Early this year, a British-Palestinian journalist, Faris Glubb, was refused a visa to visit Australia for a speaking tour. The decision was in keeping with the policy of both Liberal and Labor governments of excluding Palestinian speakers from Australia.

The only exception to this ban was the 1976 tour by two members of the General Union of Palestinian Students. Ironically, they were admitted by then Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock — mainly because the Liberal government was keen to increase trade with Arab countries such as Egypt and Iraq.

The Labor Party's Middle East policy, developed under the Whitlam government, was posed as more "even handed" than the Liberals pro-Israel policy. In opposition, Labor held some talks with the Palestinians (Bill Hayden met Yasser Arafat in 1981) and called for the withdrawal of Australian troops from the Sinai. Although calling for a "just solution" to the Palestinian problem, ALP policy has stopped short of recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organisation — even after many European social-democratic and conservative governments did so.

ALP policy has always been sensitive to the pro-Israeli lobby in Australia. This has meant a less than even-handed interpretation of their "even-handed" policy. But even this policy was destined to change with the victory of Hawke over Hayden as ALP leader, followed by his victory in the election. Bob Hawke admires Israel greatly, and he quickly instituted a review of Labor policy.

Labor's promise to withdraw from the Sinai "peace keeping" force was dishonoured within weeks, after Hayden held talks with the Israelis, the Egyptians and the United States. In the United Nations, Australia continues to vote as close as possible to Israeli and United States wishes, despite the shift in international opinion towards recognition of Palestinian rights.

And, as Faris Glubb has shown, the Hawke government continues the "bipartisan" policy of Australian governments of banning all speakers who are even vaguely associated with the PLO. In this article, ALI KAZAK argues the case for Australian government recognition of the PLO ....
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There seems to be widespread agreement that Australia's approach to the recognition of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation should be based on the assumption that its fundamental interests lie in a just and lasting peace in the area. Feelings run very strongly in that part of the world. The conflicts within the region are overlaid by power struggles between East and West, and it would be very easy for a regional quarrel to develop into a general confrontation.

The question that must be posed and answered therefore is whether recognition of the PLO would enhance or diminish the chances for peace.

Support for the PLO

At the outset, we confront the extraordinary fact, given the existence of the recognition controversy, that there seems to be no doubt in almost anyone's mind that the PLO is in fact the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

All available evidence supports this fact. A 1982 poll of West Bank Palestinians, commissioned by Time magazine and conducted by the Tel Aviv Public Opinion Research Institute, revealed that 86 percent favoured "a Palestinian state run solely by the PLO" (Time, 24 May, 1982). The Jerusalem Post (international edition, 20-26 February, 1983) reported a February 1983 poll of West Bank opinion showing "massive backing for Arafat" to the extent of 90 percent. And a recent book on the West Bank by an Israeli journalist (West Bank Story) by Rafik Halabi, reviewed by Bernard Avishai in the New York Review of Books, 10 June, 1982) cites and concurs with the statement by a Palestinian journalist that "There are two camps on the West Bank today — PLO supporters and PLO members."

In addition to these empirical findings and observations, we have the singular fact that nobody other than the PLO even claims to speak for the Palestinian people. For serious observers of the Middle East conflict, there is no question of splitting the Palestinian people from the PLO. As even Labor federal parliamentarian Ralph Jacobi remarked on 7 May, 1984, "The political basis of the PLO is the predicament of the Palestinian people."

If the PLO is, in fact, the representative of the Palestinian people, how can Australia refuse to recognise it as such and at the same time support its right to participate in negotiations to determine their future? Not only does such a contradictory position smack strongly of insincerity on Australia's part, but it also places great obstacles in Australia's way if we want to play any role in aiding or encouraging negotiations leading to real peace.

To find out what Palestinians really want, one must listen to and talk with their real representatives. Negotiations that exclude the PLO exclude the Palestinians.

The Australian government seems to realise the inconsistency of the position and attempts to resolve it by having diplomatic contact with the PLO (outside Australia) but not recognition.

The government has refused to grant a visa to Palestinian journalist Faris Glubb to tour Australia, and will exclude the overwhelming majority of Palestinians (who support the PLO) from obtaining a visa because "Consistent with its firm opposition to the use of force, the Government did not agree to a visit by a propagandist for an organisation of some of whose constituent members engage in violence, and publicly claim attribution for acts of terrorism". Putting to one side the question of "terrorism" (which we shall deal with shortly), this policy stance has not only been evident in the visits to Australia of representatives of numerous national-military resistance organisations, ranging from the Afghani Mujahedeen to SWAPO, the IRA or groups in the Pacific, Asia and Central America. In particular, the representative of the neo-fascist Lebanese Phalange, Naoum Farah, was warmly received by Prime Minister Bob Hawke on 13 September 1984, just days before the second anniversary of the massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila camps by the Phalange, assisted by the Israel Defence Forces.

Since Australia places no such artificial limits on its contact with Israel, it is inevitable that we are getting a one-sided and inaccurate understanding of the situation as a whole. Even if non-recognition were merely symbolic, and it is hard to see how it could be, it would involve Australia in a dangerous game of failing to encourage negotiations with the real parties, making it all the less likely that any negotiations will occur and, even if they do, that the results will bear any relation to Palestinian aspirations. It is hard to see how a just and lasting peace could be achieved in those circumstances.

Following Israel's Wishes

Of the various reasons offered to justify Australia's position, there is one deserving attention at the outset, because it seems, for many people, to override all other considerations. It is the claim that Australia should not recognise the PLO because Israel refuses to negotiate with the PLO.

In the first place, it is not true that all parties in Israel oppose recognition of the PLO. Not only do Rakah and the Progressive List for Peace, parties with a mostly Palestinian base and six members in the Knesset, support recognition of the PLO, but so does a growing body of Jewish opinion in Israel.

In January 1982, three prominent Israelis (editor Uri Avnery, Reserve General Mattityahu Peled and former finance ministry director-general Yaacov Arnon), leaders of the Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace and members of the Shei party, had official talks in Tunis with PLO leader Yasser Arafat. According to the Jerusalem Post (international edition of 23-29 January, 1982), Peled said on Israeli television after the talks that he was "convinced the PLO's activities were now aimed at reaching peace by establishing two states — Israel and a Palestinian state — side by side".

While Israel's government and major parties are opposed to peace negotiations with the PLO, Jewish opinion in Israel is far from monolithic in this regard. It would be a grave error to allow Israel's refusal to deal with the PLO on fundamental issues to determine Australia's policy.

The basic reason for this is Israel's claim, on religious and historical grounds, to all of Palestine and its systematic effort to overwhelm the Palestinian population by settlement and land acquisition. This has been the claim and aim of the Zionist movement from its inception to the
aware of the Palestinians' sovereign aspirations in the West Bank and Gaza. City Square, Melbourne 1983.

Refusing to deal with the PLO is a way of avoiding negotiations with the Palestinian people altogether, perhaps forever, or at least until sufficient "facts on the ground" have been created. If this is the case, Australia is playing directly into Israel's hands. "Rejectionism", a term often misapplied to the PLO and Arab states, should refer to Israel and the United States who have, as Noam Chomsky well illustrates in The Fateful Triangle (Pluto Press, 1983), rejected the well established international consensus on a Middle East solution.

The Question of "Terrorism"

A another recurring theme has been the question of "terrorism". The PLO has long been characterised by Israel as a "terrorist organisation", no doubt in part to suggest that it has no organic relation to the Palestinians, but also to give grounds for Israel's refusal to deal with it. Israel seems to claim a moral right not to negotiate with the PLO either because, as "terrorists", they are morally inferior to the Israeli government or because the wrongs responsible for many acts of terror such as the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946 and the massacre at Deir Yassin in 1948. Remember that these events took place many years before the PLO was even founded.

Can the government that carried out the brutal bombing of Beirut in 1982, which left tens of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians dead, claim that the balance of righteousness or injury is on its side? Can the Israeli government make this claim after being held responsible by its own judiciary for the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, two days and nights of hell on earth that left at least 800 Palestinians dead? This minimum estimate is more than twice as high as the claims made by the opponents of recognition for total Israeli deaths attributed to the PLO. In his book on the war, the then Israeli Jacobo Timerman wrote that in July 1982 alone (i.e. not counting the massacre of Sabra and Shatila), "more children were killed in Beirut than during thirty years of terrorism in Israel". (The Longest War, p.140). It is important to remember that it was the Israeli claim that the PLO was merely a "terrorist organisation" with no link to the Palestinian people that led directly to this tragedy. It could only have occurred against a population rendered defenceless by a two-month siege aimed precisely at dislodging its only defenders.

Even if Australia should disagree with the means used by the PLO in the past, this is no basis for refusing to recognise and deal with it as the representative of the Palestinians, especially since Australia continues to deal with Israel despite all the features of Israeli policy towards Palestinians that Australia finds objectionable.

Israel's "Right to Exist"

The Australian government has suggested that it would recognise the PLO only if the PLO would recognise the existence of Israel. This, of course, is the position of the US government, as set out in the Memorandum of Agreement between Yigal Allon, Israel's then foreign minister, and Henry Kissinger in September 1975, which stated that the United States "will not recognise or negotiate with the PLO so long as the PLO does not recognise Israel's right to exist and does not accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338". This issue seems to have two distinct aspects, one having to do with Israel's "security" and the other with a kind of moral assent by the PLO to the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

The word "right" is of crucial significance here, because what is being asked of the PLO is not that it merely recognise the fact of existence, even in the sense of entering peace negotiations that could ultimately lead to the peaceful existence of two states, but that the PLO accord moral legitimacy to the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state of Israel.

Such a precondition is really an extraordinary phenomenon, apparently unknown to international law and practice. Is Australia required to grant moral legitimacy to every regime and state with which it has relations? Is such moral assent entailed by having such relations, so that we must be taken to approve of every state with which we deal? Of course not. So it is hard to see why recognition of the "right" of Israel to exist should be at all relevant as a precondition to the recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian...
people. Certainly Australia has relations with many states, including most of the Arab states, that do not recognise Israel.

If the Palestinians feel aggrieved by the creation of the state of Israel in their midst and the general disaster for them that has followed the advent of Zionism in the region (and can anyone deny that they have at least some grounds for this grievance?), and if they project a vision of a secular democratic Palestine or express a desire for the status quo ante, should they be forced to abandon their vision if there are sufficient objective guarantees that they will not seek to impose it by force? In any event, why should they be forced to abandon it before they are offered anything in return, as a precondition for negotiations?

In 1937, David Ben Gurion, a leader of the Zionist movement, said:

The acceptance of partition does not commit us to renounce Trans-Jordan: one does not demand from anybody to give up his vision. We shall accept a state in the boundaries fixed today, but the boundaries of Zionist aspirations are the concern of the Jewish people and no external factor will be able to limit them. (Zichronot, Memoirs, Volume 4 [1937]. Tel Aviv Am Ovrd Publishers, 1974. p. 151.)

And of course in 1947, Menahem Begin said of the partition resolution:

The partition of the homeland is illegal. It will never be recognised. The signature of institutions and individuals of the partition agreement is invalid. It will not bind the Jewish people. Jerusalem was and will forever be our capital. Eretz Israel will be restored to the people of Israel. All of it. And forever. (Menahem Begin, The Revolt, Revised Edition. New York, Dell Publishing Company Inc., 1977. p. 433.)

Australia does not make it a condition of recognition of Israel that it abandon these claims. Australia continues to stand by Israel even as Israel imposes them on the Palestinians by force. Israel's hypocrisy in these circumstances in refusing to deal with the PLO on the grounds that it does not recognise Israel's right to exist is manifest. How can Australia make it a condition of recognition of the PLO that it first grant moral assent to the legitimacy of a continuing attack on its national existence?

In addition, Australia should not forget that Israel has indicated more than once that it would not recognise the PLO even if the PLO were to recognise Israel. Conservative Israeli governments have already given explicit support to the policy of Labor governments, which is "total opposition to negotiation with the PLO even if the latter recognises the state of Israel and its right to exist and stops terror acts altogether". (Davar, 4 July, 1975.) Israeli Cabinet Secretary Dan Meridor declared in early 1984 that "Israel has reiterated it will never negotiate with the PLO even if the guerrilla organisation recognised the Jewish state's right to exist". (Australian Jewish News, 16 March, 1984.)

Numerous other national resistance movements, which do not recognise the regimes they oppose, are not treated by the Australian government the way the PLO has been.

The fatal flaw in UN Resolution 242, so far as the Palestinians are concerned, is that it does not recognise the Palestinians at all. Add to this the numerous UN resolutions not recognised by Israel (including the Palestine partition resolution itself and the resolution admitting Israel to the UN on the condition that the Palestinian refugees be allowed to return home), and the real double standard seems to be operating in the requirement that the PLO must first recognise Resolution 242 before it will be recognised as the representative of the Palestinians.

The whole issue of recognition is based on a completely false reciprocity. The PLO is being asked to recognise Israel's right to exist, not as a condition of the right of a Palestinian state to exist, but as a condition of the right of the PLO to represent the Palestinians. In return for this, the PLO should in fairness be asked only to recognise the right of the Israeli government to represent non-Palestinian Israelis, in other words, the right of non-Palestinian Israelis to choose their own representatives. But, of course, nobody suggests that the PLO has ever refused to do this.

The PLO has more than once expressed its willingness to negotiate an accommodation that could include peaceful coexistence, more recently in
the endorsement by the Palestine National Council of the September 1982 Fez plan. That plan envisages withdrawal from the 1967-occupied territories and the dismantling of all Israeli settlements established since then, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and “formalising guarantees for peace among all states in the region including the independent Palestinian state”. But even the PLO’s ultimate vision, made in the form of an official offer by chairman Arafat at the United Nations in 1974, for a “democratic state where Christians, Jews and Muslims live in justice, equality, fraternity and progress” including “all Jews now living in Palestine who choose to live with us there in peace and without discrimination”, is more than any Israeli government has ever offered to the Palestinians. 

Israel’s “Security” 

Separated from the question of moral recognition, it is hard to see how Israel’s “security” could be an obstacle to negotiations with the real Palestinian representatives. Naturally, a major aspect of any talks would have to be the security of both parties, but it is hard to see how the talks themselves could threaten Israeli security.

In fact, it seems that the notion of a Palestinian state is often perceived to be the threat, and recognition of the PLO is feared merely because it might lead to the creation of such a state. Two responses can be made to this view.

Firstly, Australia must be even-handed in its concern for human security. Could anything be clearer from the events in Lebanon in 1982 than that it is Palestinian security that is endangered by the lack of a state?

Secondly, what does Israel, the world’s fourth-ranking military power, have to fear from a new Palestinian state? More importantly, would not a Palestinian state give some measure of dignity and satisfaction to a people accustomed to the dependency, desperation and frustration of nearly four decades of refugee marginality, and wouldn’t this be the best objective guarantee of security for everyone in the region?

If fear of the possible eventuality of a Palestinian state is the ground on which Israel refuses to recognise or negotiate with the PLO, it has nothing at all to do with security, and can only be related to the pursuit by force of the self-interested Israeli claim mentioned earlier to dominion over all of Palestine, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip, at the expense of the Palestinian inhabitants.

Conclusion

One of the reasons advanced for Israel’s refusal to negotiate with the PLO stands up to close scrutiny and certainly none can serve as a basis for Australia’s refusal to recognise the PLO, or to refuse Palestinian representatives the right even to be heard in this country.

Israel’s refusal to negotiate with the PLO, even if the PLO recognises Israel, seems to be part of its strategy to extend the dominion of the Jewish state to include all of Palestine.

Israel’s policy of delegitimising the PLO has been the basis for all of its attempts to eradicate Palestinian nationalism and aspirations, from the banning of the Palestinian flag throughout the territory occupied by Israel and the dismissal of faculty members of West Bank universities who do not disavow the PLO in writing, through to the slaughter of the Palestinians in Lebanon in the name of eliminating the PLO. These actions are only rendered defensible by the artificial splitting of the PLO from the Palestinian people, and they are indeed necessitated (from Israel’s purely selfish point of view) because the PLO is so closely bound up with Palestinian nationalism and expresses it so well.

Over a hundred UN member states currently recognise the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians, including Austria, China, Greece, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Turkey, the USSR and Tanzania (who accord the PLO full diplomatic status), and Belgium, Brazil, Finland, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru and Spain (who accord it political recognition without diplomatic status). In June 1980, nine heads of states of the European Economic Community accepted the PLO as one of the participants that must be included in peace negotiations. This was reaffirmed by them in March 1983. And, of course, the UN General Assembly resolved in 1974 that the PLO was the “representative of the Palestinian people” and in 1975 the General Assembly and the Security Council invited the PLO to participate in that capacity in all matters relating to the Middle East.

Australia’s failure to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people aids Israel’s charade. Australia’s recognition of the PLO would help bring peace to the region.

How? Lasting peace in the Middle East cannot be imposed. It can only come through negotiations, and the key to breaking the current impasse is to take steps to bring the parties together. It is obvious that the Palestinians have everything to gain from such a process. That is why the PLO is willing, and has been willing since 1974, to enter into negotiations without preconditions.

On the other hand, given the terrible military blows it has inflicted on the Palestinians and the complete control it exercises over the territories in issue, Israel has little or no incentive to negotiate or compromise on the fundamental issues. Israel is buying time in the hope of extinguishing all hope of Palestinian sovereignty. This is precisely the goal of its settlement policy. A stalemate is in Israel’s interest, and time is on its side.

As one of Israel’s staunchest friends over the years, Australia is in a position to give Israel some incentive to negotiate by refusing to countenance its attempts to avoid negotiations with the Palestinians through the PLO. Recognising the PLO is one of the few concrete steps, and certainly the least drastic, that Australia can take in the interests of peace. Not only will it indicate our unwillingness to contemplate Israel’s plans for the area, but more importantly it will give considerable solace and encouragement to those courageous forces within Israeli society who are genuinely interested in peace, but who, when they make contact with the PLO to have discussions that are so necessary, are branded “traitors” by the Israeli government.

The author thanks Michael Mandel for his assistance with this article.

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