that the bogus assassination attempt would provide a pretext for a Syrian move against the PLO-left once more.

But while new fighting is today reported in Lebanon, first reports indicate that it has been instigated by rightist militias and not the Syrians. Over the past 48 hours, both the Syrian and Jordanian governments have publicly supported Egyptian calls for a Geneva conference, and there is no Syrian government communiqué yet in response to the Khaddam affair. It is reasonable to assume at this point that Saudi and Egyptian pressure is aborting any new Kissinger Lebanon war schemes; yesterday, Saudi, and Kuwaiti representatives arrived in Lebanon to help supervise the disarmament of all militias and armed groups, attempting to reverse the anti-leftist inequities introduced by Syrian troops over the past two weeks.