

Israel-Palestine talks in Paris break up acrimoniously

Five more Palestinians killed by Israeli troops

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Officials described the tripartite crisis meeting in Paris between US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Palestinian Chairman Yassir Arafat and Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak as one of the bleakest and most angry diplomatic exchanges in recent years.

Albright had brought Arafat and Barak to Paris for talks in a desperate bid to stop the widespread violence in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel from developing into outright civil war, which would destabilise economic, political and social relations throughout the Middle East.

Discussions were acrimonious from the start, with Arafat and Barak refusing a face-to-face meeting for more than six hours, as Barak blamed the conflict on Arafat.

At one point, when it became clear that the US and Israel would not agree to set up an international inquiry into the violence that has now claimed 69 lives, Arafat walked out of the talks, saying, "This is a humiliation. I cannot accept it." His car was on the point of leaving the US ambassador's residence where the talks were being held when Albright demanded that the gates be shut so as to force him back to the negotiating table. He went back into the talks but Albright and Barak adamantly refused to accommodate his demand.

Albright and Arafat flew on to Cairo for a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Barak returned to Israel saying, "We don't have a partner for peace. It could cost blood." He issued an arrogant statement demanding Arafat make his security forces put an end to the uprising and insisting on Israel's right to the Old City of Jerusalem and the holy places, captured in the 1967 war. "If the Palestinian police did not bring the violence to an end, Israel would know how to manage the situation," he threatened.

While the abortive talks were in progress, a fourth cease-fire crumbled almost as soon as it was announced, when a

battle broke out in the Gaza Strip, although elsewhere the situation was quieter. While the Israelis said that they would withdraw their tanks from areas where the Palestinian security forces had restored order, Palestinian police deny that such withdrawals have as yet taken place. There were continued clashes in Hebron and in northern Israel.

With the failure of the Paris talks, the atmosphere remains very tense. Five more Palestinians were killed on Friday in fighting with Israeli troops, raising the death toll since the conflict erupted to at least 74. The deaths occurred in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza on what Palestinians had declared to be a "day of rage". In Jerusalem, a young Palestinian was shot dead and several others injured when violence erupted immediately following the Friday prayers near Lion's Gate, one of the entries to the Al-Aqsa mosque.

The insurrection has now spread beyond Israel and Palestine's borders. In Jordan, police fired tear gas and deployed armoured vehicles to control the hundreds of rioting Palestinians at a refugee camp in Amman. More clashes were expected.

In Egypt, President Mubarak called for an emergency Arab summit to discuss the escalation of violence and the future of the peace process. The Arab states are becoming increasingly angry at the muted response of the Western powers, and above all Britain, which have refused to condemn the Israeli government for their use of weaponry more suitable for a major theatre of war than civil unrest.

The US has steadfastly refused to condemn Israel's ruthless suppression of the Palestinian demonstrations, saying merely that Israel's action had been "counterproductive". Albright has invited both of the negotiating teams to Washington next week to try to restart the talks, but Barak has yet to accept.

Arafat came to Paris as a leader who had lost the support of his people for a settlement with Israel. Barak, on the other hand, despite coming to power with US backing and a pledge to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, was a hostage to right-wing and religious fundamentalists who are opposed to ceding an inch of territory to the Palestinians.

While the visit of Ariel Sharon and his huge armed entourage to Jerusalem's holy places provoked the Palestinian eruption, the anger that lay behind it had been building up for years. Far from alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians, the land-for-peace deals organised under the Oslo and Wye Valley agreements have exacerbated the wretched conditions of their existence.

The scale of the riots far outweighs that of the *intifida* in the late 1980s, and expresses the Palestinians' growing disillusionment with the misnamed peace process. As Arafat himself has acknowledged, the days when he was one of the most popular figures among the Palestinians and particularly the youth have long gone. These forces now tear up his picture. Had the peace process brought any tangible benefits for the masses, Arafat would have been able to go before them, condemn Israel's provocation and appeal for calm. Instead, he was both invisible and silent as the battle raged between the Palestinians and the Israeli armed forces. Never known for being camera shy in the past, he was conspicuously absent from the world's television screens. His first act was to race as fast as he could to meet Albright and Barak.

Arafat's political isolation graphically illustrates the failure of the perspective of bourgeois nationalism to achieve a progressive solution for the Palestinians. It has proved to be a blind alley that serves overwhelmingly the interests of the privileged few, not those of the workers, peasants and their families.

Barak, on the other hand, despite winning a landslide victory only last year on a "land for peace" platform, is beholden to the right-wing nationalist parties and fanatical religious movements that hold Israeli politics in a vice. Progress in the peace talks was entirely dependent upon accommodating them, despite their opposition to a deal with Arafat and the Palestinians. At every point, he made concessions to his right-wing coalition partners. Shas, a religious party, demanded and won funding for its network of religious colleges, schools and welfare services. Yisrael B'Aliya, the Russian immigrant party, refused to yield the Zionist settlements on the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Barak faces the imminent collapse of his government

when parliament reconvenes at the end of October. He calculated that, despite the risks entailed in allowing Ariel Sharon and the Likud Party's provocative visit to Jerusalem's holy places to demonstrate Israel's sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem, the risks in alienating Likud and its supporters were even greater. Even though the security forces on the Temple Mount could have turned Sharon and his huge armed entourage away, Barak allowed the visit to go ahead.

Barak has not uttered one word of criticism of Sharon. Instead his government have blamed the Palestinians for the bloodshed his visit unleashed.

Dependent upon maintaining a Jewish majority for the peace talks, Barak turned his back on the Arab MPs, who represent 20 percent of Israel's population and who support the peace process. Although materially much better off than Arabs in the Palestinian-controlled areas, their incomes are much lower than the Israeli average. They face systematic discrimination in jobs, schools, housing and social services. No new Arab towns have been built, and until a court decision earlier this year, Israeli Arabs were barred from buying land and building homes in much of Israel. As a result, their towns are cramped and squalid.

Now, for the first time, Israeli Arabs have come out on the streets to openly support their Palestinian brothers outside Israel's borders. Uprisings have broken out in Nazareth, in the north of Israel, and even more importantly in Jaffa, part of the Tel Aviv conurbation. Israeli citizens are now being shelled and 11 Israeli Arabs have lost their lives during the protests. The prospect of civil war looms.

In response, Barak is seeking to form an emergency government with Likud—the very force responsible for the present situation.



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