

President Clinton tries to bring Mideast back from the brink

by William Jones

Two days of intensive talks in Washington on Sept. 30-Oct. 1, an emergency Mideast summit hastily called by President William Clinton in an attempt to stave off a new outbreak of violence in the West Bank and Gaza, failed to resolve any of the issues that sparked the recent explosion. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose provocative actions had set off the crisis, refused to budge on any of the issues at the heart of the controversy, despite intensive efforts by the Clinton administration to broker a solution.

The recent violence was sparked by Netanyahu on Sept. 20, when, following a British-intelligence script for Mideast destabilization (see *EIR Special Report*, "Ariel Sharon and the Israeli Mafia"), an underground tunnel was opened along the Harim al-Sharif, the area in Old Jerusalem running along the Western Wall, on the top of which are situated the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, two of the most important Muslim holy places. The Temple Mount, as the Jews call the Harim, is also the area where the Temple of Solomon was located. Archaeological digs related to the excavation of that temple touch on the most sensitive issue in the Middle East, the status of Jerusalem, a city which both Palestinians and Israelis consider their capital. The tunnel, which ran from the Western Wall, the only remaining part of Solomon's Temple, to the Via Dolorosa, had long been excavated, but was never fully opened, for fear that such a move would be an affront to Muslims.

These Muslim fears had been exacerbated when, in 1982, members of an extremist Jewish yeshiva in East Jerusalem attempted to burrow under the Dome of the Rock in order to blow it up. The yeshiva, Ateret Cohanim, established in 1978, has as its specific goal the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple on the present site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The yeshiva has also been involved in buying up land in the Arab district of Jerusalem in an effort to make Jerusalem a "Jewish" city. These efforts have been facilitated by the wild-eyed Likud mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert. Olmert personally took a shovel to move the last bits of earth away from the tunnel entrance in the dead of night on Sept. 20.

One of the chief backers of the Ateret Cohanim Yeshiva is Irving Moskowitz, a Florida-based real estate speculator and casino operator, who is close to Netanyahu. The Italian

daily *Corriere della Sera* reported that the first person whom Netanyahu called after opening the tunnel, was Moskowitz. Netanyahu's protests that he didn't realize what an outcry he would provoke by opening the tunnel have a false ring, in light of Netanyahu's relationship to Moskowitz and the Temple Mount crowd.

To the Palestinians, the opening of the tunnel signalled that the Netanyahu government, which had put the brakes on the peace process when it took power following the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the architect of the peace process, was trying to resolve the "final status of Jerusalem" by fiat rather than through negotiation.

The resulting riots were the worst in several years, with over 70 people killed in three days. Palestinian police, seeing Israelis gunning down Palestinians armed only with stones, at times turned their guns on the Israeli soldiers. On the third day of violence, 27 Israeli police and border guards stormed the Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, as worshippers emerged from Friday prayers, and shot dead three young men, when some of the crowd began throwing stones.

Since he came to power, Netanyahu has shown little inclination to fulfill the Oslo agreements. Israeli Housing Minister Ariel Sharon, the "Butcher of Lebanon," has increased the rate of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, in defiance of the agreements. In Hebron, a city on the West Bank which is the alleged birthplace of Abraham, sacred to both Jews and Arabs, there is a settlement of several hundred Jews protected by Israeli soldiers. In the Oslo accords, the Rabin government pledged to reduce the number of Israeli soldiers and to leave the overall security of the city in the hands of the Palestinian police. No troops have yet been withdrawn.

No preconditions

On Sept. 26, President Clinton issued a statement calling on all parties to "avoid any actions that are likely to undermine the progress of the peace." Although not prepared to directly condemn Netanyahu's opening of the tunnel, fearing that such a statement would harden the prime minister's stance and lead him to boycott the summit, Clinton referred to the move indirectly, saying, "They need to end the violence and they need to discuss these matters between them, and they need to

ask themselves, all of them do: What can we do to avoid unnecessarily provocative actions.” Secretary of State Warren Christopher was assigned by Clinton to try to cool down passions and bring about a meeting between Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Christopher and Mideast coordinator Dennis Ross began an intensive “shuttle telephone diplomacy,” in an attempt to end the violence. Efforts were made to bring the two leaders together in the Middle East. Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak offered to host the leaders in Cairo, but sought pre-commitments from Netanyahu, in order to ensure that something would result. These, the Israelis were not prepared to give.

Finally, President Clinton invited all the parties to Washington, without preconditions. The invitation was accepted by Arafat, Netanyahu, and Jordan’s King Hussein. Mubarak, predicting that the conference would produce no concrete results, decided to stay home.

Israeli intransigence

The first day of meetings on Sept. 30 seemed to give some hope. President Clinton met with each of the leaders individually, then with all the parties, after which they went to lunch at the White House. It was agreed that the President and King Hussein would leave the lunch at a certain point, thus allowing Netanyahu and Arafat to talk alone. One of the prime goals of the summit was to get the Israeli and Palestinian leaders in a one-on-one meeting. The two had met only once in a rather pro-forma meeting previously. This time they talked, sometimes with advisers, sometimes with only translators, for almost four hours.

Encouraged by the longer meeting between the two leaders, negotiating teams of Israelis and Palestinians had met through much of the night trying to hammer out a joint statement to be issued the following, final, day of the summit. But already on his way to the United States, Netanyahu had indicated that he wasn’t going to close the tunnel, one of the U.S. requests in order to restore calm. U.S. negotiators felt, however, that they could at the very least get Netanyahu to set up some time-table for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Hebron. This also proved impossible. The meetings went well into the night, and by early morning it became clear that no progress would be made on any of the issues.

Secretary of State Christopher then tried to get the parties to agree to send negotiating teams to Erez on the checkpoint between Israel and Gaza, to continue talks on Hebron until a withdrawal arrangement is reached. Even this was not pinned down until a further 20-minute meeting between Arafat and Netanyahu at the White House. They committed themselves to personally take up the negotiations if the talks reach a snag.

At the press conference, President Clinton tried to strike an up-beat note. The President had refrained from putting pressure on Netanyahu, something that will undoubtedly be required. But as Egypt’s President Mubarak indicated, however, pressure from the outside may harden the intransigence

of the Israeli leader without similar pressure from within Israel.

It was also obvious that President Clinton did not relish getting into a fight with Netanyahu on the eve of the U.S. elections. A “peanut gallery” of Republicans, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, with Presidential hopeful Bob Dole chiming in, warned Clinton not to pressure the Israelis. This “Netanyahu chorus,” playing for those American Jewish voters who are not yet disgusted by the Netanyahu performance, undoubtedly strengthened the prime minister in his obstinacy.

At the concluding press conference, the parties agreed to let President Clinton do the talking, fearful that any other course of action would reveal the deep rift dividing the two parties—what the President hopes will be thrashed out in the negotiations in Erez. Here again, in response to a question on the status of Jerusalem, the President made an indirect reference to the tunnel. “[This] is part of the terms of the agreement by which all parties are bound; that is, to not do anything to upset the balance of issues that have to be part of the final status negotiations,” he said.

Later, while Arafat postponed a scheduled press conference in deference to the President’s wishes, Netanyahu did everything possible to air his point of view, holding his own press conference and even squeezing in an interview with Ted Koppel’s “Nightline” before returning to Israel. Israeli Cabinet Secretary Danny Naveh claimed the summit a “victory” for the Israelis. Although Netanyahu tried to appear “conciliatory,” regarding the issue of “concessions,” he said, “Let me tell you why that concept is so dangerous for peace; because when you are facing pressure, you do not make concessions. At least, responsible leaders don’t do that, because then there’s never an end to concessions, and there’s never an end to pressure.” Netanyahu also used the opportunity to attack the “calumny” of the media which had deprecated the tunnel-opening as an “affront to Islam.” Even Koppel couldn’t refrain from asking Netanyahu if his opening of the tunnel were not a form of knowingly “sticking a finger in Arafat’s eye.”

If Netanyahu continues to cavort with the Temple Mount fanatics, and to thumb his nose at the growing outcry coming from both within and outside the Middle East against his policies, President Clinton may be forced to use more “persuasive” arguments. The more immediate question, however, is will the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza accept Netanyahu’s restatement that he is prepared to withdraw from Hebron, and set up a concrete schedule of talks, as signs that the peace process is still alive? Conscious of the growing danger, President Clinton made a personal appeal to them at his press conference, “I ask the people of the Middle East, I ask the Palestinians and others, to give us a few more days to let this thing unfold. Give us a few more days to see whether these negotiations start, whether they’re proceeding in good faith, whether progress can be made.”