

The U.S.A. and the PLO

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THE AGREEMENT signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization last week will have implications for American law and policy that go beyond the immediate task of supporting and financing the continuing peace process. Over the long years of conflict between the former antagonists, the United States enacted some laws and adopted some positions in relation to the PLO that were of dubious constitutionality. But now, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher said in a speech in New York on Monday, it is time to remove them.

Among the laws that should be repealed are those that closed the PLO's United Nations observer office in New York and its information office here. These facilities, staffed by Americans and legal resident aliens and complying with all relevant U.S. laws, were engaged in providing information to the public -- political propaganda, if you will -- not terrorism, and should never have been the target of congressional suppression. The offices should be allowed to reopen.

A second area of concern does not require a statutory change but a policy shift. During the Bush administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service chose to interpret a provision of the immigration law in a way that would allow the deportation of any alien who had ever supported any organization that has committed an act of terrorism, even if the person only contributed funds for lawful and legitimate purposes like refugee assistance or health care. Moreover, the statutory definition of "terrorism" is broad enough to cover not only the PLO but many organizations like the African National Congress and others that have taken up arms in political struggles widely supported here. Because of this policy, the U.S. government has been trying to deport eight aliens living in Los Angeles, not one of whom has been accused of a crime or charged with engaging in terrorism. But because they have spoken and raised money for a PLO-related group, the U.S. government wants to expel them.

Sixty-three immigration law professors wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno on Monday urging her reconsideration of this overbroad policy. It is wrong not only in the context of the PLO but on its face. Ms. Reno should also take another look at the Los Angeles case, which was inherited from the Reagan and Bush administrations, and abandon it. The aliens involved did nothing for which an American citizen could be penalized. The charge against them is political speech, not terrorism, and speech should not be a deportation offense.

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