

Requirement for Peace: Politically Intact P.L.O.

By Herbert C. Kelman

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — It is in the interest of Palestinians, Lebanese, the United States and most Arab countries — as well as in the long-term interest of Israel — that the Palestine Liberation Organization emerge from the crisis in west Beirut with its political standing intact.

Whatever one's feelings about the P.L.O., it is the only Palestinian body that has the capacity to make peace with Israel because it has become the symbol and embodiment of Palestinian nationhood. Its efforts to give voice and concrete expression to Palestinian national aspirations have succeeded in achieving international recognition and establishing national institutions. The P.L.O. has a monopoly on legitimacy in Palestinian eyes and thus only it — or some agency that directly derives legitimacy from it — can negotiate a settlement that will gain the acceptance and commitment of most Palestinians. Therefore, it is in the interest of those who seek a lasting, mutually satisfactory resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to insure that the P.L.O. leadership — still very much intact in west Beirut — is able to survive and maintain its political credibility.

But if the P.L.O. has the capacity to make peace, does it also have the will to do so? It is significant that P.L.O. leaders have repeatedly — even in the midst of the current confrontation — signaled their readiness to move toward a political accommodation with Israel, although unfortunately these signals have remained ambiguous because of sharp divisions within the Palestinian movement and the Arab world and a lack of responsiveness on the part of Israel and the United States. If the present leadership survives politically — while recognizing the futility, for both sides, of a military option — the movement toward a political solution can be accelerated. If the P.L.O. leadership is destroyed or discredited, however, it will take a very long time before a new Palestinian leadership can emerge — within or outside of the P.L.O. — that has the will and capacity to make peace. The field will be left to rejectionists, lacking the will, and to quailings, lacking the capacity.

In view of the vital role of the P.L.O. in the peace process, United States policy should be directed to two related purposes: insuring that P.L.O. leaders not only survive the present confrontation but also emerge with their political standing and credibility intact; and doing so in ways that will encourage the P.L.O. to commit itself unambiguously to a political solution. Actions intended to insure the

P.L.O.'s survival can bolster its will to make peace by strengthening the proponents of a political solution within P.L.O. councils and by demonstrating United States responsiveness. What can Washington do?

First, it can reduce the probability of an Israeli assault on west Beirut. President Reagan can make it clear that he considers such an assault unacceptable and persuade the Israeli Government to negotiate more flexibly. Once P.L.O. leaders are presented with options other than unconditional surrender — options enabling them to pursue political alternatives — they may be persuaded, in turn, to evacuate Beirut. Such actions, then — in addition to preventing bloodshed and devastation — may insure the honorable survival of P.L.O. leaders with a political agenda.

Second, Washington can help negotiate a departure agreement that strengthens the P.L.O. leadership's political position. If the agreement provided protection for Palestinian civilians against attack and expulsion — essential under any circumstances — P.L.O. leaders would not be vulnerable to charges of abandoning their people. If it contained an explicit promise of American recognition of the P.L.O. in return for P.L.O. recognition of Israel, P.L.O. leaders would achieve a major political objective while confirming their commitment to a negotiated settlement.

Finally, whatever the terms of the departure agreement, Washington can publicly emphasize features that strengthen the P.L.O. leadership in its search for a political settlement. Along with its evident political failures, the P.L.O. has achieved political successes in the last few weeks: it has demonstrated political agility, forced the Palestinian issue to the center of attention and persuaded many that Palestinian self-determination is a necessary condition for Middle East peace. An open and clear American acknowledgement of these successes and their implications would both enhance the political prestige of P.L.O. leaders and encourage them to channel that prestige into political movement.

If, by these and other means, the P.L.O. survives as an effective representative of the Palestinian people with genuine incentives to pursue a political option, Israel will have a negotiating partner with whom it can make peace at last.

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