

Israeli Activist Lobbies U.S. Congress For Peace

by Suzanne Rose

Israeli activist Uri Avnery, at a press conference on Capitol Hill on Oct. 25, announced support for a renewed peace effort between Palestinians and Israelis. Avnery represents the Israeli peace group Gush Shalom. A longtime political activist who fought in the Jewish underground against the British occupation of Palestine, and an author, Avnery founded the political party Haolem Hazeh, and won a seat in the Knesset (parliament). There, he advocated peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians. In 1974, he secretly met with Palestine Liberation Organization officials, and in July 1982 he held an historic meeting in Beirut with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) convened the press conference with the support of Reps. Mel Watt (D-N.C.), John Dingell (D-Mich.), John Conyers (D-Mich.), and others. Several American pro-peace Jewish organizations also participated and are sponsoring Avnery's tour of the United States.

Avnery's appearance on Capitol Hill is strategically important, because discussion there of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been dominated by the most rabid anti-peace elements of the Zionist lobby. Outspoken opponents of peace at International Relations Committee hearings on the Sept. 11 attacks, Reps. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), have been demanding of U.S. officials that the Palestine Authority be declared a terrorist organization that deserves the "final solution." At hearings with Secretary of State Colin Powell on Oct. 24, the discussion was dominated by the rantings of this group. Lantos told Powell, "If a U.S. pilot killed bin Laden, he would be given the Congressional medal. If Israel targets assassins, they are condemned. It is hypocrisy to criticize our allies for actions we engage in. Israel is a democratic ally and a friend. Are they entitled to pursue terrorists against them?" None of these Congressmen raised the issue of a Mideast peace plan at this or other hearings.

Avnery told Congress that peace supporters among Israeli and American Jews are alive and well. He praised the statements of President George Bush and Powell in support of a Palestinian state. His four-point program—to end Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, support a Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories, establish the right of return for refugees, and support Jerusalem as a shared capital—injects rationality into the discussion. He said that now is the opportune time for the administration to step forward

with a clear peace initiative. Without it, the region is headed toward a bloodbath. "We need a massive intervention to stop the blood from flowing," he said, clearly recognizing that the Israeli military is on the verge of a new, perhaps catastrophic escalation.

'An Obstruction To Peace'

Avnery gave the lie to the common wisdom that the Israeli population no longer supports peace. He said that they are demoralized by the failure of the recent talks, but would support a serious proposal from the outside. According to Avnery, his views are endorsed by a large segment of American Jewish public opinion. However, he does not find this sentiment in the leadership of the major Jewish organizations or the Jewish lobby in Congress, which he called an "obstruction to peace." He said that their blank check to the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon is not improving stability.

Avnery said he was amazed by the welcome he has received in his U.S. tour so far. "Something has changed in the Jewish community in the U.S. People realize that automatic support for the Israeli government policy is mistaken. People who love and support Israel have a duty to tell them what is right and what is wrong."

There are growing anti-American and anti-Israeli emotions in the Mideast because of the violence, Avnery said, in motivating a renewed peace effort as in the interest of America and Israel. "The daily bloodletting in our conflict with the Palestinians creates terrible rage against the U.S. . . . It is ineffectual to bomb and pursue Osama bin Laden, while daily, things are happening to create new rage."

Avnery had come to Capitol Hill to attempt to tell Congress—which has been passing one-sided anti-Palestinian resolutions because of the perceived power of the Zionist lobby—not to clip the wings of a new peace effort. "Don't be afraid of Sharon. If the Israelis elected the horse of Caligula, the American Jewish community would support him," he said.

Statements of support were issued by Watt and Dingell. Watt said, "The voice of Israel is not monolithic. The voice of America is not a monolith. I encourage the public to be cognizant of a growing need to listen to a variety of views. It is of grave international importance to get to a resolution in the Middle East. We have to hear the voices of peace and justice and understand those voices will prevail."

Dingell released the text of a floor statement he had made that morning, endorsing the Mitchell Commission Report, which, earlier this year, outlined steps needed to achieve a Middle East peace. He introduced a resolution backed by the administration and 25 colleagues in support of the report. Criticizing the Israeli moves into Palestinian cities, he said, "Mr. Speaker, as we wage war on terrorism, we must be careful to remember that while we have many allies, we must not allow any single country to use this conflict to justify any and all actions they take in their national interest."