

Labor joins Netanyahu coalition as evidence of war crimes in Gaza mounts

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The decision of the Labor Party to join the rightist coalition led by Benjamin Netanyahu allows Likud to form a government. If all of Labor's Knesset members maintain their support for the move, Netanyahu will have 66 to 67 seats in the 120-member parliament and will be sworn in as prime minister Tuesday.

Labor will sit in the Knesset as part of the most right-wing government in Israel's history. It has joined the government despite Likud being explicitly opposed to a two-state solution and the stated goal of establishing of a Palestinian state, the nominal political difference separating Labor from the overtly right-wing parties. Even Kadima, the party established by Ariel Sharon, refused to join the coalition unless Netanyahu at least formally endorsed a two-state policy. Likud's other major coalition partner is the far right Yisrael Beiteinu of Avigdor Lieberman, who is in favour of the ethnic cleansing of Israeli Arabs. Lieberman has been appointed as Netanyahu's foreign minister.

Likud won one seat less than the Kadima party of outgoing Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, but was asked to form a government by President Shimon Peres because the rightist parties enjoyed an overall majority. But Netanyahu was urged by the Obama administration in the United States and by the European Union to strive to include either Kadima or Labor, so his government could be depicted as being less extreme than it is.

Labor will do more than provide a fig leaf for the continued support by the major powers and the complicity of Washington's Arab allies in Israel's offensive against the Palestinians. Party leader Ehud Barak will personally spearhead attacks on the Palestinians and any hostile moves that are made against Iran, retaining the post of defence minister he occupied in the outgoing coalition government with Kadima.

Barak's horse-trading with Netanyahu also secured Labor four cabinet portfolios in addition to defence: industry, trade and labour, agriculture, and welfare and social services, and one position as minister-without-portfolio. As well as

heading the Israeli military, Labor will play a key role in imposing austerity measures on the working class. The chairman of the Histadrut trade union federation, Ofer Eini, secured an agreement to take part in all socio-economic discussions in tripartite "round-table" arrangements with the government and the employers.

Barak's decision won the support of a narrow majority of Labor's central committee and Tuesday's party convention, where 680 delegates voted to join while just 507 voted against. He was opposed by a group of Labor MKs, headed by Amir Peretz and Shelly Yachimovich, but afterwards Yachimovich said that she "respected the outcome." Cabinet Minister Yuli Tamir, one of the founders of Peace Now, has merely stated that she had not yet decided if she will vote with the government.

Labor's joining the coalition was entirely predictable. Its undeserved reputation as the "party of peace" was already in ruins after its direct participation in military assaults such as the July war against Lebanon in 2006 and January's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza that claimed the lives of 1,400 Palestinians, including 300 children and 116 women. The Israeli siege left the territory in ruins, with more than half of Gaza's 27 hospitals and 44 clinics damaged by Israeli bombs, according to the World Health Organisation. Labor's support has collapsed as a result, dropping from 19 to just 13 Knesset seats, as the party fell into fourth place, eclipsed by Yisrael Beiteinu.

Even as the final preparations for Netanyahu taking office are being made, the demands for Israel to face war crimes charges relating to Operation Cast Lead, waged directly under Barak's leadership, are growing.

Israeli newspapers have published the testimony of soldiers detailing atrocities in which they participated or that they witnessed in Gaza. The United Nations human rights investigator for the Palestinian territories, Richard Falk, has issued a report declaring that Israel's siege of Gaza "would seem to constitute a war crime of the gravest magnitude under international law," describing the Israeli campaign as a "massive assault on a densely populated urbanized setting"

that subjected civilians to "an inhumane form of warfare that kills, maims and inflicts mental harm."

He listed war crimes such as the "targeting of schools, mosques and ambulances" and the use of white phosphorus shells in densely populated neighbourhoods. The war on Gaza was not legally justified and could constitute a "crime against peace," he argued, the principal charge against the Nazi leaders tried at Nuremberg.

A report by human rights advocates who visited Gaza after the war accuses Israeli soldiers of shooting children, bulldozing a home with a woman and a child inside, and shelling a building they had ordered civilians to enter one day earlier.

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel has accused the army of repeatedly violating its own ethics code, and possibly international law, by impeding the evacuation of the sick and wounded and by endangering medical teams operating in Gaza.

A month-long investigation by the *Guardian* newspaper has compiled detailed evidence of war crimes committed by Israel during the 23-day offensive, including the use of Palestinian children as human shields. Medics and ambulance men were targeted when they tried to tend to the wounded, and sixteen were killed. The *Guardian* also cites evidence of civilians being hit by fire from unmanned drone aircraft, "said to be so accurate that their operators can tell the colour of the clothes worn by a target."

Netanyahu's government will continue this campaign to destroy Gaza and to secure the permanent annexation of much of the West Bank to Israel. Labor's own fig leaf for participating in the coalition, Likud's agreement that it will work for peace with its neighbours and respect Israel's existing agreements, was exposed yesterday when it was revealed that Netanyahu has struck a secret deal with Lieberman to enable further settlement construction on the West Bank. Army Radio said that the plan to build on land known as E1 had been agreed upon, even though it did not appear in the official document relating to the coalition agreement.

The aim is to build 3,000 new homes starting from the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim so as to create contiguity between the settlement and Jerusalem, preventing Palestinian construction between East Jerusalem and Ramallah. The isolation of East Jerusalem, the putative capital of a Palestinian state, would make any agreement on the question of permanent borders impossible. Regarding Iran, the *Jerusalem Post* revealed on March 16 that the coalition agreement between Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu puts the fascist Lieberman "in charge of Israel's strategic dialogue with the United States on issues such as Iran.... The joint American-Israel strategic dialogue committee is where

key decisions are made regarding both countries' policies toward the emerging nuclear threat, and on other key strategic issues in meetings twice a year."

"Kadima officials were surprised by the appointment and said it proved more than ever that Netanyahu's government would be dominated by Lieberman," the *Post* commented.

The government will also be charged with a historically unprecedented assault on the living standards of the Israeli working class.

Fitch Ratings has said that Israel's economy will contract by 1.5 percent in 2009 and that its budget deficit will reach 7 percent. Israel's ratio of debt to gross domestic product could rise to 90 percent by the end of 2010 from 77 percent now and could potentially undermine Israel's creditworthiness.

The Bank of Israel has reported that the main index of economic indicators dropped for a seventh consecutive month in February, indicating "a continuation of the economy's drift toward a recession." This is translating into a steep growth in unemployment. In February almost 20,000 workers were laid off, the highest monthly increase in Israel's history, leading to a number of bitter labour disputes.

The situation now facing both the Israeli and Palestinian people poses grave dangers. The Zionist project of forging a nation-state in which the Jews of the world would supposedly find liberty, equality and social justice has failed. Established through the dispossession of the Palestinians, Israel has been maintained ever since through brutal wars and repression, while internally social divisions have become ever more acute.

Today, the state that was supposed to offer a home to the people who suffered the Holocaust is viewed as an international pariah and the perpetrator of obscene war crimes. It is ruled by a government that spans the official political spectrum and that is in a state of undeclared war with the majority of its own citizens. The only way forward is through the development of a new socialist and internationalist political movement to unite Arab and Jewish workers in a struggle against all the region's ruling elites and their imperialist backers and for the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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