PLO Representative at BJPA: “Don’t Blindly Support Israel”

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by Aimee Gonzalez

The Berman Jewish Policy Archive @ NYU Wagner hosted PLO Representative Maen Areikat at a luncheon on March 2nd to discuss the role of American Jews in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

A mix of professors, students, Jewish communal leaders, journalists and others came to listen to Representative Areikat discuss the situation between the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli government, and what needs to happen for the peace process to move forward. As **the JTA noted**, this appearance is part of a larger effort on the part of the PLO “to open dialogue with the Jewish community.”

“Time is not on either side,” said Areikat, but he emphasized that it is of the essence. He stated that Israel has the opportunity to work with a willing Palestinian government who is committed to peace. Palestinians are frustrated, however, with the fact that Israel continues to build settlements while also claiming to want peace, he said. Areikat held firmly to the stance that “peace negotiations and settlements cannot go hand in hand” and contended that it is necessary to find a new approach.

Perhaps a new approach is on its way; in **an article about the event**, Haaretz noted that Prime Minister Netanyahu “is considering a plan to cooperate with the Palestinians on the establishment of a Palestinian state with temporary borders, as part of an interim peace agreement”. As that story had not yet broken widely in America while the event proceeded, no one asked Ambassador Areikat during the Q&A whether this idea would be acceptable to the PLO.

This discussion built up to the main point of the event—what American Jews should do. On this Areikat was clear: “Don’t blindly just support Israel. Do not abandon [it], but…look beyond tomorrow.” Practically speaking, he stated that American Jews should support their government’s efforts to end this conflict. Many Jews are reluctant to criticize Israel or support anyone who does, he argued, but a successful peace process requires recognizing positive steps from both sides, and condemning those who won’t cooperate—including Israelis.

The Jewish leaders in the audience for this event showed no signs of “blindly” supporting Israel. Every Jewish questioner during the Q&A voiced support for a Palestinian State. This may be because those who chose to attend this event were those who were most inclined to this position, but it may also indicate how marginal the position against Palestinian self-determination has become in contemporary American Jewish discourse. A few decades ago, opposition to any form of Palestinian nationalism was well within the American Jewish mainstream (see **this piece by Avraham Weiss**, and **this by Richard Cohen**). But at Wednesday’s event, this perspective was not evident.

The content of the discussion was hardly surprising, but the fact of the discussion is still noteworthy. While the event began with the formality of a diplomatic speech, by the end, when the Q&A broke down the wall between speaker and audience, it was a

lively conversation over lunch.

Watch the video below:

Video streaming by Ustream