By Herbert C. Kelman

The administration's decision to suspend the dialogue with the Palestinian Liberation Organization is a seri-
ous and dangerous error, which can be rectified only by an early offer to resume the dialogue with a
broader mandate, accompanied by a clear restatement of United States policy.

The decision is dangerous be-
cause it puts an end to the halting peace process that the US has been trying to promote in the
Middle East and thereby in-
ncreases the expectation and prob-
ability of a new war - not neces-
sarily by design, but as a result of escalating rhetoric and violent ac-
tions that can easily get out of
end to the process that it had
been hoping to scuttle. It also
provided further confirmation to
the view in some Israeli circles that US criticism of Israel is meant as a sop to Arab countries
European allies, and domestic
constituencies and need not be
taken at face value.

The other winners in the US
decision to suspend the dialogue
with the PLO were Abu-Abbas
and his fellow Palestinian oppo-
nents to Chairman Yasser Arafat's
peace initiative. They succeeded
in achieving the probable pur-
purpose of the attempted raid on
Israel's coast on May 30: the scut-
ing of the nascent peace process.
They also demonstrated their
capacity to undermine future peace
efforts by mounting terrorist ac-
tions and thereby gaining control
over US policy.

The issue is not US policy to-
ward terrorism, which is one of
the forms of violence that cannot be
contenzzed even in a world that,
unfortunately, still considers organized violence a legitimate means of pursuing national objec-
tives. The issue is the conduct of
foreign policy with maximal flexi-
bility, effectiveness, and adher-
ence to principle. By these crite-
ria, the way the US-PLO dialogue
structured from the begin-
ning can only be described as
highly unprofessional. Under
constraint from Congress, the ad-
mistration has boxed in the dia-
logue with conditions that re-
duced its effectiveness and made
it vulnerable to the maneuvers of
Palestinian rejectionists and
Israel extremists.

The opening of the dialogue
in December of 1988 was a policy
decision, based on the judgment that the PLO was an essential
partner in any realistic peace process, and that the PLO leadership
under Arafat was prepared to engage itself seriously in that
process. Neither the attempted
raid of May 30 nor Arafat's fail-
ure to respond to it in the precise
form that the administration
scripted for him, change the wis-
dom of the original policy deci-
sion or the validity of the judg-
ments on which it was based.

The raid and the PLO re-
sponse to it demonstrate two un-
fortunate realities: that Arafat is not in control of the actions of all of the groupings that consti-
tute the PLO, and that he is con-
strained by the declining support
among Palestinians, inside and
outside the occupied territories,
for his peace initiative. Public
support for the PLO peace initia-
tive has faded because many
Palestinians have concluded, pre-
naturally, in my view, that it has
failed. They have seen no recip-
rocation by the Israeli govern-
ment of fundamental concessions
that the Palestinian leadership
has made, and even the one vis-
ible success of the PLO initiative -
the now-suspended dialogue with
the US - has turned out to be more of a charade than a forum for substantive discussion.

There is no question that the peace
process would be stronger if there
were no terrorist actions or if the PLO were prepared to com-
promise and nutritious such ac-
tions specifically and unquali-
cally. It would also be stronger if
there were an Israeli government
that was prepared to stop settle-
ment activities in the occupied
territories, to reduce the level of
violence against Palestinians, and
to commit itself to peace on the
basis of a historic compromise.
But US policy must be based on
an assessment of the political re-
atalies on the ground, including
the constraints under which politi-

cal leaders operate. Such an
assessment suggests that the PLO
remains a necessary partner to a
peace process, that Arafat re-
 mains committed to his undertak-
gs of December 1988, and that
his leadership of the PLO - con-
strained as it is - still offers the
best hope for negotiating a mutu-
al, satisfactory Israeli-Palestinian
peace agreement.

Under the circumstances, the
US policy objective of promoting
a viable peace process required us
to continue the dialogue with the
PLO - and indeed to upgrade it -
and thus to strengthen the hands
of the pro-negotiation elements in
the Palestinian community and
the Arab world. Conditioning the
continuation of the dialogue on
the PLO's adherence to a specific
set of words and actions dictated
by the US was tactics - unwork-


gly symptomatic of a flawed rela-
tionship. The dialogue was an in-
strument of US policy, not a favor
to the PLO. Within such a rela-
tionship, the appropriate US re-
action would have been to com-
municate to the PLO that the May
30 raid has made the dialogue po-
litically embarrassing, and to pro-
pose a joint search for a mutually
acceptable formula to continue
the dialogue.

How can the damage be re-
paired? First, the administration
should start now - with quiet diplomacy, probably with the
help of unofficial contacts - to
ascertain what sentiments about
the circumstances under which the dia-
logue can be resumed. Through
such consultations, it should be
possible to determine what path
feels able to take, short of yielding to
US ultimatum, that would allow the administration to declare that
the dialogue is continuing. Doing the
dialogue have been met.

Second, the resumption of the
dialogue should be viewed as an
opportunity to redefine its pur-
pose, upgrading both its content
and the level of its participants.
The temporary suspension of US-
PLO talks will have served a con-
servative function if its resump-
tion is used to signal a new
commitment to the dialogue as a form for serious exchange on
substantive issues. The dialogue
must move beyond its previous
role as a symbol and an opportu-
nity to moderate the PLO, and
become a venue for exploring Palestinian requirements and
their ideas about the process and outcome of negotiations.

Third, resumption of the dia-
logue should be accompanied by
clear and detailed statement of
American policy regarding the Is-
raeli-Palestinian conflict. The
statement should include those
positions to which the US has
been committed for a long time,
such as: Search for a solution that
assures both Israeli security and
Palestinian political rights; adher-
eance to a land-for-peace formula;
opposition to Israeli settlements
in the occupied territories; and
having the status of Jerusalem de-
termined in the course of peace
negotiations.

The statement should also add,
however, an essential point that has so far been lacking in the fresh understandings that
are shaping the American commit-
ment: That a fair and lasting solu-
tion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be based on recogni-
tion of the self-determination of
peoples and the right of both na-
tional self-determination in the
land that they share. Moreover, a
clear and full US statement should
make clear that a peace process
cogent of Palestinian nation-
hood cannot exclude the PLO,
drive a wedge between Pal-
estinians in the occupied terri-
tories and those outside, or rule out a clear and full US statement - through nego-
tiations - of a Palestinian state
in peaceful coexistence with the
Jewish state of Israel.

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