

April 23, 2002

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: A PERSONAL STATEMENT

The establishment of a viable, democratic, Palestinian state, coexisting peacefully with a viable, democratic Israel, is in the best interest of both peoples. To achieve this goal a historic compromise in which each party gets less than it is convinced it deserves is essential. I support all peaceful actions which are directed toward this goal and oppose all actions whose aim is the destruction of Israel or the subjugation, whether political, economic or social, of the Palestinians. I unequivocally condemn the killings and maimings of innocent people. There are no justifiable causes for this just as there are no insurmountable obstacles to Israelis and Palestinians living in peace, as do the French and Germans despite a history of many bloody wars and hated occupations.

I believe that the Israeli government has wrongfully supported the establishment and the maintenance of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. It has been far too one-sided in its enforcement of laws and has responded to acts of violence by Israeli extremists with only mild punishment while imposing unjustified and unnecessary sufferings on Palestinians. There have been actions by these extremists which are unforgivable.

I also believe that many (perhaps most) Palestinian officials have as their ultimate goal the dismantling of Israel. I base this on (1) their statements before and after the Oslo agreement, (2) their rejection of the Camp David proposals and choosing instead the path of violence by planning the present Intifada, (3) material in text books used in their schools, which vilify Israel and Jews and incite children against them, and (4) their tolerance, even glorification, of killers.

This has contributed to a situation in which the reaction of the Israelis (including many who truly desire a peace of equals with the Palestinians) to the acts of murder by a seemingly endless stream of fanatics, has been one of despair and anger. In this way the Palestinian extremists have, as they probably intended to do, helped bring to power Israeli extremists who also oppose a peace based on compromise with and respect for the Palestinians legitimate aspirations. The action of these extremists has in turn provoked more hostility by the Palestinians and thus the vicious cycle continues.

The extreme measures of force used in the Israeli response has now led to the death of many innocent children and adults, and the destruction of hospitals, schools and cultural centers. The tragic consequences of this vicious cycle reached the scientific community with petitions and counter petitions about ties with Israeli scientists. Such involvement by scientists in non-scientific issues has not been seen since the 70's and 80's when there were protests and some organized boycotts against the Soviet Union for the imprisonment of Sakharov, Orlov, Sharansky and others.

While I strongly approve of scientists' involvement in human rights and social issues, I want to call attention to some important differences between the situations then and now. (1) The Soviet Union was a superpower and Israel is a country with less than five million people which is reacting (over reacting) to a real danger to the lives of its citizens. (2) The Soviet Union was a dictatorship where scientists (like others) could not express opposition to the government without being punished severely, while Israel is a democracy (the only one so far in the region) where all scientists can, and some do, express opposition to government policies.

I strongly urge our Israeli colleagues to speak up for reason, peace and decency in the present emotionally charged situation. I also urge all non-Israeli scientists concerned about the horrors of the present situation in general and about the human rights of our Palestinian colleagues in particular (this includes academics as well as those engaged in the medical and educational areas) to: (1) condemn acts of violence by all parties; (2) speak out for a just peace which will permit the existence of viable democratic Israeli and Palestinian states (along the lines proposed by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter in his Op-Ed page article of the New York Times of Sunday, April 21, 2002, also posted here); (3) keep and strengthen ties with Palestinian and Israeli scientists and academics, urging them to speak out for peace, and (4) work for human rights, elimination of poverty, and a just civil society everywhere.

Sincerely yours,

Joel Lebowitz