

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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**THE PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION'S SEARCH FOR PEACE: IT IS
TIME FOR REDIRECTION**

Elias H. Tuma

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has, by most standards, come of age as a national liberation movement, as the representative of the Palestinian people, and as a force to contend with in policy making regarding the Arab - Israeli conflict and the Middle East region at large. But the PLO has realized little success in gaining recognition by its primary opponent, Israel, or in bringing a just and peaceful settlement of the conflict closer to realization. It may be that two decades have been too short a period to realize such results, but there are few indications that time has been the critical element. It is more likely that the policies of the PLO have reached a point of diminishing returns and therefore need to be redirected in more positive and fruitful ways.

The PLO has faced one crisis after another during the last two decades. It has had to cope with the Jordanian authorities, and Black September is a reminder. It has had to face various Lebanese factions, Syrian forces, and the forces of Israel in Lebanon and elsewhere; it has survived. It has had to evacuate Beirut and suffer dispersal to ten different countries, but it has recovered. And it has had to deal with internal friction, but it has succeeded to reunite at the 1987 Palestine National Council in Algeria. The PLO has also continued to provide aid to the Palestinian people in various economic and social forms. Finally, the PLO has gained diplomatic recognition as an observer at the United Nations and almost as a sovereign authority

by many nations. These are important accomplishments. Yet they fall short of the target, namely to resolve the conflict with Israel and exercise the right of self-determination in a part of Palestine, as originally recommended by the United Nations. The PLO has also not succeeded in mobilizing solid genuine support for its cause even from the Arab States or from countries which recognize it diplomatically, the rhetorical support it enjoys notwithstanding. Why then does it continue to pursue those same policies which obviously have not succeeded in realizing the objectives?

Several explanations may be offered, such as the limited options it has had and the preoccupation with other peripheral objectives. The PLO has had few options that seem viable and feasible and therefore conducive to change the policy. For example, it has limited military power of its own and even less military backing by others. Therefore the military option has been ruled out. Yet the PLO has not been able to mobilize sufficient support of a superpower to negate the military option and pursue other means fruitfully. The United States continues to be an adversary. The USSR plays the role of a supporter but only to block certain actions, rather than to initiate or enforce favorable policies or actions. At the same time, the PLO has not been able to generate enough pressure, military or otherwise, to induce Israel to modify its own policies and thus justify new policies by the PLO itself. The PLO may also have had to utilize its time and effort to recover from the military disaster and dispersal from Lebanon and therefore has not had the chance to reassess its policies.

While these explanations may justify holding on to old policies, it is possible that a major explanation is the preoccupation of the leadership with more grandiose objectives. The leaders, for example, have involved themselves as mediators between nations, as international

ambassadors for certain ideologies or organizations, and as defenders of national and global causes. Such involvement has no doubt left an impression of success which, in turn, has induced the leaders to accelerate their movement from one capital to another in pursuit of material support, but not enough of either to induce a change of policy by Israel or to realize the Palestinians objectives. Another preoccupation of the PLO which falls under the grandiose type of objectives is the identification with various regional, ideological, and religious groups or countries regardless of how close their causes are to the cause of the Palestinians. Identification with the Third World, with the Organization of African Countries, and with the Organization of Muslim Countries may have mobilized moral and material support for the PLO, but evidently not enough to make a difference. It may in fact have had counterproductive effects. On one hand, it has preoccupied the leadership with “peripheral” matters at the expense of the main objectives of the liberation movement. On the other, it has burdened the movement with commitments and implications that are contrary to the ideal objectives of the PLO. A case in point is the strong identification with the Organization of Muslim Countries, which is contrary to the ideal of establishing a secular democratic state in Palestine. Another is the identification with revolutionary Iran, only to find out that Iran has been dealing with Israel.

While the PLO has continued to pursue these tested but not very successful policies, it has also allowed some of its actions to drift into avenues that have had negative effects on the struggle. For example, the PLO seems to have allowed the guerilla war (against the military) from liberation to drift into terrorism (against civilians). Denying responsibility for terrorism or charging that all civilian Israelis are also in the military have not succeeded to offset the negative

impact such actions have left on world opinion and on the ability of the PLO to gain sufficient support for its policies to achieve its targets.

It is evident, at least to me, that there is a need for the redirection of policy. On one hand, there has been little success in achieving the targets, and, on the other, a stalemate seems to have developed which leaves Israel with the upper hand and the change to go on building settlements in the Occupied Territories at the expense of Arab land and the future of the Palestinians. The need to change policy is also evident in the fact that time has not been a friend of the Palestinians; everytime they postpone action or reject a proposition they end up as the loser. In the meantime, millions of Palestinians continue to suffer in their diaspora while Israel enjoys the power and benefits of occupation. In fact the need for change requires that the change be in a specific direction. While various directions may be considered, I suggest the following as a point of departure:

1. There is a need for clarification of and focus on the objectives of a just and peaceful settlement of the conflict in light of the changes that have taken place since 1947. Most of the platforms in existence are either vague or outdated, or both. A clear statement of feasible objectives would help the Palestinians to rethink and help others to appreciate the position of the Palestinians as people and of the PLO as their liberation movement.

2. There is a need to reassess the nature of the relationship with the Arab countries individually, and to concentrate on promoting the relationship with those countries that can be most helpful in resolving the conflict. At this point two seem most important, Syria and Egypt.

Syria is indispensable because of its proximity and territorial involvement; Egypt is indispensable because of its peace relations with Israel and its status as leader of the Arab world.

3. There is a need to reassess the value of involvement in the affairs of the other countries in the region and outside it; a case in point is the Palestinian involvement in the local quarrels between the feudalistic leaders of Lebanon. It is true that at some point the Palestinians had no option in the matter, but more efforts can be expended to avoid such counterproductive involvement.

4. There is a need to put more focus on the struggle for liberation from within the Occupied Territories, including the encouragement of local leadership to carry the responsibility. There is little doubt that the solution must come from within, as long as the military option from the outside has been excluded.

5. There is a dire need to abandon violence and to upgrade the non-violent struggle for liberation and conflict resolution. The world knows that the Palestinians exist as a people; Israel is now convinced of that and many Israelis are fighting to help establish the identity of the Palestinians as a people with full rights to sovereignty and independence. Violence has become counterproductive and should be abandoned.

6. There is a need to give clear signals to Israel that peaceful coexistence of Palestinians and Israelis is a primary objective of the Palestine Liberation Movement. Secret messages by third parties or implicit expressions of opinion are inadequate. Israel may be put on the defensive by facing it with a clear statement of these objectives. Indeed, I would go as far as to suggest that the PLO would secure a major diplomatic and moral victory and facilitate the achievement of its objectives by offering to recognize Israel unilaterally and meet directly

with its leaders to negotiate a resolution of the conflict at any time, at any place, and with no preset conditions.

The redirection of policy is not easy, but it is essential, and the more positive the new direction of policy is, the more likely it will be to realize the objectives to which the PLO has dedicated itself.

Next AVP: The Palestinians: Refugees or Citizens

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