

Prospects for Mideast peace: the view from Gaza

by Our Special Correspondent

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 and the subsequent election, most probably by vote fraud, of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, are events which have shifted the political geometry of the region radically. Just how the shift in Israel has affected daily life in Gaza and the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority, according to the peace agreements signed with the former Labor Party government, should be ruling, is not generally appreciated outside the area. *EIR* has compiled a picture of conditions there, through discussions with several prominent Palestinians, who occupy positions of political responsibility there.

The Netanyahu-Sharon government was greeted with skepticism by most Palestinian officials, though judgment was suspended until the government made clear what its policies would be. During the election campaign, Netanyahu had generated this skepticism, with his declared intention to essentially stop the peace process. But, after taking office, and meeting with President William Clinton as well as some Arab leaders, he issued certain statements which sparked a bit of optimism, in that he indicated his willingness to continue the peace process in some form. His official decision, however, to lift the ban on new Israeli settlements, dashed Palestinian hopes. This decision directly violates the peace agreements. Netanyahu's position on the redeployment of the Israeli military out of Hebron, has also violated prior agreements. Netanyahu had wanted to start negotiations by mid-August, introducing "adjustments" to the earlier formula, as his defense minister announced after a visit to the city. This means, Israel wants to increase the number of Israeli soldiers inside the city, and to confiscate Palestinian property and homes, for "security reasons." The Palestinian Authority (PA) rejects these changes.

Israel fails to fulfill Oslo agreements

Even if Israel does decide to redeploy out of Hebron, the settlements issue will continue to create social tensions. Confrontations have become a daily event in Gaza. For example, on Aug. 8, when Israeli officials moved to confiscate land in the Gaza Strip, in Rafah, Palestinians gathering for Friday prayers, responded by announcing their plan to build a mosque on the location. The Palestinians have made clear to their Israeli counterparts, for example, in the meeting between Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Min-

ister David Levy, what Tel Aviv had violated in the original agreements. Thirty-four items were listed, which, though in the Oslo II agreement, had not been fulfilled. Other items were listed, which constituted outright violations of Oslo I and Oslo II, most prominently, the settlements and Hebron.

According to the Oslo treaty signed in 1993, and the Declaration of Principles, there should be no activities undertaken, regarding the settlements, from either side, which would jeopardize negotiations on the final status, negotiations which should begin no later than this year. Yet, Netanyahu announced his policy to be, to build new settlements, to expand existing ones, to confiscate lands, and to build roads connecting them. For this latter project, National Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon has been given \$7 billion, with which to finance vast road construction, including the two recently announced roads, from the coast inland, and from Nablus to Jerusalem. Sharon's strategy is to link up all Israeli settlements, thus creating a crisscross network in cement, which will isolate Palestinian cities, towns, and villages from one another. Netanyahu's rationale is, Israelis have a right to build houses and roads, because it is "government land."

As a result of these developments, members of the Palestinian Council can often be heard saying that the peace process is "frozen." The joint committees, which had been set up under the Labor Party government, have not met since late February. Those joint committees, which were discussed in the first meetings of President Arafat with the new Israeli regime, are charged with solving purely personal cases of need. For example, if a Palestinian is in dire need of medical attention in an Israeli hospital, arrangements can be made. The Civilian Joint Committee, which should discuss daily problems and should be responsible for implementing Oslo I and II, has not done so. This activity is virtually frozen. Thus, there are no negotiations on vital questions regarding water, energy, and the freedom of movement.

The last issue is particularly sensitive, because current Israeli practice hinders the movement of Palestinians from the areas under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction, through Israel, for example, from the West Bank to Gaza. Even members of the Palestinian Authority are denied free passage, and are subjected to humiliating searches and harassment at Israeli checkpoints. Recently two leading Palestinian officials, one the head of preventive security, the other, the head of a negoti-

ating team, were detained at the Eretz checkpoint in Gaza.

Israeli insistence on total control over transit has reached outrageous dimensions, in the case of air travel. Although President Arafat inaugurated the new airport in Gaza, flights have not been allowed in or out, even of his helicopters (which are stationed, as a result, in Egypt). Israel claims that air traffic falls under the category of external affairs and border matters, areas over which they should have jurisdiction. Thus, Netanyahu's government proposes that passengers using the Gaza airport should go through the Rafah checkpoint to the airport, by bus, along an Israeli corridor. The planned Gaza port has not entered the construction phase, largely because of a similar conflict over control.

The only good news

The only good news received from Netanyahu, refers to the rights of Palestinians to work inside Israel. In a partial lifting of the closure, Netanyahu has allowed 30,000 Palestinians to return to their jobs. During the total closure period, Israel imported tens of thousands of foreign workers, and now has 103,000 licensed foreign workers, including 45,000 Romanians, 25,000 Turks, and 18,000 Thais. However, according to Israeli Labor Ministry spokesman Zvi Timor, another 100,000 foreign workers are in the country illegally, the Aug. 4 *Washington Times* reported, exacerbating tensions with Palestinians, even to the point of physical clashes.

Despite the limited readmission of Palestinian laborers, unemployment in the Gaza Strip is skyrocketing. About 60% of the workforce is unemployed. In an effort to provide at least some employment to men responsible for maintaining families, the Palestinian Authority has offered jobs on a part-time basis; a worker will labor at a job for two to three weeks, and at least have some income to keep his family alive. Then he will be replaced by another unemployed man for a few weeks.

Further trouble on the economic front has come with the new Israeli government, since Agriculture and Environment Minister Gen. Rafael Eitan has slapped new controls on the import of Palestinian vegetables and fruits. New laboratory tests to ascertain the purity of the water used, and the amount of pesticides, have been introduced, making it, in the words of one Palestinian economist, "impossible" for Palestinians to export at all. The only food items allowed into Israel readily are strawberries and carnations, which, it is believed, are re-exported as "made in Israel," under an Agresco trademark. Carnations and strawberries are notorious for their consumption of water, a precious commodity in Palestine. They consume about one cubic meter of water per square meter. Water is in itself a bone of contention, as the current Israeli regime has backed down on commitments embodied in the peace agreements, to provide the Palestinian Authority with water; in the West Bank city of Jenin, now under Palestinian jurisdiction, the lack of water is creating a major crisis.

A few projects, initiated after the Oslo accords, have succeeded in eluding the active sabotage by the Netanyahu-

Sharon regime. Most of them are bilateral projects with Germany, in Gaza, Ramallah, and Nablus. One project supported by the German government in Gaza for solid waste management has been quite successful. In addition, schools started in 1995, have been completed for use by Palestinian children this year. A \$40 million project in the Gaza municipality for the rehabilitation of waste water, conducted partially with U.S. aid, is being implemented, though most of the funds flow into "technical assistance," a category which it is difficult for the man on the street to see. Another \$24 million has been made available by the Norwegian government for upgrading the electricity network, its transport and distribution.

Although this has led to some improvement, it, like the other projects, represents improvement of existing infrastructure, not new construction. The same holds for road improvement, where part-time laborers are engaged in building tile (not asphalt) roads, under World Bank direction. The World Bank, which still controls the flow of donor funds into the Palestinian Authority, has rejected any self-sustaining projects, preferring to finance projects for the rehabilitation of existing infrastructure, and prioritizing things like the building of curbstones, rather than new asphalt roads.

Now the International Monetary Fund has begun to issue loans to the Palestinian Authority, which many Palestinian leaders believe they will not be able to finance or repay. "The policy of the World Bank and the IMF is to destroy our economy, what there is of it," said one legislator. In a symposium held in the University of Bir Zeit on the West Bank in July, Palestinian economists and academics joined ranks to denounce the looting operation being implemented through the IMF-World Bank. Dr. Adel Samareh, editor of *Rouiya Ochra (Alternative Opinion)*, one of the main speakers at the symposium, said, "It is never possible to talk neutrally about the World Bank and the IMF. The twin institutions are the embodiment of a programmatic activity to make poverty and economic dependency in the Third World a perpetual state in the name of 'development.' "

The combination of political harassment, obstruction of implementation of the peace accords, violation of specific clauses, and continuing economic sabotage, has created a situation for Arafat which is untenable. Despite the Arab support he has sought and, in part, received, in a flurry of diplomatic activity over the past months, Arafat cannot be expected to withstand the political pressure mounting against him from within the Palestinian population. The opposition to his government has expanded significantly since Netanyahu took power, particularly through the Hamas organization, which is in de facto alliance with the anti-peace forces in Israel. Hope for relief, and a return to the peace process, lies, according to many Palestinian leaders, in the possibility of a government crisis in Israel, and new elections which might return a sane Labor Party grouping to power. Otherwise, there is the perspective that a re-elected Clinton may wield the power of the U.S. Presidency to impose resumption of the peace process.