

## Newt Gingrich pushes the Mideast toward war

by Dean Andromidas

Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, has taken his crusade against the Clinton Presidency to the Holy Land. The prophet of the Conservative Revolution, Gingrich led a Congressional delegation to Israel over the Memorial Day weekend, arriving in Jerusalem on May 23, where he did everything possible to undermine President Bill Clinton's attempt to break the stalemate in the peace process. Gingrich's antics may backfire, but his actions at every turn pushed the region toward war.

Gingrich led one of three Congressional delegations, comprising no fewer than 26 U.S. Representatives and Senators, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. Less disingenuous observers considered Gingrich's pilgrimage as an effort to garner financial support from the pro-Likud wing of the American Zionist Lobby, and, more importantly, from the Christian fundamentalists; these latter form the major base of support for Gingrich and his Conservative Revolution cohorts in Congress, and await a Mideast-centered "Armageddon" to herald the "end-times rapture" at the Millennium.

Gingrich's arrival was like manna from heaven for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, who has justifiably come under heavy criticism within Israel and internationally for his sabotage of the Middle East peace process. Netanyahu has refused to accept a proposal put forward by the Clinton administration, for a second troop withdrawal from 13% to 15% of the area of the West Bank. Israeli withdrawal was stipulated in the Oslo peace accords. Netanyahu had only recently returned from a tour of the United States, where he met with Jewish leaders, and spent a day parading around Capitol Hill with Gingrich and other GOP leaders. In a January 1998 visit to Washington, Netanyahu had staged a high-visibility rally with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

The dynamic between Netanyahu, on the one hand, and the Congressional right wing, on the other, was perhaps best captured by Nahum Barnea, a political commentator for the daily *Yediot Aharonot*. "Netanyahu has no peer when it comes to understanding the American arena. He knows that U.S. officials, from [U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine] Albright down are angry, yet helpless. But he also knows he can always beat them because he owns the U.S. Congress."

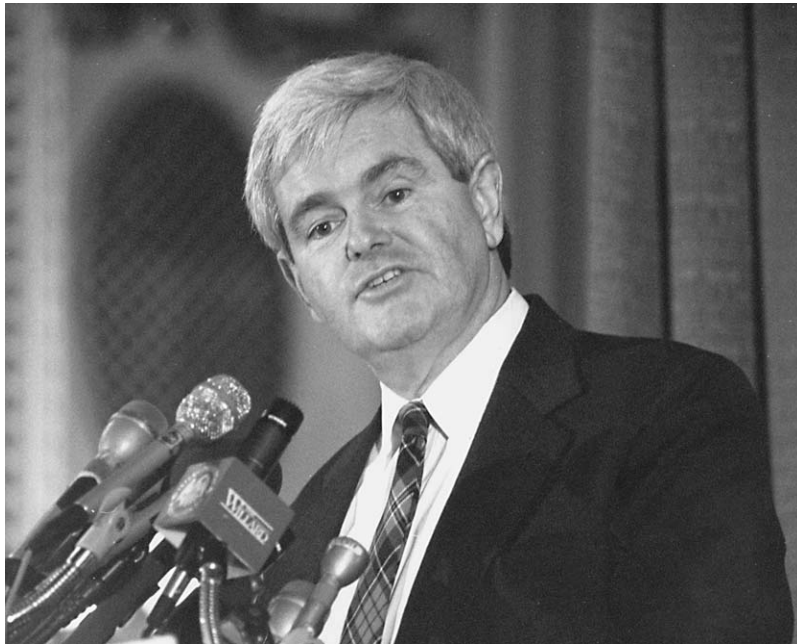
As for Gingrich's competence to deal with the Middle East peace process, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat assessed Gingrich's abilities thusly: "This man is absolutely ignorant of what is happening here, and his words and actions reflect this." Gingrich "does not know anything about the issues or the sensitivities here. He is more extremist than most Israelis. . . . What he says and does undermines the forces of peace on both sides."

### Egging Netanyahu on

According to unnamed official Israeli sources cited in the May 25 *International Herald Tribune*, Gingrich and other members of the Congressional delegations urged Netanyahu to go even further than he deems wise or necessary in waging a frontal assault against the Clinton administration and its Middle East policy. The officials said that the Israeli leader was told he would be backed to the hilt in any showdown with President Clinton, and that the legislators were prepared to do everything in their power to ensure that he won such a confrontation.

Gingrich was quick to deny that he had made such assertions, claiming, "You never say that. When we're out of the country, we try to work with the administration."

Nonetheless, he then proceeded to undermine President Clinton's Middle East policy at every step. Speaking before



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (right) and U.S. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (above). White House spokesman Mike McCurry commented, with studied understatement, that Gingrich's provocative remarks in Israel show that "he has a ways to go when it comes to proficiency in diplomacy." In fact, the Speaker's statements have brought Israel and Palestine closer to a new explosion of violence, undermining the foreign policy of the U.S. government.*

the Israeli Knesset (Parliament), Gingrich declared, "We in Congress stand with you today in recognizing Jerusalem as the united and eternal capital of Israel." While this is a sentiment held by many Israelis, the notion of a "united Jerusalem" including occupied East Jerusalem, which is considered illegal by the United Nations, is one of the most sensitive issues in the peace process. In comments following his speech, Gingrich accused the Palestinian Authority of "inciting violence" and of "suggesting violence," which, he said, is responsible for the deadlock. He also backed Netanyahu's bogus demands for "peace with security," saying, "Israel alone must determine its security needs. We cannot allow non-Israelis to substitute their judgment for the generals who Israel has trusted with its security."

Gingrich even planned to visit a site that had been proposed for the new American Embassy in Jerusalem, as well as touring the Old City, which could have brought him into the midst of the illegal Jewish settlements at the center of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts that have often led to violence. These plans drew a sharp response from Erekat, who charged that Gingrich was "playing with fire." Apparently fearing that Gingrich could trigger a new outbreak of violence, U.S. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger convinced him to change his plans.

Nonetheless, Gingrich eventually drove by the proposed embassy site with Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, as well as by the Har Homa housing site, which is one of the most

controversial of the new settlements in East Jerusalem. In addition, he took a helicopter tour of the West Bank, with Israeli Infrastructure Minister and leading war-hawk Ariel Sharon as guide.

Simultaneous with Gingrich's tour, the fanatical Ateret Cohanim settlers group attempted to establish at least nine illegal settlements in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Ateret Cohanim is the most radical of the settler organizations, and it is seeking to rebuild the Solomon's Temple on the Temple Mount, an endeavor which would first require the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the most holy sites in the Islamic world. Better known as the Temple Mount crazies, the success of this cult in their effort to destroy this mosque could trigger a new Middle East war, but would fulfill the "Armageddon" yearnings of the radical Christian-right groups in the United States.

The visit did cause a violent outbreak between protesting Palestinian parliamentarians and Israeli police, on the same day that Gingrich was to visit the proposed U.S. Embassy site.

### **The loudmouth Speaker**

Gingrich's most amazing statements were reserved for President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright. He accused the President of blackmailing Israel, saying that on Israel's 50th anniversary, the President's message was, "Let us blackmail you on behalf of Arafat." As for Albright, Gingrich charged, "I think it is wrong for the American Secretary of

State to become an agent for the Palestinians.” Later, he denied saying it, and even claimed he had coordinated his trip with the White House.

In reaction to Gingrich’s comments, White House press spokesman Mike McCurry said, “His suggestion that the Secretary of State is loyal to anyone but the people of the United States of America is offensive, and highly offensive.” When asked whether he was expressing the feelings of the President in these comments, McCurry replied, “That’s my statement on behalf of the President’s view. Now, we will try to learn more about this. The statement was reported to us, you know, as it was made by the Speaker last week in the region.”

State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin declared, “There were some rather stunning reports over the weekend about Speaker Gingrich’s reported willingness to provoke the Israeli government to disagree with his own government. And if true, those would be rather stunning comments that would undermine the efforts we’re trying to make to advance America’s national interest and the national interests of the United States.

“Similarly, I found particularly appalling and outrageous his suggestion that the Secretary of State of the United States was an agent for the Palestinians.

“The Secretary of State is pursuing policies, at the direction of the President, that are designed to advance the national interests of the American people. She is an agent for the American people, and any suggestion that she’s an agent for anyone else is extremely provocative, unjustified, and outrageous suggestions.”

As for Gingrich’s claim to have coordinated his trip with the White House, McCurry said the suggestion was “a little misbegotten.”

## Gingrich the racist

Gingrich’s fulsome embrace of Netanyahu’s views is, in reality, as anti-Israel as it is anti-Clinton, and flies in the face of opposition to Netanyahu across party lines in Israel. Other voices tried to convince the Speaker that the reality of the Middle East is much different than the “virtual reality” which often prevails inside the U.S. Congress. In fact, when Gingrich spoke before the Knesset, the Israeli Arab members of the Knesset, who represent some 1 million Arab citizens of Israel, walked out in protest. Taleb A-Sana, of the Democratic Arab List, yelled at Gingrich, “It is a disgrace that a racist like you comes to speak here.”

Israeli President Ezer Weizman, in a meeting with Gingrich and other members of the Congressional delegation, said, “The government must very quickly decide about the [West Bank] withdrawal, because a continuation of the current stalemate could spark an explosion.” He underscored the necessity to “sit down with Arafat and find a solution, because if we don’t find a solution, something will blow up.” As for Arafat’s commitment to fighting terrorism, President Weizman pointed out that “these past 18 months we have enjoyed

relative calm.” He added, “Yasser Arafat is fighting terrorism, more than I thought.”

In another meeting, Labor Party Chairman Ehud Barak assured Gingrich that a 13% withdrawal would have absolutely no negative impact on Israeli security. He said, “Had it been any other Prime Minister, we would already be past the second pullback and deep into the final status talks without giving up any security.” Going further, he said that even super-hawk Sharon would have agreed to a second withdrawal. “If I were Prime Minister and Sharon were serving under me, then, too, he would find a way to get the pullback carried out. This is food for thought,” Barak said.

On the last day of Gingrich’s visit, in a move labelled a “stinging rebuke” by the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, the members of the Knesset from both the opposition and government parties, voted in favor of introducing legislation which would repeal the direct election of the Israeli Prime Minister. If passed, this would without doubt signal the fact that Netanyahu’s days are numbered.

Despite the fact that Palestinian Authority President Arafat considered cancelling his appointment with Gingrich and the Congressional delegation, the meeting went ahead, primarily because other Congressmen, who were more open to the Palestinian point of view, were part of the delegation.

Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath stressed that the meeting with the entire delegation was “the first real dialogue with Congress at a very senior level and here in Palestine.”

Palestinian Education Minister Hanan Ashrawi, who termed Gingrich’s antics “extremely provocative,” stressed that the meeting went ahead because it was important “to make clear to Gingrich that there is a Palestinian side and there are issues that cannot be meddled” with.

It is important to note that prior to this meeting with the Congressional delegation, Arafat had just returned from Saudi Arabia, where he won support for convening an extraordinary Arab summit, aimed at redefining policy, in light of the imminent collapse of the peace process. Such options as breaking all ties with Israel, or suspending normalization until Israeli policy shifts toward peace, are expected to be discussed if such a summit is held.

Gingrich proceeded on to the Kingdom of Jordan, where the delegation met with King Hussein. The King reportedly stressed to Gingrich “the importance of respecting signed accords between the two sides and putting them into implementation.” The King said that attaining peace on the Israeli-Palestinian front was an “essential step in building a comprehensive, just, and durable peace.”

As to Gingrich’s claim that he was just “trying to be helpful” during his trip, McCurry told the White House press corps: “If Speaker Gingrich believes he is helping the peace process by making provocative statements that appear to side with one party against another party, then he is demonstrating that he has a way to go when it comes to proficiency in diplomacy.”