

# Peace in Israel-Palestine Depends on U.S. Election

by Dean Andromidas

As this article is being written, Southwest Asia faces three developments that will have radical implications for whether war or peace reigns in the region. First, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, the symbol of the Palestinian nation for over four decades, lies on what is feared to be his deathbed. Second, the Israeli Knesset's approval of the first draft of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, promises to lead to more bloodshed in the Occupied Territories, while perpetuating the ongoing political crisis within Israel itself. Third, and most important, are the United States Presidential elections.

Doctors from Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt have descended on the Mukata, in Ramallah, the besieged headquarters of the Palestinian President, charged with the mission of saving their beloved leader's life. In the event of his death, an unfillable chasm will open within the Palestinian leadership. His role as leader is not only a question of the loyalty and leadership he has been able to command over the Palestinian body politic. He has also been their irreplaceable grand strategist, who has been able to keep the very concept of a Palestinian nation alive in the face of the most incredible international odds.

The less said about the doomsday predictions of chaos and civil war which have permeated the media, the better. What must be said is that only a leader whose commitment to a Palestinian nation, coupled with the wisdom to comprehend and act on a path to the establishment of such a nation, will succeed.

Sharon and his generals know this very well, and have systematically killed or imprisoned any individual who could replace Arafat. Historically, the two principal leaders who shared many of the qualities of Arafat were Khalil al-Wazir, also known as Abu Jihad, and Salah Khalaf, also known as Abu Iyad. Abu Jihad, who was Arafat's deputy, was assassi-

nated in Tunis by an Israeli commando team in 1988, the very year the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) officially accepted the United Nations resolution calling for the recognition of Israel. The Israeli commando team that killed him in his office in Tunis included Moshe Ya'alon, who is now a lieutenant general and Israeli Chief of Staff. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, a former Chief of Staff, also took part in the planning of the operation.

Abu Jihad's assassination was a transparent attempt to sabotage any pressure on Israel for opening negotiations with the PLO, which was at the time negotiating with certain circles within the Reagan Administration. The last act of the Reagan Administration was to recognize the PLO.

Abu Iyad was killed on Jan. 14, 1991, just three days before the outbreak of George Bush Senior's Gulf War. His assassins were linked to the notorious Abu Nidal, the Palestinian terrorist-for-hire, who many have claimed did the deed at the behest of the Israeli Mossad. Abu Iyad was Arafat's intelligence and security chief, and in the years prior to his assassination, he had become an advocate for face-to-face negotiations with Israel. He also disagreed with the PLO's support for the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990. His outlook should not be surprising, however, because Sharon and his faction are known for killing the moderates.

Today, the only Palestinian who approaches Arafat's capacity to lead, is Marwan Barghouti, a member of the Palestinian legislature and leader of the Fatah's Tanzim organization, who now sits in an Israeli jail. Barghouti, a man in his 40s and a veteran Fatah activist, was one of the major Palestinian advocates for peace in the 1990s, and still is committed to a two-state solution. Sharon and his generals illegally arrested Barghouti, and framed him up for murder in an Israeli show trial. He is now serving five life sentences. Nonetheless, if anyone wants real peace in the region, it is Barghouti who

must be freed and brought back into a leadership position with the Palestinian movement.

Instead, Sharon will seek, at best, a puppet, who will ensure continuation of the conflict. The installment of a leader so weak that he would please even Sharon, would guarantee chaos throughout the West Bank and Gaza. As one source warned, "I am afraid if Arafat were to die, we will see a period of paralysis and shock followed by chaos throughout the territories, as every local 18- to 25-year-old vies to become the local chief by attacking as many Israelis as possible."

## Netanyahu's Putsch

Touted as an "historic" decision on the level of that of Menachem Begin's negotiation of peace with Egypt over three decades ago, the Knesset decision to approve Sharon's disengagement plan promises merely to prolong the bloodshed, which has taken more than 3,000 Palestinian lives and 1,000 Israeli lives since the Fall of 2000. Just the day before the Knesset vote, no fewer than 17 Palestinians were killed in an Israeli military strike into the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

What has not been widely reported is the fact that the bill for which the "historic" vote was taken does not include the words "settlement evacuation." Even a second bill, dubbed "evacuation-compensation," which will be submitted to the Knesset in a week or two, will not include the words settlement evacuation. Some time in the future, such a bill will include these words, but only at the time when a decision has to be made—if ever—to remove a settlement. This may sound strange, but as most Israelis should know, Sharon has been a master in playing for time; after all, he has done this for the last four years since coming to power.

Sharon won the Knesset support for his plan with a strong majority of 67 to 45, with 7 abstentions, yet he is as politically shaky as he was prior to the vote. Almost half of Sharon's own Likud Party members of the Knesset (MK) voted against the plan, including Likud Ministers Uzi Landau and Michael Ratzon, whom Sharon immediately fired from his Cabinet for voting against their own party.

No sooner did the vote take place, than Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu launched what Sharon is said to have called a "putsch." Although Netanyahu voted in support for the plan, no sooner had the voting finished than he, along with Likud Ministers Limor Livnat, Yisrael Katz, and Dan Naveh, threatened to resign from the government in two weeks' time if Sharon doesn't support the idea of a national referendum on the plan. Sharon has made clear that he will not support a referendum, and if they resign, Sharon could very well see his government collapse.

Netanyahu's intentions are transparent. He voted for the plan despite the fact that he opposes it, because he knows the majority of Likud voters support it. He, like Sharon, knows that within two weeks there could very well be a new President-elect in the United States, so he is positioning himself for the "day after." A Bush victory could be a boost for Sharon.



*Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, during a visit to Washington, D.C. in 1998, to meet with President Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Arafat's illness creates a grave crisis, since the Israelis have killed or imprisoned any Palestinian moderate figure with the potential to replace him as the national leader and rallying point.*

A victory by John Kerry potentially could lead to a dramatic shift in policy towards reaching a final settlement to the conflict. Whatever the outcome, early elections could be called and Netanyahu is positioning himself to once again become Prime Minister.

Confirming that Netanyahu is positioning himself for the Likud leadership in party primaries, one source from a leading Israeli think-tank told *EIR* that Sharon would most likely win those primaries and then go on to win the elections. Nonetheless this would most likely not help him, because he does not have the majority support of the 3,000 Likud Central Committee members who decide on the slate of candidates for the Knesset. Thus, Sharon would again be stuck with senior Knesset members who do not support his policy, but who will have to be brought into his Cabinet. The source believes that the Likud would lose some of its current 40 seats to the Labor and Shinui parties, with which Sharon would form a government.

Because Arafat has been used by Sharon as an excuse to say he has no peace partner, the prospect of Arafat's passing

has led Knesset members from the opposition Labor and Yahud parties to call for opening negotiations with the Palestinians, in order to implement the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and kick-start peace negotiations. There are even calls from the right to freeze the disengagement plan until the situation settles in the territories.

### **Bush or Kerry: War or Peace**

Faced with this unfolding crisis, only the intervention of the President of the United States could create a new reality. If that new President is a re-elected George W. Bush, then a new war is assured, this time with Israel's participation in attacks on Syria and Iran. With Bush as President, even a new Israeli-Egyptian war cannot be excluded.

A Bush victory, without doubt, will lead to the strengthening of the neo-cons and an even stronger support for the fanatics in Israel, be they of the Sharon or Netanyahu factions. The chaos that would follow the passing of Arafat, could very easily be folded into a war scenario, where Israeli would launch attacks on Syria and the nuclear facilities of Iran—this time, with an open endorsement, if not the open cooperation, of the Bush Administration.

By contrast, a Kerry victory would represent a potential for a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, back to that of the Clinton Administration, which worked closely with both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. Although this is obviously the last thing Sharon or Netanyahu want, there would be strong support for this among the Israeli public. It would be hoped that Kerry would name Clinton, who is tremendously popular within Israel, to lead a drive for peace. The so-called "Clinton peace plan" which the former President revealed shortly before he left office, enjoys strong support both within the Israeli and Palestinian camp. Clinton's plan, in fact, parallels that of the Geneva Peace Initiative, which was drafted by Israeli and Palestinian teams led by Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo.

The desire by Israelis for positive intervention by whoever is in the White House next year was expressed by *Ha'aretz* commentator Gideon Samet, who wrote in an Oct. 27 commentary that, despite the Knesset vote in favor of disengagement, nothing positive will happen until the United States and Europe pressure Israel to open negotiations with the Palestinians. Samet expressed the hope that whoever wins the U.S. elections, that pressure for negotiations will come down.

He wrote: "In those few cases when the U.S. did push, from evacuating Sinai in 1957 to the withdrawal from Hebron, Israel only gained. Ever since Bush junior started playing footsie with us, we've known only stupefying internal confusion. Aside from the limited disengagement, Israel has done nothing with the freedom of action it was granted. Hello, America. Hello Europe: Listen carefully to the distress signals from the shaky Israeli ship. Don't do anyone a favor. The country's surrender to fanaticism will also be bad news for you."