THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

THE UNITED NATIONS, ISRAEL AND REGIONAL GROUPS

* The member countries of the United Nations, currently 185, are organized into five regional groups for purposes of nominating countries for certain UN bodies, including the ten non-permanent seats on the Security Council. These five regional groups are: Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and West European and Others (WEOG).

* 184 of the 185 member countries are eligible for membership in one of the five regional groups. The only exception is Israel.

* Israel's natural home is the Asian group, but its entry has been blocked by a number of Arab and Muslim countries.

* The only realistic alternative is for Israel to seek temporary membership in WEOG, at least until such time as it is able to join the Asian group. Since WEOG includes not only the countries of Western Europe but also the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Turkey, there is ample precedent for the inclusion of non-European members.

* In September 1997, the American Jewish Committee launched a major public campaign to call attention to this issue and to assist Israel's entry into WEOG. With a new Secretary General and much discussion regarding United Nations reform, it seemed like an opportune moment. We took out full-page advertisements in The New York Times (September 23), International Herald Tribune (September 20-21) and a score of local papers around the U.S. The ads included coupons to be sent to the UN Secretary General, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, and the Representative of the Presidency of the European Union. Literally tens of thousands of people, from the U.S. and around the world, have sent in the coupons or have accessed our web site to transmit the coupons electronically.

* Moreover, in a span of three weeks last fall, we met with 46 foreign ministers in New York to attend the opening of the 52nd United Nations General Assembly, including, for purposes of Israel and WEOG, the foreign ministers of Australia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. We have also met with the Permanent Representatives of several WEOG countries, including the United States, to discuss the issue.

* The U.S. is entirely supportive and Ambassador Bill Richardson has made clear his determination to end this injustice and ensure a place for Israel in WEOG. Australia, Canada and Norway are also on record in support. The key to solving this issue lies with the 15-member European Union. If the EU achieves a consensus to move forward, no other major roadblocks are anticipated.
* Within the EU, there are various views regarding this issue. The most recalcitrant countries appear to be Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, with France's position vague but presumed to be close to these five. Germany, on the other hand, is supportive. Britain, which currently hold the EU chair, has indicated a desire to solve the problem, but it is unclear how much energy it will put into the effort.

* The basic EU concerns fall into two categories:

(1) With each new member of any regional group, including WEOG, the pool of potential candidates for the non-permanent Security Council (or other) seats grows, thus increasing the competition and extending the waiting period, since fairness dictates that each member eventually have a turn on the Security Council. WEOG members traditionally occupy two of the ten non-permanent seats on the Security Council for two-year terms.

(2) Whenever there is discussion among WEOG members about Israel's inclusion, there is inevitably a political dimension. Is this the right time? What message are we sending? In effect, WEOG membership has been turned into an issue of reward and punishment. If Israel "behaves" itself on peace process issues, then there is a chance for membership (though, despite discussion, no action was taken in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords); if not, forget it.

* On the first concern, it is true that adding Israel could extend the waiting period just a bit, but this has not stopped other groups from adding countries to their rosters (e.g. the East European Group has grown with the collapse of the USSR, the splintering of Yugoslavia and the "velvet divorce" of the Czech Republic and Slovakia).

On the second, our view is that correcting an unjust anomaly ought not to be seen as a matter of reward and punishment. Israel, like the other 184 UN member countries, should be treated equally. Realistically, the only group that has the power to effect this is WEOG. It should do so -- soon and without condition.

* There are at least four reasons why now would be a good time to publicize the issue: (a) There currently are initiatives in both the Senate and House of Representatives urging Israel's inclusion in WEOG. (b) Britain holds the Presidency of the European Union (until June 30, 1998) and, as a major power, it has some influence. (c) UN Secretary General is aware of this issue and is on record as saying he would like to solve it. (d) Unfair treatment of Israel at the UN sends the message that Israel is treated by a different standard than other nations, even 50 years after its establishment, ironically, by a United Nations resolution. (The WEOG issue is not the only example of treatment by a different standard at the UN -- for example, the UN Human Rights Commission, which begins its work today in Geneva, has an annual agenda item on Israel, the only country in the world that is regularly accorded such scrutiny.)

Prepared by David A. Harris
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