

POLITICAL POISON FOR THE WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

The stage has been set for a confrontation as the World Health Assembly convenes this week in Geneva, for its 42nd session. The cause of the problem is the demand by backers of the Palestine Liberation Organization that the PLO be allowed to attend the Assembly as the official representative of "Palestine." The World Health Assembly, comprised of representatives from all member states of the World Health Organization, is empowered to decide overall policy questions for WHO – including questions of membership. It was anticipated on the eve of the Assembly's opening that a majority of the 166 states attending this session is inclined to accept the PLO application. The United States, however, is firmly opposed. Secretary of State James Baker warned last week that he would "recommend to the President that the United States make no further contributions, voluntary or assessed, to any international organization which makes any change in the PLO's present status as an observer organization."

The matter of whether there should be a Palestinian state deserves serious consideration. The forum for this consideration, however, is not the World Health Assembly. Of all the United Nations agencies, many of which are known primarily for their waste and proliferating bureaucracies, the World Health Organization deservedly may be the most respected. The WHO was created to address world health problems. Its often effective work is now threatened to be undermined by the PLO and its backers who want to force the World Health Assembly to confront contentious political – rather than medical or scientific – problems. The Bush Administration is wise in threatening to cut financial support for the WHO if it admits "Palestine." A politicized WHO is of little use to the world. Politicization has poisoned the work of other once-useful U.N. agencies; the World Health Assembly should not let it happen to the WHO.

Expelling Israel. The U.S. government rightfully has declared unequivocally that it will withdraw from any U.N. organization that denies Israel full participation. Senate Concurrent Resolution 68, passed unanimously on April 14, 1982, and House Concurrent Resolution 322, passed a month later by a vote of 401-3, endorsed this policy. By Section 115 of P.L. 98-164, enacted on November 22, 1983, this became law. This is no idle threat. In September 1981, even before the congressional resolutions were passed, the U.S. withdrew from the International Atomic Energy Agency after it expelled Israel, forcing the IAEA to reverse that decision.

The PLO and its allies in WHO hope to "end run" this U.S. withdrawal threat while effectively achieving the expulsion of Israel. Israel would undoubtedly withdraw from any organization that includes the self-proclaimed Palestinian state, since it claims the territory of Israel as its own. The Palestine National Covenant, charter of the PLO, declares the state of Israel to be legally non-existent. Even the letterhead on which the PLO's application for

membership on the WHO is written displays a map of "Palestine" that includes all of Israel within its territory. Yet, if Israel withdrew "voluntarily" from the World Health Assembly and WHO, the PLO backers could urge the U.S. to stay, arguing that Israel was not "expelled."

A "State" with No Territory. Two other serious problems make the admission of "Palestine" to the World Health Organization unacceptable to the U.S. First, the World Health Organization has no right to recognize an organization with no actual territory under its control as a legitimate government. Under the U.N. Charter, only the Security Council – in which the U.S. and other permanent members have veto power – can extend membership and, in effect, recognize nations as legitimate. WHO, like all U.N. agencies, has a charter which limits its membership to legitimate nations. Admitting "Palestine" would make other U.N. organizations more likely to accept the PLO as a state, and would encourage the other terrorist organizations recognized by the U.N. as representatives of their people, such as the African National Congress and the South West Africa Peoples Organization, as well as other insurgent groups, to declare statehood and apply for admission.

Second, admitting the PLO would exacerbate the trend of politicizing U.N. specialized agencies. WHO's credibility depends on its neutrality and professionalism. But, like much of the U.N. System, the WHO has allowed itself to be used as an anti-Israeli forum. Every year since 1976 it has adopted resolutions against Israel's occupation and "illegal exploitation" of "Arab territories," issues entirely extraneous to WHO's purpose of promoting health care. In 1979 and 1983 attempts were made to expel Israel from WHO. WHO should be trying to disentangle itself from an issue as divisive as the "Question of Palestine." Admitting "Palestine" achieves the opposite effect: it puts WHO in the middle of the controversy.

Tough U.S Congress. The WHO must understand that if the U.S. withdraws from the agency, as the Bush Administration promises, then WHO will lose the \$73.8 million American contribution that provides one-quarter of WHO's budget. The U.S. Congress will surely back the White House on this, as the Congress has on UNESCO, after the U.S. withdrew in late 1984. In fact, the Congress typically is less patient with and tougher on the U.N. than are the State Department and White House. Already, 38 Senators from both parties, led by Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy and Wisconsin Republican Robert Kasten, have sent a letter to Secretary Baker sounding their alarm and threatening "a range of punitive action, including withholding U.S. financial participation" from any U.N. agency that admits the PLO as a state. And House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations unanimously reported out California Democrat Tom Lantos's bill prohibiting U.S. contributions to any U.N. organization which grants full membership to any group "that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood."

At the World Health Assembly this week, the U.S. delegation should make sure that all representatives fully understand that a vote to admit "Palestine" could cost the World Health Organization dearly. Should WHO defy these warnings, the U.S. should carry out its threat to withdraw from the organization.

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For further information:

Mark A. Franz, "By Providing A Platform for Terrorists, the U.N. Raises the Question: Does It Belong in the U.S.?" *Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum* No. 220, December 1, 1988.

Juliana Geran Pilon, "For the World Health Organization, The Moment of Truth," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 507, April 30, 1986.