

Labour and Likud seek national government as Israeli-Palestinian conflict intensifies

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has escalated further since Likud leader Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister last week. This has taken place against a background of negotiations between Likud and the Labour Party to form a national government, during which the Labour leadership has all but abandoned even the pretence of opposition to Sharon's militaristic agenda.

On February 13, Israeli Defence Force (IDF) helicopter gunships operating over the Gaza Strip assassinated Massoud Ayad, one of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's bodyguards. That same day a 14-year-old Palestinian was killed and nearly 100 others were wounded by IDF gunfire.

In retaliation for the death of Ayad, the next day a Palestinian bus driver in Aznur, south of Tel Aviv, ran into a group waiting at a bus stop killing eight people, including several Israeli soldiers.

Israel responded by blockading the Palestinian settlements, barring all Palestinian workers from entering Israel and imposed travel restrictions within the Occupied Territories. Fighting continued throughout the next two days. To date almost 400 people have been killed, including 327 Palestinians and 13 Israeli Arabs.

Sharon has declared null and void the proposals for peace elaborated by the outgoing government of Ehud Barak, and refuses to enter negotiations unless all Palestinian violence ceases. The growing danger that he will provoke all-out war with the Palestinians has led to statements of disquiet by the major Western powers, with US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher warning that escalating violence was producing "a new cycle of action or reaction, which can become impossible to control".

The one place where Sharon's stance has received unequivocal support is within the highest echelons of the Labour opposition. Both Barak and his main rival in the Labour Party Shimon Peres have been undertaking separate negotiations with Likud to form a national government. Without Labour's support it would be all but impossible for Sharon to remain in power, without calling a general election in a matter of weeks, since Likud has just 19 seats in the 120-seat parliament.

On every possible occasion, Barak and Peres have taken pains to endorse Sharon's hardline stance against the Palestinians. Despite having stood down as party leader, Barak immediately went into negotiations with Sharon and resumed his place in the *Knesset* (parliament). His first act was to reassure Likud that he would not insist Sharon continue where the previous peace talks had left off. In a letter sent to US President George W. Bush, Barak said

previous ideas raised with the Palestinians were not binding on Sharon, and blamed Palestinian intransigence for the failure to secure an agreement. His stance in seeking a national government was supported by Peres, who declared that, "Labour has to follow the needs of the country."

Barak, who remains caretaker Prime Minister until Sharon can form a government, congratulated the army for carrying out its latest assassination and said that, "Anyone who intends to harm Israelis will not escape and the long arm of the Israel Defence Forces will know how to locate and even the score with them." During Barak's term of office, the IDF has already carried out around 20 assassinations of Palestinian activists.

Peres has been offered the post of Foreign Affairs Minister by Sharon, while Barak looks set to become Defence Minister. The framework for a national unity government has been agreed and it is expected Labour's central committee will approve it next week. A host of Labour ministers are scrambling over themselves to secure a fresh government portfolio alongside Sharon, Barak and Peres. Indeed Barak and Peres are in dispute over who decides about the plum jobs.

To accommodate the scramble for portfolios, a unity government is likely to include up to 30 ministers, an all-time record, with eight each drawn from Likud and Labour, five from the orthodox-religious Shas and the rest drawn mainly from the settler and religious parties. Between seven and nine of the new cabinet members would have to be ministers without portfolio, because there is no actual job for them to do.

The only justification advanced for Labour's alliance with Likud is that it could thus act as a moderating influence on Sharon and prevent him relying on the extremist minority parties. However, a careful examination of the proposed agreement exposes this argument as fallacious.

The "Ramon-Sa'ar" draft agreement contains points that appear to be concessions to Labour, but all are heavily circumscribed. Previous peace agreements with the Palestinians are to be honoured, but only if ratified by the Israeli parliament and only if the other side also honours them. Israel will seek permanent agreements with the Syrians, the Palestinians and the Lebanese on the basis of UN resolutions and work to advance peace with the Palestinian Authority through interim agreements.

This sounds good on paper, but in reality there is little chance that the *Knesset* would ratify the previous agreements and Sharon has already declared that there will be no negotiations while

Palestinian violence continues.

On the essential question of the Zionist settlements within the Occupied Territories, Labour and Likud agreed that no “new settlements” will be established and that the strengthening of existing settlements would be done on the basis of their “natural growth”. This formulation is meaningless, particularly given that Likud secured a joint commitment that the national government “will supply an answer for the settlements' ongoing needs”. Sharon had already agreed not to build any new settlements, because he can reinforce Israel's grip on the Occupied Territories by expanding existing settlements in the areas he wants to keep.

On all other substantive issues, the “Ramon-Sa'ar” accord is a fudge. Likud agreed to drop any mention of the unity of Jerusalem, Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount and the Jordan Valley, and opposition to a “right of return” for Palestinian refugees. In return, Labour agreed to omit its demand for acceptance in principle of the possibility that isolated Zionist settlements could be evacuated unilaterally, and support for the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state. Labour also accepted that the joint government should only seek an interim accord with the Palestinians, not a final peace deal.

To justify this rank capitulation to Likud, Peres blithely declared that, “formulations aren't everything”. Thus it will be Likud's perspective within the *Knesset* that is implemented, behind the cover provided by Labour's toothless and occasional criticisms.

Labour's rush to unite with Likud, and its ceding of all previous points of difference, is politically dangerous for the Israeli ruling class. It has prompted sombre warnings over the growing political alienation of broad social layers from official politics. The liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper warned that, “The birth of such a government could well signal the death of the Labour party”. It cautioned that the willingness of senior Labour members to “distort every ideological distinction between the two main parties” might contribute towards the “weakening of the two large parties on the right and the left, and the strengthening of parties with extremist and sector-specific agendas.”

The pro-Likud *Jerusalem Post* agreed that there was a growing danger of political instability, but attributed this to the excessive influence of the small religious parties and advocated electoral reform to strengthen the grip of Likud and Labour. “When people are alienated from democratic politics because it cannot ensure stable government, the result may well be a yearning for strong leadership through non-democratic means,” it editorialised.

Electoral change will not be enough to conceal or compensate for the discrediting of the Labour Party. Sharon is pinning his hopes of forming a stable government on forming an alliance with a party that is on the brink of disintegration. Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami both refused to join a Sharon government, with Beilin denouncing the party's negotiating team for their “willingness to sell the soul of the Labour Party”.

Two Labour parliamentary deputies, Elie Goldschmidt and Uzi Baram, have resigned from the *Knesset*. Goldschmidt warned that, “If there is a national unity government, it will be evident that the differences between Labour as the main branch of the left and the Likud as the main branch of the right are not that big.”

It is clearly with this in mind that Beilin has said he is leaving the party to establish a new, social democratic formation, in discussion with the Meretz party that emerged from Israel's “Peace Now” movement. But no new political organisation formed on this basis can provide a genuinely progressive alternative to a Likud/Labour coalition. Recent history testifies to the fact that no section of the Israeli left—whether Labour, Meretz or other smaller formations—has been able to oppose the right wing's domination over Israeli political life. This is because their own politics, like those of the right, are based upon a defence of the Zionist state.

Labour's disputes with Likud have always been of a tactical, rather than a principled character. Labour led the negotiations that culminated in the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinians. They were convinced that the future of Israeli capitalism was bound up with a rapprochement between the Israeli and Arab ruling classes, in order to end the country's relative isolation within the Middle East, provide access to regional and global markets and make it a more attractive location for international investors. These aims, which necessitated a substantial reduction in government spending, depended on some form of resolution to the Palestinian question. Labour proposed that in return for ending opposition to the state of Israel, the PLO be granted a form of limited self-rule in a state formed on part of the West Bank and Gaza Strip occupied during the 1967 War. This would be heavily circumscribed to ensure that the new Palestinian Authority—and the future Palestinian state—did not pose a military threat to Israel and remained economically dependent on its far stronger neighbour. (There are obvious parallels with the creation of so-called tribal homelands, or Bantustans by the Apartheid regime in South Africa.) Barak's election campaign in 1999 even utilised the slogan, “Peace through separation: Us here, them over there.”

Yet Labour was to meet its most determined opposition from the very social forces it helped create. In the 1967 War, Israel had assumed the explicit character of an expansionist regional power with its occupation of the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. The Zionist settlers who were encouraged to take up residence on these lands by Labour owe their social existence to this expansionist perspective and have naturally become the social bedrock of the extreme right opposition to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians in the political and military elite.

There can be no genuine peace in the Middle East unless a new political movement is developed in fundamental programmatic opposition to both Likud and Labour. Such a movement must repudiate the divisive and reactionary ideology of Zionism, with its advocacy of a state based on ethnicity and religion. It must advance the unity and equality of the Jewish and Arab working class against all the bourgeois regimes of the region on a democratic, secular and socialist program for the building of the United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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