

War now, peace later: Israel's doves line up behind war

Part one

Jean Shaoul
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This is the first of a two-part article on the attitude taken by Israel's Peace Now movement towards the Olmert government's wars of aggression in Lebanon and Gaza.

One of the most significant features of Israel's wars of aggression in Gaza and Lebanon is the unanimity between the so-called "hawks" and movements that in the past were considered "doves."

Peace Now has remained largely silent over Israel's massive assault on Hamas and the Palestinians in Gaza, ongoing since June. In the case of Lebanon, from the moment full-scale hostilities began in July following Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers, Peace Now declared its support for the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the Olmert government.

It issued a statement on its web site explaining that its members had gone to Kibbutz Gonen in northern Israel to proclaim that Israel had the right to respond to the capture of the Israeli soldiers and that Peace Now supported Israel's right to defend its borders.

Peace Now has echoed the government's propaganda that Israel faces provocations by Hamas and Hezbollah, accepting the official Israeli and American definition of both organisations as terrorist groups. There are no territorial issues at stake, it maintains, and therefore the government's response to supposedly external and unprovoked assaults on the sovereign state of Israel is entirely justified.

In June 1982, Peace Now opposed Israel's invasion of Lebanon, rallying tens of thousands to protest against the war. It organised Israel's largest demonstration ever—400,000 people—against the government of Menachem Begin and his minister of defence, Ariel Sharon, for its role as the occupying power in aiding and abetting the slaughter of more than 800 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla by its allies, the Lebanese fascist Phalange, and demanded an inquiry. More than a few Israeli commentators viewed Begin and Sharon as war criminals, and the US as their accomplices.

In the late 1980s, Peace Now was the first major force to call for an independent Palestinian state on the territories illegally occupied by Israel since 1967—the so-called two state solution—and proposed peace talks with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Yasser Arafat. The Labour Party took up its banner and went on to sign the ill-fated 1993 Oslo Accords that embodied its demands.

The transformation of Peace Now into an advocate of unrestrained aggression against a civilian population, which tramples on all the regulations governing international relations set up in the aftermath of World War II, is therefore a source of tremendous political confusion for working people in Israel. Many had looked to Peace Now to

articulate their opposition to the criminal and brutal actions of Israel against the Palestinian and Lebanese people.

Under conditions in which the so-called peace movement gives its imprimatur to war, there is little political outlet for those horrified by the slaughter and destruction being carried out by Israel's armed forces.

Yossi Beilin is the leader of the Meretz-Yachad party in Israel's parliament, and the man most associated with the peace movement. He led the secret talks with the PLO in Oslo. He was the minister of justice at the time of the Labour government's pullout from Lebanon in May 2000, a negotiator in the failed talks at Camp David in 2000 and Taba in 2001, and a signatory to the Geneva agreement in 2003.

Beilin now echoes the Kadima-Labour government's justification for the war: That it was launched to rescue the captured Israeli soldiers and defend Israeli citizens. He argues that this is entirely in line with his reasons for calling earlier for a withdrawal from Lebanon:

"People like myself led the movement to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000, and when we were asked what would happen if they continued to use violence against us and shoot at us from Lebanon, we said that when we leave Lebanon according to a UN agreement, then we will have a free hand to use against those who act against us. This is why we find ourselves in a difficult situation. We cannot criticise everything the government does, especially since it is clear that there was no Israeli provocation."

Beilin presents himself as the loyal opposition—supporting the war now, but maintaining the level head that will be necessary to safeguard the long-term national interests of Israel. In an August 9 article in *Haaretz*, entitled "The Test of the Zionist Left," he declares: "We have a deep belief in the right of the Jewish people to a democratic and secure state, which has a stable Jewish majority: the state of the Jewish people and all of its citizens. We are convinced our national interest is in completing the moves toward peace with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon, and that there is no alternative to an agreement... But our feeling that peace could have been reached long ago and that Israel has played a not insignificant role in the fact that this has not happened does not justify, in our eyes, the behaviour of our enemies."

"The military response in Gaza is justified in our eyes, and the response in Lebanon is no less justified," he continues. "We see our role over the course of the war as warning against Israel's lapsing into situations that it did not anticipate at the beginning of the war and warning against acts that contradict the values of Israeli society, while demanding that we reach the negotiation table as soon as possible to

discuss a cease-fire.”

Amos Oz, one of the founders of the Peace Now movement in 1978, goes even further. His article in the *Los Angeles Times* is indistinguishable from the ravings of Washington’s neo-conservatives.

He calls Hezbollah’s “kidnapping” of Israeli soldiers “a vicious, unprovoked attack on Israeli territory.” He writes: “This time, Israel is not invading Lebanon. It is defending itself from daily harassment and bombardment of dozens of our towns and villages by attempting to smash Hezbollah wherever it lurks.”

He continues: “The Israeli peace movement should support Israel’s attempt at self-defence, pure and simple, as long as this operation targets mostly Hezbollah and spares, as much as possible, the lives of Lebanese civilians (not an easy task), as Hezbollah missile launchers are too often using Lebanese civilians as human sandbags.” (Emphasis added).

Oz endorses the Bush administration’s stance that Israel is fighting a terrorist network sponsored by Iran and Syria. “Hezbollah’s missiles are supplied by Iran and Syria, sworn enemies of all peace initiatives in the Middle East,” he declares, and adds, “The real battle raging these days is not at all between Haifa and Beirut, but between a coalition of peace-seeking nations—Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand—and fanatical Islam, fuelled by Iran and Syria, on the other.”

Oz knows full well Israel’s real motives in seeking the destruction of the Lebanon. As he wrote in 1982, the Israeli invasion of that year was “not to repulse a threat to our very existence, but to get rid of an irritant and mostly change the map of the region.”

No one epitomises the degeneration of the peace movement more clearly than Amir Peretz, the former left-talking trade union leader and current Labour Party leader, who is now the minister of defence. As *Haaretz* pointed out in an article headlined “First War Run by Peace Now,” Peretz is “the architect, chief engineer and standard bearer of the war.”

He was one of the first members of Peace Now, and in the 1980s was one of eight Labour Party legislators who, along with Beilin, tried to get peace talks going with the Palestinians.

Less than a year ago, Peretz was voted in as leader of the Labour Party against the incumbent, Shimon Peres—the architect of Oslo—by party members who were disgusted at Labour’s participation in a coalition with Ariel Sharon’s Likud. Labour’s leaders had provided the political cover for Sharon’s brutal suppression of the Palestinians, his land grab on the West Bank, which was carried out in the name of “unilateral separation,” and his austerity measures against the Israeli working class.

Peretz won the leadership contest on the twin promises of peace negotiations with the Palestinians and measures to deal with the rising social inequality within Israel. His election as Labour Party leader prompted Sharon, with the support of Peres, to split with Likud and proclaim the founding of a new party—Kadima—to take forward Sharon’s expansionist agenda.

But last May, following the March general election in which Kadima became the largest party, but lacked an overall majority in the Knesset, Peretz took Labour back into a coalition with Kadima, now led by Ehud Olmert, with Peres as Olmert’s deputy.

Agreeing to take the post of minister of defence, his first acts were to order the assassination of five members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and to step up the assault on the Palestinians in Gaza. With full backing from Washington, he authorised the

military’s long-planned air, sea and land assault on Lebanon, calling up reservists and putting Israel on a war footing.

Nahum Barnea, a columnist with *Yediot Aharonot*, aptly summed up Peretz’s role. Having a broad-based government, led by Olmert’s Kadima party and including Labour Party leader Amir Peretz as defence minister, “makes it much easier to launch a military strike against someone,” he wrote.

The transformation of Peace Now into an open advocate of war has left it to groups such as Gush Shalom and the Communist and Arab parties to advance an antiwar position. While the demonstrations and vigils opposing the war in Lebanon and the occupied territories were small at first, they are now drawing thousands of protestors. On August 5, 10,000 took to the streets of Tel Aviv in spite of the war hysteria and physical attacks on the marchers.

Demonstrators chanted, “Jews and Arabs, Refuse to be Enemies!”, “We Shall not Die or Kill in the Service of the USA!”, “Children Want to Live in Beirut and Haifa!”, “Peretz, Peretz Resign, Peace is More Important!”, “A Million Refugees, that’s a War Crime!”, “Olmert, Peretz and Ramon, Get out of Lebanon!”

But in order to advance the struggle against war, it is necessary to understand why the old peace movement has undergone such a dramatic degeneration. Peace Now’s transformation into an apologist for and prosecutor of war can be understood only in terms of its rejection of a historical and class analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its nationalist defence of the Zionist project.

Its claim that there are no territorial issues involved in the war against Lebanon is as absurd as its statements that Israel is merely responding to provocations from Hezbollah. Even if one leaves aside the ongoing Israeli violence against the Palestinians and its illegal occupation of their territories, there is a great deal of evidence of repeated Israeli provocations against Lebanon prior to last month’s Israeli invasion. For example, several reports by the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (Unifil) show that Israeli military aircraft infringed on Lebanon’s airspace on an almost daily basis between 2001 and 2003, and persistently until 2006, often breaking the sound barrier over populated areas.

As for territorial issues, the Zionists have long had an interest in Lebanon, going back to 1938, when Ben Gurion, who was to become Israel’s first prime minister in 1948, envisaged a state of Israel that would include southern Lebanon as far north as the Litani River.

To be continued



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