Fissures deepen within Israeli political establishment

Jean Shaoul
21 November 2003

In an extraordinary move, four former leaders of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security force, gave a joint interview to Israel's leading daily, *Yedioth Aharanoth*, criticising Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's suppression of the Palestinians.

Warning that Sharon's policies were leading to a catastrophe that threatened the very survival of the Jewish state, they called for Israel to dismantle some of the Zionist settlements in the Occupied Territories and sign a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority (PA) that will establish a Palestinian state.

That these former security chiefs turned businessmen have described Sharon's policies as nothing short of suicidal for the Zionist state is indicative of the depth of the political divisions within the Israeli ruling elite. These are the self-same people who for 20 years were responsible under successive Israeli governments for brutally suppressing the Palestinian people. Under their leadership, Shin Bet, as now, carried out assassinations, raids into Palestinian towns and villages in search of alleged terrorists, collective punishments, house demolitions, curfews, exiles, deportations, imprisonment without trial, closures and road blocks. It ran a network of Palestinian informers throughout the West Bank and Gaza, a number of whom have been exposed and executed by Palestinian militants, and became notorious for its brutal interrogation of Palestinian detainees.

They are speaking out now because they can see that Sharon, who rests upon a narrow social layer of ultra-nationalists, is dragging Israel into a military, social and economic quagmire that may yet lead to its destruction. They publicly acknowledge that repression, far from having the intended impact of crushing Palestinian resistance, has stiffened resolve to fight the Israeli army of occupation. And privately they will be equally concerned by mounting internal opposition—both to the continued occupation and to the attacks on living standards made necessary by the devastating decline in Israel's economy as a result of the ongoing conflict. They speak for a section of the ruling elite that recognises it can no longer maintain its political domination based on such a short-sighted policy.

Ami Ayalon, director of Shin Bet from 1996 to 2000 and now chairman of an irrigation systems company, said, "We are taking sure and very measured steps to a point where the state of Israel will not be a democracy or a home for the Jewish people."

Avraham Shalom, director of Shin Bet from 1980 to 1986 and now an international business consultant, said, "All the steps we have taken are steps that are contrary to the aspiration for peace. If we do not turn away from this path, of adhering to the entire land of Israel, and if we do not also begin to understand the other side, we will not get anywhere. We must admit that there is another side, that it has feelings and that it is suffering, and that we are behaving disgracefully. Yes, there is no other word for it: disgracefully... We have turned into a people of petty fighters using the wrong tools."

Carmi Gillon, a Shin Bet director from 1995 to 1996 who has more recently served as an ambassador, said, "If we continue our conflict with the Palestinians, this country will go from bad to worse... [The government] is dealing solely with the question of how to prevent the next terrorist attack. It ignores the question of how we get out of the mess we find ourselves in today... It is clear to me that we are heading toward a crash."

Yaakov Peri, director of Shin Bet from 1988 to 1995, a period that covered the brutal suppression of the first Palestinian intifada, and now a banker and businessman, said, "We are heading downhill towards near catastrophe in almost every area—economic, political, social and security."

"We need to take the situation into our own hands and leave Gaza with all the difficulty that that entails, and to dismantle illegal settlements. There will always be some [settler] groups...for whom the land of Israel nestles in the hills of Nablus and inside Hebron, and we will have to clash with them."

When asked about the right-wing zealots who would oppose such a withdrawal, Ayalon said, "At issue are 15 percent or even 10 percent of the settlers, and we have to be capable of facing such a number."

The unprecedented two-hour newspaper interview was the first time the four former security directors had ever met together. According to Gillon, they had agreed to speak out publicly because of "serious concern for the condition of the state of Israel."

They denounced Sharon for making progress on the Bush administration's "road map" dependent upon the Palestinian Authority reining in the militant opposition groups that organised the suicide attacks on Israelis. Shalom said, "It is an excuse for doing nothing" and that it was a ploy to avoid negotiations and continue the policies of Israeli expansionism. "We will not determine who is relevant and who isn't," said Shalom. "Nothing can happen without Arafat," he added in an unusual criticism of the Bush administration's attitude towards the Palestinians.

Ayalon said, "If the state of Israel were to leave the Gaza Strip...and really and truly begin to dismantle illegal

© World Socialist Web Site

settlements...the Palestinians would come to the negotiating table."

They condemned the security wall that Israel is building to pen in the Palestinians into an ever-smaller part of the West Bank. Shalom said, "Today's fence is creating a political and security reality that will become a problem. It creates hatred, it expropriates land, and annexes hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to the state of Israel. The result is that the fence creates the exact opposite of what was intended."

He likened it to apartheid, adding, "The Palestinians are arguing, 'You wanted two states, and instead you are closing us up in a South African reality.' Therefore the more we support the fence, they lose their dream and hope for an independent Palestinian state."

Ayalon concluded by saying, "Much of what we are doing to day in [the West Bank] and Gaza is immoral, some of it patently immoral."

Their criticisms go much deeper than a recent outburst from current chief of staff of the armed forces, General Moshe Ya'alon. He told the press that the government's harsh treatment of the Palestinians was counterproductive and strengthened "terror organisations."

That such people have so openly attacked government policy underscores the explosive nature of social relations in Israel.

Sharon responded by accusing his critics of playing into the hands of terrorism, whilst former president Ezer Weizman said they were undermining the government. But in general, the cabinet tried to downplay the significance of the criticisms. "I don't want to add more fuel to this," said an unnamed senior government official. "These of all people should have known this is the worst time to conduct public debate on these issues."

But evidence still mounts of dissent within the ruling elite.

Just last week, officials in the foreign ministry—angered by Sharon's refusal to reach an agreement with the Palestinians—leaked a secret memorandum to Reuters news agency. It showed that Sharon had reneged on a personal commitment to President Bush that he would dismantle the Zionist settler outposts in the West Bank as a sign of good faith in the US-brokered "road map."

The memorandum said, "International criticism is growing because of our lack of creative ideas for getting out of the conflict. Our claim that Israel has fulfilled its side of the 'road map' is seen as lacking credibility because not only have we not evacuated the illegal outposts, we are working in every way to whitewash their existence and build more."

Sharon had told Bush at the Aqaba summit in June that he would dismantle a hundred or so outposts that were illegal under Israeli law. After very publicly dismantling a few, he allowed some to move a few hundred metres away or be re-established a few weeks later and then quietly dropped any attempt to close the outposts.

Though many of Sharon's critics stress that he is undermining Washington's supposedly sincere efforts to bring the two-state solution envisaged by the road map into being, this is a crude distortion.

Sharon heads a government without significant social support outside of a

narrow layer of far-right settlers and religious zealots. He could not act as he does without the tacit support of the Bush administration, and of a coterie of Christian fundamentalists and right-wing pro-Zionists who determine the realities of US foreign policy as opposed to the White House's occasional and mealy-mouthed declarations of impartiality.

The public criticisms of Sharon from within the establishment are aimed as much at an international as a domestic audience. They hope to undermine Sharon in order to win the ear of Washington and convince the Bush administration to more diligently pursue its own road map. The fact that such deeply corrupt individuals endorse such a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict speaks volumes as to the character of the so-called "two-state" perspective being advanced.

The US, European Union, United Nations and Russia (the Quartet)—have drawn up a plan that intends to bring the Palestinian intifada to an end on terms that benefit only the Zionist regime. Sharon did not invent the condition that the PA must suppress militant groups before any progress could be made. It is written as phase one of the road map, which declares, "A two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only be achieved through an end to violence and terrorism, when the Palestinian people have a leadership acting decisively against terror"; it demands an immediate and unconditional cessation of violence by the Palestinians, "visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt, and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis anywhere."

Once the PA crushes all resistance to the Israeli occupation, it will be granted in return a "state" that is in reality precisely the type of apartheid-style solution warned against by Shalom—one equivalent to a bantustan and entirely subservient to Israel economically, militarily and politically.

In such a state, probably made up of around half of the Occupied Territories and ringed and intersected by Israeli military outposts, the PA would function as Washington and Tel Aviv's police force in controlling a restive population that would still be denied its social and democratic rights.

All "attributes of sovereignty" within this entity, it should be noted, are to be determined by "the consensus judgement of the Quartet."

Sharon judges from the actual content of the road map and from the private and public views expressed by his US backers that his policy of a Greater Israel can be pursued without serious opposition, providing only that he justifies this by constantly blaming the PA for their supposed failure to meet their side of the bargain with Washington. This has been successful so far, but its cost has left Israel a pariah state that is teetering on the edge of economic collapse and social and political conflict that could tear it apart.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site