

Israel: Shimon Peres joins Sharon's new party

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Former Israeli Labour Party leader and ex-prime minister Shimon Peres held a joint press conference with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on December 4 to formally announce that he was quitting Labour to join Sharon's new Kadima ("Forward") Party. Peres's defection follows that of two other Labour cabinet ministers, Haim Ramon and Dalia Itzik.

"I am joining the great and important partnership, and I'm doing it very consciously and out of a sense of obligation and privilege," Peres declared. "[We] need to continue the peace process without stopping ... we must continue the momentum of our own initiative and outlook in this great and true partnership with the other side."

Peres's declared commitment to peace is a fraud. Kadima is the political vehicle for Sharon—a man who has based his entire career on Israeli expansionism and attacks on the Palestinian people.

The political union of the elder statesman of Labour Zionism with the war criminal Sharon represents an acute expression of the profound crisis of the Israeli state. Traditional conceptions of "left" and "right" wing politics no longer have any real relevance with regard to official Israeli politics. Nor does the country have any genuine opposition party. The entire political establishment is united behind Sharon's strategy of annexing East Jerusalem and large swathes of the West Bank.

Labour has consistently lined up behind Sharon ever since his election as prime minister in 2001. As Likud's junior partner in the "national unity" government, Labour has spent the past year providing left-wing cover for the unilateral disengagement from Gaza.

Sharon openly admitted to his supporters in Israel that the tactical withdrawal of the 9,000 settlers from Gaza had nothing to do with any peace settlement, and was instead aimed at winning US support for Israel's permanent annexation of Palestinian land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Labour Party's role has been to promote the myth favoured by the Bush administration that "unilateral disengagement" from Gaza—which leaves Israel in military control and can be reversed at any time—is a major Israeli concession and represented a step towards a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

Peres aims to perform a similar role from within Sharon's

party, but he is a discredited figure. The Nobel Peace Prize winner's value to Sharon within Israel is limited. He is deeply unpopular—despised by the right for his association with the Oslo Agreement and derided as an opportunist by Labour Party supporters. He is not standing as a candidate in the elections, and according to Israeli media reports, will not play any significant role in Kadima's election campaign.

Peres's central role will be played out on the international stage. If Kadima wins the general election scheduled next March, Sharon will appoint Peres as his "minister of peace affairs".

"Peres is the prime minister's most important possession," *Haaretz's* diplomatic affairs analyst Akiva Eldar wrote on December 12. "To Sharon, one picture with him in the *New York Times* or *Le Monde* is worth more than thousands of votes in Jerusalem and Dimona."

When Sharon again steps up his attacks on the Palestinians, Eldar continued, "Peres will take his 'peace team' to Europe and show the world that everything is all right".

While ceaselessly referred to as "centrist" by the international media, Kadima is essentially a re-branded Likud, shorn of the fascistic and messianic wing of the settler movement which was exploited by Sharon's enemies in the party—principally Benjamin Netanyahu—to undermine his leadership. For the far right, even Sharon's pragmatic efforts to expand Israel's borders into the West Bank and secure permanent control over East Jerusalem do not go far enough. Abandoning a single settlement is seen as a betrayal. But this does not make Sharon's aims or his new party any the less reactionary.

Kadima's political physiognomy has been amply demonstrated in a number of recent episodes.

The December 5 issue of *Newsweek* magazine quoted one of Sharon's political strategists, Kalman Gayer, as saying: "Sharon would accept a Palestinian state in Gaza and 90 percent of the West Bank, and a compromise on Jerusalem, in exchange for peace."

The prime minister immediately issued a statement denying the report. "The remarks attributed to Kalman Gayer are in total contradiction to my positions and opinions," Sharon insisted. "If, indeed, these remarks were made, they were made strictly on Mr. Gayer's initiative, and they are senseless and absurd.

The entire united Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel forever.”

A number of prominent right-wing Likud figures have defected to Kadima. Tzachi Hanegbi, chairman of Likud, announced on December 7 that he was joining Kadima. Hanegbi has long been one of the fiercest proponents of a Greater Israel within Likud. He first rose to prominence in 1982, when he led ultra-nationalist student protests against Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai peninsula. More recently, Hanegbi was a leading opponent of the Gaza disengagement earlier this year. While he now claims to have been won over to the disengagement plan, Hanegbi has stated that he intends to act as the “right-wing marker” of Kadima.

On the same day as Hanegbi announced his support for Kadima, police announced that they were pressing charges against him for corruption. While serving as environment minister between 2001 and 2003, Hanegbi allegedly handed out dozens of ministry jobs to his cronies. The corruption charges were of little concern to Sharon. As a source close to the prime minister explained in the *Jerusalem Post*: “We might lose some votes in the short term due to the unfortunate timing of the police’s decision, but we will gain in the long term because Tzachi is seen as the ultimate Likudnik, and it is important that a centrist party like Kadima has a high-profile figure who opposed disengagement.”

“Centrism” is thus defined as a party that encompasses two variants of an expansionist military policy, as opposed to Likud’s sole embrace of the settler and ultra-orthodox stance on Gaza disengagement.

On December 11, Israel’s defence minister Shaul Mofaz announced that he too had heeded an appeal from Sharon to quit Likud and join Kadima. Prior to his appointment as defence minister in 2002, Mofaz was an Israeli army general in charge of fighting the Palestinian intifada. He directed countless attacks in the Occupied Territories, including the destruction of the Jenin refugee camp in March 2002 and the demolition of Yasser Arafat’s Ramallah headquarters.

As defence minister, Mofaz coordinated ongoing Israeli operations against the Palestinians, including a series of assassinations targeting Palestinian militants. Less than a week before he joined Sharon’s new party, Mofaz asked Israel’s attorney general for permission to resume Israeli army demolitions of family homes connected to suicide bombers, a practice that was suspended last February. According to a *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper report of December 14, he also approved the construction of 290 new settlement houses in the West Bank just days before resigning from Likud.

“There is no other way to influence events in the country than with Kadima,” Mofaz explained. Sharon has promised the ex-general the post of defence minister in a new Kadima government, ensuring a direct line of continuity in Israeli military operations in the West Bank and Gaza since the beginning of the intifada. Echoing Hanegbi, Mofaz declared

that he intended to serve as Kadima’s “right-wing cursor”.

The display of unity behind Sharon is not confined to those who have joined his party. His manoeuvres have only been made possible by the Labour Party’s unwavering support for his attacks on the Palestinian people. Peres’s replacement as Labour leader by Amir Peretz has done nothing to alter Labour’s support for the brutal military suppression of all Palestinian resistance in the Occupied Territories.

On winning the Labour leadership on November 9, Peretz pulled the party out of the “national unity” coalition. This move was driven by the fear that the Labour Party’s prostration before Sharon was completely discrediting it in the eyes of the Israeli working class. Peretz has since campaigned on a left-populist program, promising to increase the minimum wage and reverse some of the deep social spending cuts implemented in the past five years.

However, the new Labour leader’s opposition to Sharon does not go beyond challenging the worst excesses of his economic and social agenda. While widely promoted as a “dove”, Peretz has made clear that he does not intend to challenge any aspect of the government’s military operations. He declared at the official opening of Labour’s election campaign: “You [Sharon] know how to look after the security of the country, but we know how to take care of people better than you, how to take care of every child, how to ensure that new immigrants can buy apartments.”

In response to a suicide bombing in northern Israel on December 5, Peretz declared that Israel “must conduct a war without compromise against terror”.

“As peace people, we would have even more of a right to fight back against terror,” he continued. “No-one can prevent us from using any means necessary against terror.”

His comments followed a meeting with his newly formed security team, made up of former army generals, admirals, police chiefs, and intelligence agents.

Peretz’s bellicosity is in part motivated by an attempt to placate Labour’s “old guard”. Senior Labour figures, led by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, have accused Peretz of illegitimately securing the Labour leadership by stacking the party with his trade union supporters, and they blame him for Peres’s defection to Kadima. Barak and Peres are essentially working both sides of the fence in order to continue supporting the right-wing economic nostrums and land grab on the West Bank demanded by the Israeli bourgeoisie.



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