

Is there any future for the Mideast peace process?

by Our Special Correspondent

In the course of President Clinton's acceptance speech at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago on Aug. 29, he referenced several foreign policy achievements in his first term, from North Korea, to Bosnia, to Northern Ireland and the Middle East. It is no accident that in every case, where progress had been certainly made in the last four years, forces hostile to the U.S. Presidency have engineered attacks to undermine, indeed, suffocate the efforts. Clinton hailed the process toward peace between the Palestinians and Israel, saying he hoped it would soon be extended to include more Arab parties; in the moments he was speaking, the most significant strike action swept across Palestine, and preparations were afoot for a major showdown over Jerusalem. If Clinton is reelected, and the Middle East peace process is to be rescued, a drastic change in course must be effected, and fast.

The single main obstacle to peace in the region is constituted by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, characterized by Lyndon LaRouche in a recent interview as "a stooge for the Sharon interests," which are, in turn, a "stooge for the British interests," which intend to bury the peace process—and U.S. foreign policy—in blood. Since the Sharon-Netanyahu combination took power, in what was most probably a fraudulent election, in May, the Israeli side has piled up provocation on provocation, putting Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat in an untenable position: Either he would continue to approach Tel Aviv with offers for resuming negotiations, and, being rebuffed, meet the scorn of his political base and population; or, he would respond to provocations with a return to the tactics of the Intifada.

Arafat had no choice in the closing days of August, but to

adopt a militant stance against the Israelis. Since taking power, Netanyahu has refused to meet his Palestinian counterpart, insulting Arafat by offering him meetings with lower-level aides, or at most, with Foreign Minister David Levy, who has been virtually shut out of any decision-making process by Netanyahu. During the meeting the two had, Arafat presented a long list of grievances. It was a list of instances of Israeli non-compliance with clauses of the official peace agreements since Oslo I in September 1993, and a list of outright violations of such accords. Among them are Netanyahu's non-compliance with the commitment to redeploy Israeli troops out of Hebron on the West Bank, and his violation of the joint commitment, not to do anything on the ground which would jeopardize the agreements regarding territorial jurisdiction. In both cases, Netanyahu's government made clear that it would not hold any promise on Hebron or on freezing Jewish settlements, to be sacred.

Provocative actions

These were words which enraged Palestinian negotiators and citizens, but they were only words, until a few weeks ago, when Netanyahu's government announced plans to redefine Israeli military troop deployments in Hebron, in such a manner as to expand, rather than reduce, their presence and control. On Aug. 12, Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai formally approved a plan for 300 mobile homes to be built in the occupied territories, during the current school year. Half the mobile homes were said to provide space for overcrowded schools, but another 100 were to be put at the disposal of the College of Judea and Samaria, in the Gush Emunim/Jewish

Defense League settlement at Ariel. As Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat remarked, it appeared that Israel were more interested in expanding settlements, than in peace. He characterized the decision as a declaration that the peace process had been brought to a close.

The crisis thus created in Palestinian-Israeli relations seemed to be relaxed, when Israeli President Ezer Weizman made known on Aug. 25, that he would meet Arafat, at his home in Caesarea, unless the prime minister were to meet the Palestinian leader soon. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who had directed the Oslo agreements, made known his intention to meet with Arafat as well, albeit in a personal capacity.

Then, the words became deeds, with disastrous consequences. Netanyahu's government acted first to impede the Peres-Arafat meeting planned to take place in the West Bank city of Ramallah, by refusing Arafat overflight permission for his helicopter. Instead, the two met at the checkpoint for Gaza.

On Aug. 26, the Israeli government officially approved the construction of a new neighborhood in the Kiryat Sefer settlement, west of Ramallah. This constituted the first approval under the Netanyahu government of a plan for building, and thus the first act of reversing the freeze on construction which the previous Peres government had instituted. The minister's spokesman, Avi Benayahu, followed up three days later with the correction, that "a number of construction plans in existing settlements" had been approved. Although he did not quote figures, the Likud-linked daily *Maariv* wrote that they were 3,550, seven hundred of which would be housing units for the Kiryat Sefer settlement, 1,050 for Hashmonaim, 900 for a seminary, 200 for Matiyahu, and 700 for the settlement at Betar Ilit.

The straw that broke the camel's back came in Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities had been demanding for some time that several offices of Palestinian entities in the city be shut down, under the pretext that they constituted "political" representation of the Palestinian Authority in an area, East Jerusalem, whose final status has yet to be negotiated. Tel Aviv closed down the Geographic Society, a sports club, and a statistical office, all institutions whose presence there pre-dated the Oslo accords. Rather than respond with hostility, the Palestinian Authority watched the offices being closed.

Then, on Aug. 27, Israeli authorities demolished a Palestinian building there, in the process of completion, on the grounds that it had been put up without a permit. The building was to function as a community center for the handicapped. Police moved in before dawn, sealing off the area in the old city where the construction was going on. A crane hoisted a bulldozer over the walls and razed the building.

Pressures on Arafat

In a meeting that same day with his Legislative Council in Ramallah, Arafat was under fire. The council's president,

Ahmed Korei (Abu Alaa), said he thought they had to "examine whether there is any real peace process at all." Korei himself had just been subjected to outrageous personal harassment at the hands of Israeli soldiers in Hebron, who had pushed and shoved him at a checkpoint, after he had visited the Tomb of the Patriarchs in the city. In the meeting, the legislators demanded that Arafat freeze all contacts with the Israelis until Tel Aviv began to honor its peace commitments.

Arafat emerged from the heated discussion, stating that Israel, with its provocative actions, had declared war. "What happened concerning continuous violations and crimes from this new Israeli leadership means they are declaring a state of war against the Palestinian people," he said. "They are idiots to have started the Jerusalem battle," he charged, and vowed that "there will be no Palestinian state without Jerusalem. Netanyahu should know he is stupid to have started this battle."

U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross phoned Arafat from Paris, urging him to have patience. Ross was meeting with an Israeli government envoy, Dore Gold, and an Egyptian Presidential adviser, Al Baz, to seek ways of reviving the talks. Ross reportedly told Arafat that the Israelis were "prepared to move" and "had good intentions." Arafat reported on Ross's promises, and then issued a call to the Palestinians to mobilize. He called for a general strike the following day and for Palestinians to go to East Jerusalem on Friday, Aug. 30, for prayers at the Al Aqsa mosque. "On Friday, all Muslims, including Palestinians in Israel . . . will go to the Al Aqsa mosque and pray," he said. "Jews and Christians who do not pray should accompany them and stand behind them"

The Israeli reaction was, predictably, as harsh as it was hypocritical. Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying that the government would "relate with severity to any attempt to bring about escalation or violence that could harm the peace process." It continued, "Extreme statements and actions which do not contribute toward moving the diplomatic process forward should be avoided, especially in light of emerging understandings between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to advance their negotiations on a number of issues."

The strike, the first in two years, since the partial handover of authority to the Palestinians, was a political success. Most shops and businesses were closed from 8 a.m. to 12 noon in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the city of Hebron, where Israeli soldiers are on patrol everywhere. There were no clashes reported.

On Friday, Aug. 30, the Israeli authorities mobilized a massive presence at all checkpoints and in Jerusalem, to intimidate Palestinians and prevent them from entering the Old City. As a result, a smaller number than hoped for reached the mosque. Estimates range from 30-40,000, probably mostly residents, whereas 100,000 were expected.

If the strike and gathering at Al Aqsa were political achievements for the Palestinians, this does not mean that

the crisis has been overcome. Arafat is under significant pressure from the radicals of the Damascus-based "rejection front" organizations, George Habash's PFLP and Nayeh Hawatmeh's DFLP. A PLFP spokesman said that "Arafat should stop all negotiations with Israel if he is serious about confronting Netanyahu's settlements policies in the occupied Palestinian lands." Hawatmeh issued a statement to the effect that Netanyahu's "settlement policies show that he wants war, and not peace." Such organizations, and the locally active Hamas, can only gain from further Israeli intransigence, as people despair of breaking the deadlock through peaceful means.

Arab governments are furious

On the other hand, forces within Israel as well as among those Arab governments which have made peace treaties with Israel, seem to have realized that unless they move to bring pressure on Netanyahu, the peace perspectives will be dashed forever.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak spoke out, just prior to the dramatic events in the territories, to warn Netanyahu that, unless he returned to a peace posture, there would be no need and no sense, to convene an international conference of the Middle East and North Africa economic summit. The conference, slated to take place in Cairo in November, was to be a follow-up to last year's economic summit in Amman. But, Mubarak made clear, no international investors would attend the event, if conflict were on the agenda.

Jordan, which has suffered political turbulence as a result of popular discontent, with economic distress instead of the promised peace dividend, has also moved to try to restart the stalled process with Israel. Following a visit by Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Karim Kabariti to Ramallah on Aug. 29, for talks with Arafat on the eve of the strike, King Hussein telephoned Netanyahu. Kabariti reportedly told Arafat that "we do not accept any analysis that calls for continuing settlement expansion and at the same time to say that the peace process is all right." The King, in his direct call to Netanyahu, "stressed the need to implement the agreements signed between Israel and the Palestinian side, and to work to prevent a deterioration in the situation, to confront all the difficulties which confront the peace process and to emerge from the current crisis."

Mubarak echoed similar sentiments in an interview with *Maariv* Aug. 30, in which he characterized the Israeli promises to revive talks as "window dressing." He condemned the settlements policy in particular, as "a policy [which] could destroy the entire [peace] process."

Israeli opposition to Netanyahu

Within Israel, pressure is mounting. Weizman's announced intention to meet Arafat, came after many figures, including in the Likud coalition, had voiced their criticism of the government's confrontationalist stance. Labor Party lead-

ers, who had been relatively silent, also moved, as it became clear that the process was not only stalled, but in danger of exploding into full-fledged armed conflict again.

As Shimon Peres, the architect of the Oslo accords said during a private visit to Morocco recently, there can be no solution without a direct meeting between Netanyahu and Arafat. "Arafat is our partner, a legal partner, there can be no agreement without him," he said. "It is a political mistake not to meet him. . . . The better the Palestinian situation will be, the better the peace plan will go ahead." Peres made clear, "There is a serious crisis because there was a change of policy" when the new government took over.

It would seem, that with such massive and authoritative pressure, Netanyahu, with his back up against the wall, would acknowledge reality and govern himself accordingly. But that would contradict the political fact of the matter, which is, that the Netanyahu-Sharon combination itself was put into power precisely in order to torpedo the peace effort. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that such an animal put into place, could do anything other than what it has been trained to do. Changing its policy would be tantamount to losing its spots. The hope for a return to peace is therefore pivoted by many on the perspective that the current government coalition, itself wracked by internal conflict, petty rivalry, and mafia-style turf warfare, could undo itself of its own accord, thus leaving the path open for a return to Labor.

Netanyahu thinks differently. He, who has long-standing, deep (at times, obscure) ties to the most rabid anti-peace circles in the United States, from the Kissingerites like Richard Perle, who wrote his political platform, to the current gaggle of ideologues around the Dole-Kemp ticket, is gambling on the possibility, that he may have powerful allies against Mideast peace in the White House soon. If President Clinton, who is genuinely committed to the idea of peace in the region, were actively engaged in pursuing it at this critical juncture, the crisis there could be overcome, all to the credit and benefit of the President's reelection chances.

Crisis coming to a head

But, as LaRouche pointed out in a radio interview with "EIR Talks" on Aug. 30, the White House is not thinking that way. "I think it's fair to say," LaRouche said, "that the administration's policy has been, for some time, not to deal with any foreign policy questions until after the election is over, for fear of what effect any kind of decision might have, in terms of wild, distracting reactions inside the U.S. political process."

LaRouche's approach to the crisis is straightforward: "It's coming to a head. The President of Israel, Weizman, and Peres, are taking action, recognizing that this Sharon, with his stooge Netanyahu, are a menace to Israel, and Middle East peace. So, obviously, we're coming to a showdown, where somebody has to back the sane forces on the Arab and Israeli side, against the nuts."