

1996 DIPLOMATIC

29 February

Meeting with a Diplomatic Delegation from the UK

Topic: Palestinian Legislative Council and Palestinian National Council

Participants: Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, PASSIA; Janet Hancock, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), London; David Haines, British Consulate General, Jerusalem; Mary Pring, British Consulate General, Jerusalem; and Sarah Armstrong, FCO, London.

SUMMARY

Janet Hancock, researching developments in Palestine since the elections for the PLC on 20 January, asked for an interpretation of the elections, including the future role of the PLC and prospects for democracy in Palestine.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi responded that the elections themselves had presented three different pictures. In Gaza, people exercised their right to vote in an atmosphere of euphoria, a result of the passage of two years since the end of the occupation and the establishment of the PNA. In Jerusalem, the city was "reoccupied" with a massive Israeli military presence, which constituted a clear violation of the arrangements made in the Oslo II agreement. A positive development was the degree of mobilization and participation among female voters. On the West Bank, however, there were mixed feelings, with participation in the elections being clouded by a sense of the occupiers being at the door.

Janet Hancock pointed out the symbolic value and significance of the elections in East Jerusalem.

Asked about the likely political formations in the PLC, *Dr. Abdul Hadi* identified four groups:

1. "The President's men," identified with the Chairman.
2. A progressive, intellectual group forming around individuals such as Haidar Abdul Shafi and Hanan Ashrawi. This group might evolve into a Social Democratic Party.
3. The most significant group, which may develop into a leadership role in the PLC and society, consisting of an alliance between the returning PLO old guard and younger activists.
4. Finally, those who are waiting to see how the Council develops and what factions emerge before committing themselves.

Dr. Abdul Hadi added that it is still unclear when the PLC will meet for its first session, and how the Council can convene given the current Israeli closure of the Palestinian Territories. The lack of preparation among the PLC members for their duties and responsibilities is also cause for concern, and something which had been commented on by

several members of the diplomatic corps in Jerusalem.

With regard to Jerusalem, he said that the Jerusalem Arab Council will be expanded to include the seven PLC members from the Jerusalem constituency, and heads of various Palestinian institutions in the city. This will expand the membership to around 30, providing a community body as an independent voice for the city.

He then explained that the members of the PLC will automatically become members of the PNC. The latter body has a membership of 680, of whom 186 are representatives of the Palestinian Territories: the 88 newly elected PLC members and the remaining 98, to be appointed by Chairman Arafat. The first to be appointed in this way was a losing candidate for the PLC in the Hebron constituency. The amendment of the Palestinian National Charter requires the assent of two-thirds of the PNC, that is, 454 members.

David Haines raised the question of how close this amendment is, reporting the assessment that the majority is secure, and Chairman Arafat is seeking to gain concessions from the Israelis by casting doubt on this.

Dr. Abdul Hadi expressed the opinion that amending the covenant will certainly be necessary on issues such as detainees, settlements, and refugees. Some Diaspora returnees from among the members of the PNC, however, will see their individual return as sufficient compensation for the amendment. Other PNC members are unwilling to amend the covenant, seeing it as a historical document which has been superseded by events. The option of an entirely new covenant is attractive for these members. Above all, there is a need for the closure on the Palestinian Territories to be lifted before the PNC can convene.

Janet Hancock asked whether new elections for the PNC were a possibility and what would happen to its "frozen" members.

Dr. Abdul Hadi pointed out that there was no time for new elections and that the PNC would convene with the same membership as in 1991, including the "frozen" ones who still count as members. With the recent start of the Israeli election campaign, Shimon Peres is insisting on an amendment of the covenant, rather than simply calling for a new one. Peres has also recently changed his mind about allowing Na'ef Hawatmeh, leader of the DFLP, into Palestine.