

# Rare Washington Airing Of Palestinian View

by Carl Osgood

During the period of April 3 to April 6, a team of legal advisers from the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestinian Authority were in Washington. They met with officials of the State Department and the National Security Council, members of Congress and their staffs, and others, to explain the Palestinian point of view on the current *Intifada* (uprising) and what steps need to be taken to improve the prospects for peace. They also participated in two public events, one at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) and the second, which concluded their week stay in Washington, at the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP).

Their remarks at CPAP were divided into three parts. Omar Dajani explained why Palestinian Authority chairman Yassir Arafat had to reject Prime Minister Ehud Barak's proposal at Camp David, last July. Amjad Atallah provided some background on the history of the current crisis, and Nisreen Haj Ahmad made the first public report on a new initiative intended to help facilitate a way out of the current crisis. Their remarks were a sharp departure in a capital dominated by Israeli factional propaganda.

Dajani explained that what the Palestinians want is viability (of their state), independence and freedom of choice for the refugees. To be viable, Palestinian territory must have contiguity, which is vital to its development potential. Instead, what Barak had proposed was "Palestinian islands in a sea of Jewish settlements." The PA's concern was that the settlement zones the Israelis were demanding would have cut the West Bank in half, and left no room for the development of East Jerusalem.

Another central issue was water. Under Barak's proposal, Israel would have annexed large areas along the border between Israel and the West Bank which, under international law, Dajani said, entitled it to a greater proportion of the region's water supplies. Also, under the proposal, Israel would have gotten control of the entire Jordan Valley "for a time to be determined by it."

The Palestinian refugees' freedom of choice, Dajani insisted, must include the right of return to former homes in Israel, but must not be limited to that. Other choices could include the Palestinian Authority areas, where they would be welcomed as citizens, as well as Lebanon, the United States, or whatever other country they may wish to go to. "None of those choices were available to us in Barak's proposal," he said.

Amjad Atallah explained that the first *Intifada*, that began in 1987, ended with the Oslo Accords in 1993 because "the agreement promised that the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza would end in five years." As a result, the expectations of the Palestinians were very high. What has happened since then, however, has been the opposite: The settlements, development of which was expected to be frozen, have instead doubled in population, and Israel has built bypass roads — Jewish-only roads that have bisected the West Bank into dozens of pieces. The effect of all this, Atallah said, is that Palestinians have even less freedom of movement than before 1993. Additionally, two and one-half years ago, the Israelis were to have withdrawn from 90% of the West bank. Instead, today, the PA only exerts security control over 18% of its territory.

## A New Egyptian-Jordanian Initiative

Despite his gloomy picture, Atallah concluded that there is a way out of the current situation. This was left to Nisreen Haj Ahmad, who described a new joint Egyptian-Jordanian initiative, which he urged as "desperately needing support." Before embarking on the initiative, however, Ahmad described what the delegation was being told, in their meetings, about how the PA should deal with the *Intifada*. They were told that Arafat must use the PA's security forces to crush the demonstrations. "They want the *Intifada* to be crushed without giving an alternative. . . ." such as freezing the settlements.

Ahmad then presented the new Egyptian-Jordanian initiative, which consists of four elements, as exactly that alternative. The first element would be to implement what she referred to as "Sharm El-Sheikh 2." That is, both Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would call for an end to the violence. Security cooperation between Israel and the PA would resume, and Israel would pull its tanks and troops back to the posts they occupied on Sept. 29, just before Sharon launched his provocation on Temple Mount, the site of the Al Aqsa mosque. Provocation. The second element of the initiative calls on both sides to implement the commitments they've already signed on to. Israel would implement the third stage withdrawal, and resume the land-for-peace strategy, which would mean placing a freeze on further growth of the settlements. The PA would have to better implement its commitments on weapons collections. The third element of the initiative calls for a resumption of the two-track talks, the two tracks being the Oslo agreement and permanent status talks. The fourth element calls for third-party monitoring of implementation of all agreements.

Ahmad pointed out two drawbacks to this initiative, however. First, it doesn't provide a sequence of events: "It's very important politically that the leaders on each side know what's going to happen." She also noted that there's been no discussion between the two sides on this initiative. "Someone has to facilitate this," she said. "We listen to many countries," she said, "but Israel only listens to the United States."