

1996 DIPLOMATIC

9 January

Visit of Professor Dr. Karl-Heinz Hornhues, Member of the Bundestag [German Parliament] and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Bundestag

Topic: Current Political Situation in the Palestinian Territories

Participants: Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Dr. Riad Malki, Director, Panorama Center, Jerusalem; Sheikh Jamil Hamami, Director, Islamic Cultural and Scientific Society, Jerusalem; Dr. Nazmi Al-Ju'beh, Birzeit University; Mr. Martin Kobler, Head of the German Representative Office, Jericho; and Mr. Large, German Diplomat.

SUMMARY

The discussion centered around the recent assassination of Yahya Ayyash and its effect on the general political situation. The Palestinian delegation explained that the productive dialogue between the PNA and Hamas was jeopardized by the event and that Arafat himself had paid his condolences to Ayyash's family as he was considered a Palestinian martyr. Many Palestinians were shocked by the reaction of Leah Rabin, who said she wished her husband had been alive to see the assassination. However, it was noted that this is an example of the deep feelings of suspicion and hatred that still exist among the parties to the conflict. The assassination was also cited as an example of Israel's still not having altered its policy of violent retaliation.

On the upcoming elections *Dr. Abdul Hadi* noted that most candidates express support for the same issues but run without a real platform. The opposition maintains its presence and is preparing for the municipal elections where it expects to have more say. The main purpose of the elections was to legitimize the leadership which the Israelis would then have to recognize. On the topic of Jerusalem *Dr. Abdul Hadi* said the idea that the Israelis will be able to avoid compromising on the issue of Jerusalem, despite their statements to that effect, is a delusion.

Dr. Abdul Hadi concluded by saying that there are many challenges ahead for the Palestinians, such as transforming the Intifada society into a civil society, to create and implement by-laws governing the people and to maintain the credibility of the elected government bodies. There was a reminder that democracy cannot simply be mandated; it must have an extensive infrastructure to support it. As for the economy, the closure and the high rate of unemployment have to be fought in order to move forward without looking back and build for the future.

Professor Hornhues said he had heard that Peres was in a weak position when it comes to security and this is why the Israeli side stresses the aspect of their internal security. He asked to which extent Palestinians would be ready to compromise on outstanding issues such as Jerusalem.

Dr. Abdul Hadi replied by saying that it was the Palestinians who changed after the DoP and not the Israelis. As for the final status issues, he said that it is the Israeli tactic to separate the various issues but that for the Palestinian side, they are all one package. He reminded the visitor that the international view on Jerusalem was that it is not Israeli, and explained that the Palestinian stance was to share the city; to keep it an open - not "united" - city, with equally shared sovereignty and two municipalities, two flags, etc., for the two peoples who live in it.

Dr. Riad Malki said that both sides are changing but neither to the same extent, nor in the same way, nor at the same speed. Leah Rabin's remarks on the assassination of Ayyash showed that the transformation is very slow and there is still much hatred to overcome. On Jerusalem he added that for decades Jerusalem was not talked about by the Israelis, specifically to pinpoint it as part of the West Bank with no real significance. To have highlighted the issue would have isolated it.

Sheikh Jamil Hamami said that the Palestinians have changed a great deal while the Israelis have not, and still possess the same mentality in terms of aggression and revenge; the killing of Ayyash was just the latest proof. He added that the Israelis are fooling themselves if they think they can continue like this and reach a final settlement without changing their attitude or without compromising on Jerusalem. Sheikh Hamami said that Jerusalem has an Arab, an Islamic and an international dimension, and he appealed to the three arenas to remain fully aware of Israel's position towards Jerusalem and its practices in the city.

Dr. Nazmi Ju'beh reiterated that Jerusalem's unity is a myth and that the city has been divided into two parts for more than 20 years. He said that Israeli annexation and statements to the effect that Jerusalem is "non-negotiable" are considered null and void, and that although it may be a red line, eventually the Israelis will talk about it. He recalled that they originally refused to talk to the PLO but eventually did. Dr. Ju'beh said that it was as simple as this: if they want peace they have to pay the price, i.e., Jerusalem. He added that the Palestinians have changed, and are not dogmatic anymore but more pragmatic. This is why they accepted UN Resolutions 242 and 383 as a basis for the peace talks. He concluded that Palestinian needs in Jerusalem are manifold, on the national, municipal, political and cultural level. They don't own Jerusalem but recognize its meaning for the Arab-Muslim world and the Christians.

Professor Hornhues said that he asked Netanyahu what he would do with regard to the peace process and the Oslo agreements if he won the elections. The response was: "a treaty is a treaty," but that his government would do it "better." Professor Hornhues then inquired about the Palestinian reaction to the report of the EU Observer Delegation.

Dr. Abdul Hadi said that people should not forget that the elections were the first of this kind of political experience for the Palestinians, and that they were basically conducted in a serious manner although some

mistakes were obvious.

Dr. Ju'beh added that elections require a democratic infrastructure that does not yet exist in Palestine. He said he was surprised by the report as the EU should have anticipated certain failures. The real challenges are still lying ahead: to build on these elections for the future, in terms of democratization, formation of a party system and manifestation of the notion of political pluralism.