

June 16, 2004

TO FESTER NO LONGER

Throughout the public discussion on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan for the Gaza district and the expulsion of Jews from their homes, not the least distressing feature is the delusions with which he and his supporters have tried to feed the public.

They have put forward the completely unfounded presumption that if the Jews don't accept the plan President George W. Bush will go back on his 'guarantee' to oppose the 'right of return' of the so-called refugees.

No such threat has been heard from Washington; nor could it be, for Bush gave no such guarantee. What Bush wrote in his letter to Sharon was a carefully drafted text designed to avoid an explicit rejection of the idea of a return of the refugees.

'It seems clear' he wrote 'that a fair solution to the refugee issue should be found through a Palestinian State rather than in Israel.' Far from being a guarantee about anything at all, it could be read as an argument for creating a Palestinian state.

There is another lesson for Israel here. Israel should not allow itself to be moved to make concessions in any field on the strength of even a promised presidential quid pro quo. It has been bitten time and again.

When, in 1974, after months of resistance by prime minister Yitzhak Rabin to secretary of state Henry Kissinger's demand that Israel give up the strategic Mitla and Gidi passes in Sinai, Rabin acquiesced, and got two promises in return. One, that the US would not carry on any negotiations with the PLO except with Israel's consent; the other, that a new aircraft being planned (it became the F15) would be sold to Israel exclusively.

Neither promise was kept.

Two years later Jimmy Carter was elected president and he, in spite of considerable senatorial opposition, insisted on Saudi Arabia also having the F15 (or Israel wouldn't get it either).

Carter tempered this breach of the commitment by excluding from the Saudi package an enhancement tank (for increased range) which had actually been created by Israel. As for not talking to the PLO, the Carter Administration interpreted this to mean that they could do so, provided Israel was not told about it.

Even had Bush made such a definite promise in his letter to Sharon, were it later to be broken by the president, he could explain it by the plea of *rebus sic stantibus* (which means, in effect, that circumstances have changed). Sharon (and any other prime minister of Israel) should have enough savvy to understand that for a world power dealing with worldwide interests one of a host of circumstances can change at any time. In fact, the Reagan administration actually apologized to Israel for the breach of an undertaking and explained the lapse by *rebus sic stantibus*.

What, then, were the circumstances that had changed? War had broken out - between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan! Go know.

The essential fact here is not whether President Bush will withhold support for the Arabs' absurd and monstrous claim 'for return of the refugees,' but that, manifestly, Israel will on no account agree to it. Israel knows - and the US knows just as well - that, as

President Gamal Nasser of Egypt in 1967 succinctly and optimistically put it, 'Return of the refugees means the end of Israel.'

Nor would the problem of the 'refugees' be solved by planning to dump them on a Palestinian state as a home for them. Even if a Palestinian state were established it would not be able to cope with the problem.

What President Bush calls a 'fair solution' requires first of all, pragmatically and morally, an answer to the question: Where did the problem come from, who was to blame for its creation? The answer is, after all, unequivocal: the Arab states, who in 1948 criminally and without any provocation invaded the by-then-sovereign state of Israel with the intent of destroying it and killing as many Jews as possible.

They then compounded their crime by calling on the Arabs living in the area of impending military action to evacuate temporarily (and then come back in a few weeks to inherit the Jews' property). They compounded their crime still further by callously deciding that those who had been left homeless should now remain homeless and wait for Israel to take them back.

In practice, then they washed their hands of the problem. The UN established the camps and the problem, now 56 years old, has grown year by year to its present proportions.

Now, if the Western nations seriously mean the near future to become an era of reform they must determine to press the Arab states, even now, to make redress. The Arab states should get together and plan the details for putting an end to the problem of the refugees that they brought about - by providing land within their tremendous domain.

The movement of the 'refugees' from their present dwellings would mean a relocation from one Arab neighborhood to another. Jordan (eastern Palestine), about four times the size of Israel, is the nearest possible destination. It is also the most logical, for the source of most of its population is in western Palestine. It has in fact always been a Palestinian state.

However, there are other possibilities within the Arab area on which the Arab states and the refugees themselves would decide.

The idea has been touched upon in the past - for its innate justice and in recollection of the tremendously successful relocation of millions of real refugees after World War II. But it has been swept aside as a solution because of the Arabs' notion that Israel can somehow be forced to take them (and encompass its destruction).

The American president and the other statesmen in the west should tell the Arabs unequivocally that this is not going to happen, the refugee problem should be taken out of the context of the conflict between them and Israel, and it is in their own interest to treat it for what it really is - a 'family problem' of the Arab nation.