

Israeli right wing demands no compromise with the Palestinians

Chris Marsden
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US-led negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians have all but collapsed. Ehud Barak's One Nation coalition and the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat have made clear they expect nothing of substance to materialise before Clinton leaves office and George W. Bush assumes the presidency. With Prime Minister Barak facing his own election challenge from Likud's Ariel Sharon on February 6, and presently 20 points behind in opinion polls, Israeli rightists have gone into overdrive in their efforts to end any possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. In some quarters, the talk now is of the need for greater repression and even the possibility of war in the Middle East.

It has proved impossible for Arafat to foist the proposals offered by Clinton on the Palestinian people, in face of the failure to accept full Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem and particularly the denial of the right of return for the millions of refugees dispossessed from their homeland since 1948.

The popular uprising known as the *Intifada* continues to rage, despite the repressive actions of the Israeli Defence Forces and fascist settlers that have claimed upwards of 350 lives. Marches have taken place in recent days throughout the Palestinian territories in support of the right of return to Israel, as well as demonstrations by some of the 360,000 refugees living in the Lebanon.

In the January 8 edition of *Dawn*, leading Palestinian academic and political commentator Edward Said ridiculed the Clinton plan for rewarding Israel "with such things as the annexation of the best West Bank land, a long (and doubtless inexpensive) lease of the Jordan valley, and a terminal annexation of most of East Jerusalem, plus early warning stations on Palestinian territories, plus control of all Palestinian borders (which are all to be with Israel, not with any other state), plus all the roads and water supply, plus the cancellation of all refugee rights of return and compensation except as Israel sees fit."

In return, the Palestinians were offered only a "land swap by which Israel magnanimously gives up a little bit of the

Negev desert for the choice bits of the West Bank." Said points out that "Clinton overlooks the fact that that particular Negev area earmarked by Israel just happens also to have been used by it as a toxic waste dump!"

But even the historic injustice proposed by Clinton, which tramples on the right of return that has been endorsed by repeated United Nations resolutions, is too much to stomach for the right wing of the Zionist establishment.

Palestinian insistence that Israel accept the right of return for an estimated 3.5 million refugees has been flatly denounced as a threat to the very survival of Israel, despite Arafat's assurances that the number of returns would be strictly controlled. Since Barak himself has made clear that he has no intention of ceding ground on this issue, however, the right wing has focused its campaign on the question of his acceptance of Clinton's proposal for shared sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa mosque—a holy-place for both Jews and Muslims.

Opponents of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians argue that even Clinton's minimal concession to the national rights of the Palestinians throws in to question the legitimacy of the Zionist state of Israel, founded as it was in 1948 through the removal of around a million Palestinians in a terror campaign that today would be deemed "ethnic cleansing". For this reason, the fate of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount has become the centrepiece of an aggressive reassertion of Jewish nationalism.

On January 8 around a quarter of a million people—the largest contingent being right-wing settlers—attended a rally to protest the possible transfer of Temple Mount to the Palestinian Authority. A picture of the capture of the Temple Mount during the Six-Day War in 1967 was projected onto the walls of the Old City.

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* January 10, for example, Rabbi Marvin Hier, Dean and Founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, argues, "the cornerstone of our return to Zion was always based on the fact that it was a return to our historic biblical roots. The place where Abraham first encountered his God, where Moses promised to lead his

people, where the prophets first introduced their concepts of social justice and freedom, and the hilltop where Solomon built his majestic temple... By giving up the Temple Mount, we are diminishing our right to any other part of the state of Israel. If the Temple Mount, with which we've had a continuous history for 3,500 years, is not ours, how legitimate is our claim to Jaffa, Tel Aviv or Haifa?"

Many on the right argue that the efforts undertaken to achieve a negotiated settlement since the Oslo Accord was signed in 1993 have sidetracked Israel from the central task of projecting itself as the military superpower in the Middle East and diverted from dealing with the Palestinians by police methods rather than through negotiations. They are determined that the coming to power of Bush in the US and Sharon in Israel should become the occasion for a pronounced shift in strategic orientation.

A January 4 op-ed piece in the *Jerusalem Post* by Uri Dan sang the praises of Sharon as Israel's possible future Prime Minister for, amongst other things, saying "yes" as the senior officer in the Southern Command in 1970 "to defense minister Moshe Dayan, when he undertook to wipe out Palestinian terror in the Gaza Strip and kept it quiet for 15 years"; and "yes" again as Defence Minister in 1982, to Menachem Begin, "when his government decided to give the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] the task of waging a war of salvation in Lebanon to destroy the PLO and evict Yasser Arafat and his 10,000 terrorists from Beirut."

The most chilling comment, "Peace is the wrong strategy", was written by Avigdor Haselkorn in the *Jerusalem Post* January 1. Haselkorn argues that, "Instead of trying to put the peace process back on track, Israeli leaders should rethink the country's strategic doctrine... Israel adopted a policy of military restraint to facilitate the negotiations. But this approach severely undermined Israel's deterrent image"

Haselkorn continues, "Israel, therefore, must reenergize its strategic deterrence policy. It must be seen as an aggressive and unpredictable power, fully committed to using all means at its disposal to block threats to its survival." He cites favourably a 1995 advisory panel to the US Strategic Air Command that stated it would be beneficial if "some [of the US national defense] elements appear potentially out of control" and that "part of the national persona we project should be that the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked."

He concludes, similarly, "It is high time Israel downplays the diplomatic effort in favor of unilateral means to assure its survival."

Confirming that a war strategy is now under serious consideration, Seth Lipsky writes in the *Wall Street Journal*, asking, "If war does come in the Middle East, the question arises as to who will be on whose side... Ariel Sharon has

argued that the war is already upon us, and the questions that war brings, like where one really stands, have long been before us."

The right wing is on the ascendant in Israel only because of the official political left wing's betrayal of the aspirations for peace amongst millions of Jewish people. Several left commentators have expressed their own fears over the growing belligerence of the fascistic forces within Israel. *Ha'aretz* columnist Gideon Samet, for one, has warned of the danger presented by "right-wing and ultra-Orthodox reactionary forces". The fact remains, however, that other leading voices within the two main parties of the left, Barak's Labour and Me'erez, are becoming virtually indistinguishable from those in Likud.

One of the founders of the Peace Now movement, Amos Oz, for example, wrote in the *New York Times* that accepting the Palestinian right of return would mean "eradicating Israel." Meir Nitzan, a prominent Labour Party Mayor, was a key speaker at the Jerusalem demonstration, where he quoted from a speech made by then Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, promising that Jerusalem would remain united under Israeli sovereignty.

As well as this, Ezer Weizman, former Labour Israeli President, has announced he is abandoning his support for Barak and will now vote for Sharon and Likud.

The left's argument for a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians has always been framed in terms of a tactical necessity—a patriotic defence of Israel's best interests, given its encirclement by Arab states—rather than one based on any genuine commitment to democratic principles. There has never been a political challenge mounted to the central conception of Zionism—that Israel must exist as an exclusively Jewish state and that there can be no real coexistence within a common entity with the region's Arab and Muslim peoples.

Given their conclusion that Arafat can no longer be relied on to curb the outrage of the Palestinian people towards Israeli brutality, the tactical support of many Labour lefts and liberals for a negotiated settlement has receded in favour of advocating a more aggressive defence of Israel's national interests.



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