

Squaring off for Mideast peace

by James A. Graff

Appearances are deceiving. It appears to be because of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's intransigence that the world may have lost yet another opportunity to end the 40-year-old Arab-Israeli conflicts. During the past year, Western countries which had dutifully supported the US-Israeli Camp David model for a negotiated Arab-Israeli settlement, appeared to join the world consensus calling for an international peace conference under United Nations auspices. Even Peres and Washington said that they supported the idea. Soviet-Israeli relations too, had steadily thawed. Everyone except Shamir, it seemed, wanted the conference.

The reality is very different. By a margin of almost 3:1, Israeli public opinion supports Shamir's refusal to surrender an inch of occupied territory. The US may give Peres verbal support but it is not prepared to drag Israel to the peace table. No one else, including Jordan's King Hussein, can accept the borders Shamir wants. Finally, there were three separate versions of a UN-sponsored international peace conference, each with its own guiding principles and format which jointly determine the outcome of each proposed conference. There could be no agreement on a conference because there was no agreement about an acceptable outcome. The only conference the US would support would be one which would guarantee the outcome it and Peres, for different reasons, could accept. That outcome is the "Jordanian Option" according to which Jordan and Israel would divide the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It is an outcome which almost 93 percent of the Palestinians there firmly oppose, as does the PLO which enjoys the support of slightly more than 93 percent of the Palestinians whose future is at stake. The accommodation of their aspirations and their right to political and social institutions of their own choosing on the West Bank and in Gaza are clearly embodied in the principles and format of the conferences called for by the UN General Assembly and the West Europeans.

US and Peres version

For Peres and the US no such outcome is acceptable. Rather they insist upon Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as the major guiding principles for their conference. Those resolutions refer to the Palestinians as refugees and therefore not as a people with a right to self-determination. The main resolution, 242 (November 22, 1967), "emphasizes" the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, calls for "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent war," and "emphasizes" the need for secure and recognized borders for the then existing states in the region. Some interpret the resolution to require Israel's withdrawal from some, but not all, of the territory it captured. Security Council Resolution 338

(October 21 and 22, 1973) calls for a ceasefire (in the Egyptian-Israeli war), urging all the parties to the conflict to implement Resolution 242.

The implications of these resolutions are clearly that the negotiating parties are Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan. The PLO, which was not formed until after the 1967 war, would effectively be excluded from negotiations and there would be no acknowledgment of any right to self-determination for the Palestinian people. Whatever their fate, it would be sealed by agreements primarily between Jordan and Israel. The conference would provide a framework for direct state-to-state talks. The US, Soviet Union and other Permanent Members of the Security Council would play largely ceremonial roles, opening the negotiations and sanctioning their outcomes. Israel would be recognized by the Arab states.

General Assembly version

The conference the UN General Assembly now envisions would establish an independent Palestinian entity on the West Bank and in Gaza. It would be established on principles Israel and the US at present reject. In 1983 the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly for an international peace conference on the Middle East in which the Permanent Members of the Security Council, including the USA and USSR, the Palestine Liberation Organization and the contending states would be invited to participate on equal footing and with equal status. The vote was 123 in favor, 17 abstaining and 4 opposed. Australia, Canada, Israel and the US cast the four negative votes. The NATO countries, New Zealand and a scattering of US client states, abstained.

That 1983 resolution (38/58C) calls upon the Secretary General to convene an international peace conference which would proceed in conformity with a number of guidelines, including the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to return, the status of the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied since '67, acceptance of the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, and the invalidity under international law of Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. It envisions a conference in which the permanent members of the Security Council, especially the USA and the USSR, would play active roles in negotiations aimed at a comprehensive regional settlement.

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