

Middle East Report by Nancy Spannaus

Arafat gets mandate for peace drive

The Palestinians' closer ties to Egypt and Washington's 'Iraqi card' mean much better chances for a settlement.

The results of the 17th session of the Palestinian National Council, and the restoration of United States ties with the state of Iraq, have created the most positive opportunity for peace in the Middle East in decades. Although racked by crisis and bombed at least twice by Syrian-controlled radicals, the PNC re-elected Yasser Arafat as chairman of the PLO.

The Council also voted for closer ties with Egypt, which has until recently been isolated within the Arab world due to its 1979 peace treaty with Israel. In doing so, it followed the lead of Jordanian head of state King Hussein, who recently restored relations with Egypt.

A closer relationship between King Hussein, Mubarak, and the PLO could lead the way toward new peace negotiations in the region, in which the United States would get Israel to agree to enter discussions with the PLO. King Hussein, who hosted the PLO conference, had addressed the meeting with such a comprehensive peace proposal. This proposal was referred to the newly elected PLO executive committee for study.

Also indicative of new potential for peace negotiations in the region was the restoration of diplomatic relations on Nov. 26 between the United States and Iraq.

Given the state of hostilities between the Moscow-backed Syrian regime and the Arafat leadership of the PLO, it is remarkable that the PNC meeting took place at all. Since the U.S. troops left Lebanon, and the State Department refused arms requests from Jordan and other moderate Arabs, the entire region has been domi-

nated by the Russians, mostly through their satrap Syria.

The four Syrian-backed factions of the PLO boycotted the meeting, claiming that it was simply a packed meeting by Arafat, whom they have been trying to overthrow, if not kill. These factions were the chief antagonists against Arafat when he was in Tripoli last December. Arafat only got out alive due to a U.S.- and Israeli-backed evacuation by ship.

Khaled Fahoum, pro-Syrian speaker of the PLO, refused to attend, and issued charges from Damascus that the meeting in Amman, Jordan, was "illegal" because it failed to reach its required quorum of two-thirds of the members.

PLO officials at the conference declared that the 257 delegates out of the 378 members of the Council fulfilled the quorum requirements.

The Syrians' failure to attend meant that many of the noted terrorist spokesmen of the PLO were not present inside the meeting, but were deployed to try to stop it. Two bombs exploded outside the meeting. In an interview with the Italian daily *La Repubblica* Nov. 29, Arafat revealed that there were other incidents as well: 1) a "crazy Arab leader" (likely Qaddafi) had prepared a kamikaze airplane to smash into the meeting; and 2) a Mercedes full of explosives had been stopped at the border while coming from Syria to Amman.

Neither the George Habash-led Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, attended the conference.

Seven Syrian-backed PLO leaders

were brought up on charges of "treason" and expulsion was considered. The most prominent of these was Ahmed Gibril, whom a petition submitted by 120 of the conference attendees accused of "instigating inter-Palestinian fighting" and "working for Arab parties other than the PLO."

The Council voted to suspend them rather than expelling them, and gave them the right to "attend the legal session of the next PNC meeting if they wish to discuss the matter of their membership."

Also propitious for a peace settlement in the region was the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iraq this week. Iraq under Saddam Hussein has become an increasingly close ally of Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's President Mubarak. The reconciliation is a sign of success for attempts by Mubarak to use his pivotal position to bring together the moderate Arabs with Israel and the United States.

U.S.-Iraqi relations have been broken since the 1967 war. At that time Iraq broke off ties, and moved rapidly in the direction of alliance with the Soviet bloc.

Iraq has had ample occasion to be disillusioned with this alliance, however, especially during the last four years. With the ascendancy of the Soviet faction committed to playing the Islamic fundamentalist card, the secular Iraqi regime found itself endangered by Soviet operations among its Shi'ite population, and by the Soviet-backed crazies running the Iranian regime.

The restoration of U.S.-Iraqi ties includes no public military agreements. It does break the Kissingerian policy profile of a "pox on both your houses," however. Dumping Kissinger policy is seen by Mubarak, and all sane individuals, as the key to a long-term peace in the region.