

The importance of being earnest



Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yassir Arafat addresses the Palestine National Council in Algiers.

By Walter Ruby

ALGIERS

THE 19TH PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL (PNC) held here last month managed simultaneously to be the long-awaited moment of transcendence for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and a reassertion of the maddening ambiguity and indecisiveness for which the organization has been known for much of its 24-year history.

A strange duality ran through the four-day "Parliament of the Palestinian People," the PLO's most important legislative body. On one hand, the PLO leadership seemed to understand intellectually that politics demanded that it come close to meeting the U.S. demands—a forswearing of terrorism and "armed struggle"; recognition of Israel; and unequivocal acceptance of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, which calls for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories in exchange for Arabs' acceptance of the right of all states in the region to live in peace within secure boundaries. But on the other hand, PLO leaders found it emotionally too great a strain to make explicit what was implicit, and openly surrender their dream of a return to all of pre-1948 Palestine. In the end, the PNC fell short of formal recognition of 242 but it did make significant steps forward in moderating earlier PNC stipulations. The PNC also issued a declaration of independence for a "State of Palestine."

The PNC's duality was evident in PLO leader Yassir Arafat's opening speech when he promised to carry "an olive branch in one hand and a machine gun in the other." It was also evident in a passage in the final PNC political statement, which rejected "terrorism in all its forms," but affirmed "the right of peoples to resist foreign occupation and

colonialism and racial discrimination and their right to struggle for independence."

The duality was demonstrated most graphically by Khaled el-Hassan, the PLO's powerful chief of ideology, whom *In These Times* interviewed at the end of the conference. Hassan bitterly denounced Zionists as "draculas" who suck the blood of Palestinians, but stated emphatically that the PLO is ready to accept a West Bank and Gaza state because "we have come to the understanding that we are not strong enough to drive three-and-a-half million Jews out of Palestine."

A new era: By proclaiming the State of Palestine with an undeniably compelling declaration of independence that evoked images of Philadelphia in 1776 and Tel Aviv in 1948, the PNC transformed the parameters of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in ways that are only beginning to be defined.

Certainly the declaration of independence, which resonated with the vision of a free and democratic Palestinian state at peace with its neighbors, effectively sets siege to what the PLO calls "the mind of official Israel, which has sought to deny the possibility of any consummation of Palestinian statehood."

But after trotting out high-level spokesmen to inform the world media that it was prepared to render Israel's diplomatic defenses almost untenable by fully and unequivocally embracing Resolution 242 and by largely forswearing terrorism, the PLO pulled back. By doing so it strengthened, at least for the time being, the hand of those in Israel who argued somewhat disingenuously that the sum product of the PNC represented "nothing new."

Some mainstream PLO leaders suggested that the last-minute retreat from a full embrace of 242 represented necessary semantic

concessions to the hard-liners within the PNC who might otherwise have walked out and fractured the tenuous unity of the movement.

But the suspicion existed among many of the international journalists covering the conference that they had been the victims of a highly sophisticated disinformation campaign. Those suspicions were heightened when, despite repeated promises to the contrary, the PLO failed to provide a French or English text of the long-awaited political document in which the breathlessly heralded policy changes on 242 and terrorism were to be spelled out. Even the Arabic text of the political statement was held back until the morning after the declaration of independence—long after stories had been dispatched around the world announcing the PLO's imminent acceptance of the U.S. conditions for negotiations. When translations of the Arabic text began filtering down to

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the non-Arabic media the following day, many of the Western reporters were confronted with the unpleasant reality that they had a good deal of egg on their faces.

Nonetheless, the flap over the PLO's seemingly disingenuous tactics partially obscured the reality that the organization had taken great strides forward in modifying basic tenets of faith in ways that would have been inconceivable only a year ago.

The PLO did make a clear assertion in its political statement that it supports the convening of an international peace conference "on the basis of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338," a resolution that calls for an international conference to undertake the implementation of 242. This was a crucial change in emphasis from the position Arafat had articulated since earlier this year that the PLO accepts 242 and 338 together with all other U.N. resolutions relevant to the Palestinian problem.

In fact, the PNC political statement retained the earlier references to "all relevant U.N. resolutions concerning the Palestinian problem," a formulation Israel and the U.S. were certain to reject since the "relevant U.N. resolutions" include General Assembly Resolution 194—passed in 1949—which affirms the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Israel, and the General Assembly's 1975 "Zionism is racism" resolution, which Israelis see as attacking the legitimacy of the basic ideological underpinnings of their state. The PNC statement also affirmed the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, and to participate in an international conference on an equal footing with other participants.

Two-state solution: But despite these significant reservations, the PNC's clear basing of a settlement with Israel on Resolution 242 means that the PLO is now on record as accepting the postulate that the final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be based on the principle that all states in the region—including Israel—have the right to live in peace within secure boundaries.

An even more direct signaling of the PLO's implicit acceptance of a two-state solution could be discerned in its backhanded endorsement of General Assembly Resolution 181, the 1947 partition plan resolution that was emphatically rejected by the Palestinian side at that time. The rejection precipitated Israel's war of independence.

The inclusion of this belated endorsement of 181 in the declaration of independence comes 40 years too late for most Israelis. Nevertheless, it is extremely important from the Palestinian perspective because it puts even the hardest-line PLO elements, like George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), at least implicitly on record in support of the principle of partition and a two-state solution—even though Habash quickly announced that he continues to reject 242 and recognition of Israel and to support armed struggle.

Jerome Segal, the American Jewish professor from the University of Maryland who is widely credited with being the first to urge the PLO unilaterally to declare an independent state, is concerned that the significance of the PLO's embrace of 181 is being overlooked in both Israel and the U.S.

"Let us not forget that 41 years ago the Arab world walked out of the U.N. General Assembly when the partition resolution was passed. But in the declaration of independence they point out that Resolution 181 pro-

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