

Amram Mitzna: Israeli left lines up behind yet another former general

Chris Marsden
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Israel's social democratic left has again demonstrated its strange penchant for former military figures by embracing Amram Mitzna, an ex-general who has announced his candidacy for leadership of the Labour Party.

The 57-year-old, mayor of Haifa since 1993, is advancing himself as a dove who has remained true to the heritage of assassinated Labour leader Yitzhak Rabin, unlike others such as Shimon Peres, who functions as Ariel Sharon's foreign minister in the Likud-Labour coalition government. It was Rabin who, following Mitzna's retirement from the army, urged him to stand as mayor of Israel's third-largest city with a mixed Jewish-Arab population (10-12 percent of its residents are Arabs).

Mitzna is hoping to benefit from the widespread disenchantment within the party over Labour's 18-month-old coalition with Likud. A survey in the *Yerushaliyim* newspaper of 401 Labour Party members found that he would easily defeat Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and MK Haim Ramon in a contest for Labour leader—winning 52 percent of the vote to Ben-Eliezer's 36 percent and Ramon's 16 percent.

A poll by the *Maariv* newspaper puts Mitzna even further ahead, beating Ben-Eliezer by 73 percent to 13 percent.

These figures belie the constantly repeated claims of mass popular support for the brutal war against the Palestinians and are fuelled by growing hostility within the working class to Sharon's plans to impose an austerity budget.

Labour has threatened to oppose the 2003 budget, as have sections of Likud and the far-right settler and ultra-orthodox parties such as Shas. In response Sharon has threatened to call early elections if the budget is not passed by October 30. This could force elections in January, nine months earlier than the set date of November 2003.

Mitzna is being catapulted to centre stage by the desire of the Labour Party's left wing to distance itself from figures discredited by their association with Sharon and wishing to put on a clean shirt to cover their own political crimes.

Shlomo Ben-Ami, a former Labour foreign minister, resigned from the Knesset this month to protest Labour's decision to carry on in coalition with Sharon. Former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and others have also threatened to leave the party if Ben-Eliezer remained at its head. One of Ben-Eliezer's key deserters, Yisrael Savyon, head of the Haifa branch of the Labour Party, is actively campaigning for Mitzna. Other leading figures such as Science and Sport Minister Matan Vilnai and the mayor of Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai, have pledged their support.

Both Ben-Eliezer and Ramon have responded to the challenge by warning of electoral disaster should the party turn leftwards. Ramon said that although they both support a unilateral withdrawal from isolated settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Mitzna is the only candidate who believes there is a Palestinian partner to negotiate with. "My problem is with the public," he added. "Even though the nation has had a bad experience with people who lack experience, they continue to prefer inexperienced people."

Mitzna has declared his opposition to Sharon's exclusive reliance on military force to deal with the Palestinians, telling a press conference, "Ariel Sharon is leading us to a disaster. Nothing he is doing on security and economic issues is getting us anywhere. That's why so many citizens have lost hope."

He linked this with the deteriorating social situation, noting, "The security situation is getting worse every day. Every day more people are losing their jobs, there are more people with less food in the refrigerator, and more people have nothing to look forward to."

He pledged an immediate resumption of peace talks with the Palestinians and to evacuate any Jewish settlements left in whatever eventually constitutes Palestinian territories. The Palestinian Authority would be offered sovereignty over the Gaza Strip, most of the West Bank and an unspecified part of Jerusalem—although Israel would retain sovereignty over Jewish holy sites—similar to the offer made by then Prime Minister Ehud Barak to Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat at the Camp David peace summit in 2000.

If an agreement is not reached, then Mitzna has said Israel would decide unilaterally where the border between Israel and the West Bank would run.

Mitzna is far from being the great left hope he is being portrayed as. There are many ambiguities in Mitzna's position, especially when he is pressed for details. Mitzna said Israel "cannot choose" Palestinian leaders, but added that he would not meet with the Palestinians prior to the election and would not say whether he would negotiate with Arafat. When asked by *Newsweek* how many settlements he intended to dismantle he replied, "I won't give you a direct answer ... but it is not just a few settlements. It is more than a few, that's for sure."

Some reports contradict claims that he will cede sovereignty over part of Jerusalem to the Palestinians. Rather, he is said to favour an international force ruling over Jerusalem's Old City, with Jews responsible for their holy sites and Muslims for theirs.

He can barely conceal his hostility and arrogance towards the Palestinians. He told one reporter, "We will have to force them to build a state, a Palestinian state, and then start to be responsible for yourself... They blame Israel about everything... We don't have medical services, that is Israel, we don't have food, it is Israel, we don't have infrastructure, we don't have schools, take your own state and do something for your own."

Mitzna is among the most decorated veterans in Israel, a tank commander who was wounded three times in one battle in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and again in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. He received the highest military awards for bravery after both and rose to major general and chief of planning and budget.

He never became chief of staff as was once expected, in part because of his history of enmity towards Ariel Sharon. He wrote a letter declaring his lack of confidence in the then defence minister while serving as a brigadier general during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. He demanded at a military conference that Sharon resign from his position and was only saved from dismissal by

the personal intervention of then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Mitzna boasts that his letter forced the commission of inquiry into the massacre of Palestinian refugees by Christian militiamen at the Sabra and Shatilla, which led Sharon to resign. When Sharon sued the liberal *Ha' aretz* in 1991 for libel for blaming him for Sabra and Shatilla, Mitzna testified on behalf of the newspaper.

But this is not the whole story. Mitzna was the Israeli Defence Force commander in the West Bank during the 1987—1993 Palestinian *Intifada*, or uprising, and his forces were heavily criticised for the brutal tactics they employed. In February 1988, a CBS news team outside Nablus filmed four IDF soldiers holding down two Palestinians and pounding their arms with rocks. Mitzna was forced to arrest the four soldiers and suspend an officer. It was only in 1993 that he resigned as chief of the Central Command. Even today he is unrepentant, stating, "First of all it was war, and I was responsible for law and order in the West Bank. I had to use the measures and authority I had."

Mitzna is a political representative of a section of the Israeli bourgeoisie, rather than the working class. He is supported by a wealthy elite, who utilised the rapprochement with the Arab regimes following the 1993 Oslo Accord to enrich themselves through Middle East investment and who view the subsequent deterioration in relations with Israel's neighbours as disastrous.

He makes repeated visits to the Israeli Arab sectors in the north in order to encourage collaboration. In Haifa, he has been accused repeatedly of cronyism because of his relationship with the contractor Gad Ze'evi. Yisrael Shimon, the Labour Party secretary for Haifa, is a partner in Ze'evi's firm, which has won numerous contracts to build lucrative high-rise offices and apartments.



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