

UNTYING THE MIDDLE EAST KNOT

We republish below "The Only Way To Peace," by Meir Vilner, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Israel and "We Are Optimists," by Yasser Arafat, Chairman, Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Both articles appeared originally in the *World Marxist Review*, 9/87.

For the past four decades the Middle East has been a bleeding wound on our planet. There have been many attempts to defuse the conflict situation but so far none have been successful. The idea of holding an international conference on a Middle East settlement has lately been gaining momentum. *WMR* asked two of the region's leading political figures to share their view of what the prospects are for convening such a conference and for bringing it to a successful completion, and what is preventing it from being held.

THE ONLY WAY TO PEACE

Meir Vilner

CC General Secretary, Communist Party of Israel

Israel's continued occupation of Arab lands is fuelling growing tension in the region and may lead to yet another war that would be more devastating than any we have previously seen and put international peace in peril. *It is urgent, vital, and in keeping with the interests of the peoples of the Middle East and our entire planet to eliminate this hotbed of war by establishing a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace.* In the situation prevailing on the international scene and in our region the only way to achieve this is by convening an international conference under the aegis of the United Nations. This explains why the idea for this conference now has more support than in the past.

There are differences in how this issue is viewed by the two major political blocs forming the present "national unity" government in Israel (Likud and Maarah). However, the significant thing is what unites them, what has been for a number of years and still is — with the approval of the US administration — the obstacle to a definitive and just settlement of the Middle East conflict.

What is this common denominator?

Both blocks deny the right of the Arab people of Palestine to self-determination, refuse to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organization as its representative, and out of hand reject the idea of a Palestinian state.

They insist on territorial acquisitions, object to Israel's withdrawal from Arab lands seized in 1967, and declare that Jerusalem, including the occupied and annexed Arab part of the city, must remain under Israeli sovereignty and that the question of its future is not negotiable. Both Likud and Maarah back the "iron fist" policy towards Palestinians in the occupied lands. They laud the strategic alliance with the USA against national liberation movements, against the independent states not only in the Middle East but in other parts of the world that have no desire to follow in the wake of US policies, and against the Soviet Union and the socialist community. Both have subscribed to Israel's official inclusion in the "star wars" programme promoted by the Washington administration. Both are attacking the interests and rights of the working people and pursuing a policy of discrimination towards the Arab population of Israel.

Once we understand what *unites* these two governing blocs we can see the substance of the *differences* between them on the question of an international conference on the Middle East and a settlement of the entire Israeli-Arab conflict.

LIKUD Position

Headed by Israel's present Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Likud does not accept the idea of holding such a conference, contending that there is nothing to talk about. Its watchword is "Eretz Israel" ("The land of Israel"). Likud's proponents deny recognition not only of the rights but of the existence of the Palestinian people, and want Israel to annex all the occupied Arab lands.

MAARAH Position

For its part, Maarah, led by the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, has lately been saying that with some reservations it is in favour of convening an international conference. One reservation is that it should be attended not by PLO representatives but by Quislings included in the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Another is that after the first sitting the conference should disband and there should be direct talks between the Israeli representatives and the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation formed along the pattern suggested by Maarah. A third condition is that the Soviet Union's participation in this international forum would depend on whether it restored diplomatic relations with Israel and acquiesced to demands that amount to interference in an internal affair, namely on the question of emigration. It is self-evident that to make preconditions for the participation of one or another side or country in an international conference is to torpedo the possibility of convening it.

Peres has admitted that he is not interested in the conference as such but feels that it should be held as a pure formality since King Hussein of Jordan is making direct talks with Israel conditional on the existence of an "international umbrella."

In other words, what Peres is suggesting is not an international conference but talks between Jordan and Israel with the participation of some Palestinian collaborationists under the aegis of the USA. The purpose here is to conclude another separate deal on the Camp David pattern, by-passing the Palestinian problem and isolating Syria. More, there are projects for "dividing functions" between Israel and Jordan in the occupied Palestinian lands: Israel would exercise the military power while Jordan and its puppets would take care of municipal affairs, utilities, and similar matters. In this way they are planning to blot out the rights of the Palestinian people.

None of these plans hold out the promise of a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in the region. On the contrary, they are aimed at perpetuating the military threat. From this it follows that the views of Likud and Maarah about an international conference diverge not over the issue's substance but over tactics.

Regardless of which of the two blocs they represent, the Israeli ruling circles could not have gone on occupying Arab territories without support from Washington. US imperialism is the principal force that has hitherto been, along with the Israeli rulers, obstructing a peaceful settlement in the region.

But this is not to say that there is no hope of holding an international conference on the Middle East. Apart from its regional implications, the Middle East crisis is a paramount global problem. It is affecting peace throughout the planet and influencing a wide spectrum of state-to-state relations. The prospect for holding a conference thus depends to a large extent on the situation in the world, particularly on the state of the relations between the USSR and the USA.

USSR Position

In the course of all these years the Soviet Union has been pressing for a comprehensive, just, and durable peace in the Middle East in keeping with the interests of all of the region's peoples and countries. It initiated the idea of holding a UN-sponsored international conference of all the sides involved in the conflict, including Israel and the Palestinian people in the person of their acknowledged and sole lawful representative, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Let me

re-emphasise: *in the situation now taking shape in the world and in our region this is the only way to extinguish the Middle East hobbed of war.*

The UN General Assembly has passed several resolutions worded in this spirit. Massive pressure can compel the US administration to consent to the holding of an international conference on the Middle East. The very fact of such a conference would add a dynamic dimension to the quests for an all-embracing settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict and galvanise the efforts on the scale of the planet, region, and individual countries to ensure the successful consummation of this forum.

C.P.I. Position

The stand of the Communist Party of Israel on problems related to a Middle East settlement rests on the resolutions adopted by the United Nations and is aimed at ensuring the rights of all the peoples in the region. Underlying the settlement should be Israel's withdrawal from all the lands seized by it in 1967, the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank of the Jordan, including the Arab section of Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, and the return of the occupied Golan Heights to Syria.

In a nutshell, the essence of the solution is two states for the two peoples: the Israeli and the Palestinian.

Meir Vilner was born in Vilna (Poland) in 1918. He went to Palestine in 1938. In 1940 he joined the Communist Party. In 1943-1948 he was a member of the CC and the CC Political Bureau, and a CC Secretary of the Communist Party of Palestine. He has been a deputy to the Knesset since 1949. A CC and CC Political Bureau member of the Communist Party of Israel since 1948, he was elected the party's General Secretary in 1965.

WE ARE OPTIMISTIC

Yasser Arafat

Executive Committee Chairman, Palestine Liberation Organisation

The Geneva Peace Conference* was to have been the instrument for settling the Middle East problems. The efforts made at the time allowed foiling the attempts of the USA and Israel to hinder a just, comprehensive, and lasting settlement of the Middle East conflict and the Palestinian problem. In this context let me recall the understanding that the Arab delegation to the conference would include PLO representatives. Moreover, in the joint Soviet-US statement on the Middle East of October 1, 1977^o the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the fact that they had their own representative were recognised by the USA for the first time.

However, developments took an unexpected turn. A visit to Jerusalem by Anwar Sadat subverted the Geneva Conference. Then followed the Camp David deal, which our people saw as a catastrophe to their cause and to the Middle East problem as a whole. The war between Iraq and Iran likewise has had extremely dangerous consequences.

Later, with the blessing of the US President Ronald Reagan and the then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin a new conspiracy was launched — the Israeli army invaded Lebanon and besieged Beirut. Together with the militarist elite in Israel, world imperialism headed by the USA believed that they had destroyed the PLO and dealt finally with the Palestinians.

An Arab saying goes: "They are of different minds in the palace and in the village." The invasion of Lebanon became the longest war fought by Israel. Its military strategy was aborted: it thought it could carry hostilities over to the enemy's territory and inflict a lightning defeat on him, as was the case in the previous quick actions that took only a few days or even hours. The siege of Beirut lasted 88 days. According to information available to the CIA, Israel suffered more casualties in Lebanon than in all other armed conflicts with Arabs.

More, despite the difficulties that the Palestinian revolution had to face after the forced withdrawal from Beirut — the attempts to create problems artificially in its ranks, and undermine the movement's unity from within — we and our Lebanese allies were able to fight an exceptionally effective and successful war of attrition in southern Lebanon. The Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin acknowledged that the "Operation Peace for Galilee" of 1982 had failed (this was said in 1987, after a lapse of five years).

Unprecedented staunchness is being displayed by our people in the occupied territories. That which is to be observed there today is *mass rising in the true sense of the word*. At the close of June, for example, Arab residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including those holding Israeli citizenship, staged a one-day protest strike with the motto "Day of Equality." This strike, involving 280,000 people, demonstrated the anger of the Arab people of Palestine at the oppression, enslavement, and racial discrimination practiced by the Israeli authorities against our people.

All the universities on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip were closed for several months. Israeli troops took them by storm, breaking into the campuses and killing and wounding. The events in the Al-Duheisha, Balata, Qalqiliya, Rafah camps and elsewhere are evidence, I repeat, of a real uprising. In the course of this uprising

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our people are reaffirming their unity and cohesion around their recognised leader, the PLO.

Similarly rugged courage is being displayed by the people living in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Some of these camps, for instance, Sabra and Chatila, have on several occasions been the scene of slaughter by the Israeli military and their surrogates. Regardless of the organisation to which they belong, all the people in these camps have fought and are continuing to fight shoulder to shoulder under the PLO banner.

This unity of the people in and outside the occupied territories has had a very beneficial effect on the situation within the ranks of the Palestinian revolution. The consolidation of Palestinian unity achieved at the 18th session of the Palestine National Council reaffirms that *our people are an integral entity, whether they live on occupied lands or in refugee camps, and that their leadership personified by the PLO is the instrument of revolutionary action*.

Note must be made of the considerable role played in this by our Algerian brothers and Soviet friends, who actively helped to unite the Palestinian contingents in the course of a long dialogue that took in various places — Algiers, Aden, Tripoli, Prague, and Moscow. Last year I spoke in Berlin with Mikhail Gorbachov, who expressed support for the efforts to consolidate the PLO ranks. Moreover, it was agreed that it was important to convene a conference on a Middle East settlement.

Later, during the visit of the French President Francois Mitterrand to the Soviet Union it was suggested that for this purpose there should be a preparatory committee consisting of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. This idea of holding a UN-sponsored international forum on the Middle East with the participation of the sides involved in the conflict, including the Palestine Liberation Organisation on a basis of equality with the others, as well as the permanent members of the Security Council was supported at the conference of heads of state and government of non-aligned countries in Harare and at the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Kuwait. Earlier, it was upheld by the Arab summit in Casablanca. The EEC members adopted a statement declaring their interest in the search for the search for a Middle East settlement on the basis of the principles enunciated by them in the Venice Declaration, i.e., the realisation of the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and PLO participation in an international conference on the Middle East. The need for such a conference has been repeatedly affirmed by the Soviet Union and the other countries of the socialist community. The Soviet stand was clearly stated in the

joint communique on the results of the Moscow visit by a delegation of the PLO Executive Committee at the close of June. This communique says that the conference should be authoritative and its purpose should be the establishment of peace based on the UN Charter and relevant resolutions and on international law. Provision must be made for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from all occupied Arab lands, including those of Palestine, and for the implementation of the inalienable rights of the rights of the Arab people of Palestine to return to their homes, to self-determination, and to the creation of an independent state.

Thus, despite the present difficult situation in our region, there is now for the first time an *actual international consensus on the question of an international conference on a Middle East settlement*. It should be borne in mind that, willy-nilly, the situation in the Middle East directly affects the destinies of the entire planet. The threat emanating from here is not confined to the region alone. Generally speaking, the Europeans and we are in one and the same boat — they are in the northern end and we in the southern. From the south our region also abuts on the borders of the Soviet Union. Any new Arab-Israeli war would inescapably undermine world peace.

In the face of the present consensus the US administration has likewise declared that in principle it agrees that there should be an international conference. But it has its own aim. It would like to use this forum as should be an international conference. But it has its own aim. It would like to use this forum as an umbrella for further outrages of the Camp David kind. Currently we are witnessing a US-Israeli plot to drag Jordan — again under the screen of an international conference — into a separate deal. Our people in the occupied territories have resolutely rejected this plot. A general Arab stand in opposition to it has begun to take shape.

We are therefore saying that there is an urgent need *to hold an Arab summit in the autumn of this year* in order to spike at Camp David No. 2 and not only to come to an agreement on convening an international conference (such agreement was already pledged in Casablanca) but also to draw up a joint plan of action at the conference with account of the new phenomena and changes in the Palestine situation and on the world scene.

The imperialists, the Israeli rulers and their surrogates in the region are seeking to undermine the success achieved at the 18th session of the Palestine National Council. It is being alleged that its outcome only complicates a Middle East settlement. Remember, the first

major decision passed at the session was to subscribe to the holding of a UN-sponsored international conference on the Middle East with the equal participation of all sides, including the PLO, and the permanent members of the UN Security Council. How does this decision complicate the search for a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace?

Also, under various pretexts attempts are being made to bribe Palestinians. This is the aim, above all, of the so-called "development plan" for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to which the USA has so far contributed 44 million dollars. Israel is annually getting direct aid amounting to 3,700 million dollars and indirect aid on the order of another 4,000 million dollars. And here the sum is only 44 million dollars. Is that enough for a development programme? Of course, not. It is no more than a sop for making new Quislings among Palestinians.

This attempt will not work. There are no Quislings among our people. As I have already noted, they are today more closely united than ever before around the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

That is why I am optimistic. A bulwark of this optimism is also the stand of the friendly Soviet Union, which has put all its weight and prestige on the side of the Palestinian people's just cause. This cause has the support of all decent, freedom-loving forces of the world, the socialist community, non-aligned states, and African and Islamic countries, which have expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine, with the Arab nation in the face of hostile challenges.

Yasser Arafat was born in 1929 in Jerusalem. An engineer by profession, he is a graduate of Cairo University. He was active in the student movement and was one of the founders of the Palestinian Fatah organisation. He has been Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the supreme commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the Palestinian revolution since 1969.

*This conference opened on December 21, 1973, and was attended by representatives of the USSR and the USA, as co-chairmen, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the UN Secretary-General. — *Ed.*

†This statement recorded, in particular, the intention of the two sides to do their utmost to facilitate the resumption of the Geneva Conference not later than in December of the same year. — *Ed.*

‡Code name for the invasion of Lebanon. — *Ed.*