

Arab Knesset Member Appeals to Americans

by William Jones

While Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—ostensibly as a result of a terrorist bombing in Jerusalem—postponed his visit to Washington on May 20, where he was to meet with President Bush to discuss the “Road Map” to Middle East peace, Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset did come to Washington, with a message to Americans desirous of ending the bloodshed of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. His message was straightforward: The de facto U.S. alliance with the Israeli right wing has strengthened Sharon’s ability to resist any moves toward peace in the region. “The United States is allying itself with direct colonial policies of the Israel government on the West Bank and Gaza, and also with the fundamentalist movement in Israel that cannot and will not separate state and religion,” Bishara told an audience on May 19 at the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine.

Terrorism and Sharon’s Gestapo Methods

Bishara tried to puncture a few myths that still hold sway in U.S. political circles, especially that Sharon’s war on terrorism has been any kind of success story. “Sharon is a bigger failure in security affairs than any Israeli Prime Minister since 1948,” Bishara said. Sharon established Unit 101, which was responsible for the so-called retaliation action over the borders, in Jordan, in Syria, and in Egypt, he continued. “He is the man who launched the 1992 war. He is the man who liquidated so-called terrorism in Gaza so that the Hamas group emerged instead of the secular PLO movement that he claimed to have liquidated. Everything he promised to do failed. In security, it’s the worst phase in Israel’s history, the last two years. In terms of the economy, Israel is in an emergency situation.”

Bishara’s comments on the Road Map, what could well be the last chance to achieve progress toward a Middle East settlement, were tinged with skepticism. “In the last three years, we changed names three times: Tenet, Mitchell, and now the Road Map. And in between, there was somebody called Cheney, if you remember. We should also consider whether the Administration is really intent on intervening in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. In the last period, it has not been so clear that they were prepared to do that, and the last major attempt to really intervene, under Clinton, failed. In Hebrew they translated Road Map in the plural, as Road Maps,” Bishara said, “perhaps indicating the ambiguity.”

He complained that the Road Map was short on concrete measures, except for the familiar Bush refrain that the Palestinians should stop the violence and that the Israelis, in the first phase, should withdraw from all the territories occupied since Sept. 28, 2000. He pointed instead to the Arab League initiative taken in Beirut in March 2002, which recognized Israeli statehood, among other provisions: “One of the most important things that happened in the history of the conflict since 1948, was the fact that Arab countries could gather in Beirut and suggest this proposal for the first time, a proposal that was not even given any attention,” he said. The issuance of the Road Map, while referring to the Arab initiative as a component of any final settlement, “has served to put the Arab initiative on the shelf.” In addition, Bishara complained, Sharon has demanded that the issue of returning Palestinian refugees to Israel be decided as a prerequisite to negotiations on the Road Map, rather than being resolved in negotiations as a “final status” issue. Nevertheless, the Palestinian side has accepted the Road Map unconditionally, and the Israeli side should do so as well. “Israel is the only state in the world that doesn’t accept the Road Map,” he said.

Support for Palestinian Cause

Bishara was more optimistic about the growing support for the Palestinians since the Iraq war. “I believe that the Palestinian issue was never so strong internationally,” he said. “It is now broadly understood that the Palestinian issue is an issue of fairness and justice. Even the proponents of the Iraq war, like Blair, had to apologize to the Palestinians. Blair had to say, ‘We will get to you soon.’ The Palestinian issue became stronger.”

“The most important thing for the Palestinians now, Bishara said, “is to give themselves a Road Map. What we need now is not a civil war in order to satisfy Israeli reactionaries, but a national dialogue, to come out, not only with nationally accepted goals, but also in broad outline, how we are to reach these goals. We must avoid the alternatives of accepting Israeli or American dictates, and on the other hand, an irrational anti-Americanism. We cannot be led by an anti-American sentiment, this is nonsense, this is also fundamentalism.”

“We must influence American public opinion,” Bishara told an audience on May 19 at an event held at St. Albans Church in Washington. He underlined the fact that the U.S. policy has been guided by people who are driven by theological motives. “Are fundamentalist Christians to determine U.S. policy in the Middle East? Do the American people know this? We should tell them.” He urged Arab-Americans, especially Arab Christians, to make this into an issue. “The Maronites, the Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church, the Chaldean Church, have not yet played a role in America in facing these fundamentalist Zionist Christians who are trying to invest Christian theology in a very irrational way, in support of Zionism. We have an answer to that and this should be activated by Arab-Americans,” Bishara urged.