

New Rabin Option For Israel, or Another War?

by Dean Andromidas

Haifa mayor Amram Mitzna's newly-announced challenge for the leadership of Israel's Labor Party represents a desperate attempt to bring together a pro-peace opposition to head off Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new Middle East war. At a press conference in Tel Aviv on Aug. 13, Mitzna declared that Sharon "is leading us to a disaster. Nothing he is doing on security and economic issues is getting us anywhere. That's why so many citizens have lost all hope. . . . There is no time to lose. We must, without delay or preconditions, start talks with the Palestinians, so that the two sides can return to the path of peace."

Mitzna, a retired general of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)—as was Labor Party Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, killed in 1995—is committed to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would include turning over all of the Gaza Strip and 95% of the West Bank to the Palestinians, and even uprooting some of the Jewish settlements, if necessary. He calls it impossible that the Israel invests "20 times" more in the settlements than in other development towns.

The former soldier supports unilateral withdrawal: "If there is no partner, then we will have to take unilateral steps for security separation. A unilateral move is obviously less good than a peace agreement, but it would bring us security separation and a security border. The world will then have to advance Palestinian society, and a new diplomatic horizon and peace agreement will be the eventual result." This relative sanity is Mitzna's alternative to "force, more force, and more force" in the conflict with the Palestinians. But he promised not to let up in the battle against terror. "We will continue to strike at terror and to use every means to destroy it."

By changing Israel's security situation from Sharon's disastrous war-making, Mitzna wants to "bring back foreign investors, tourists, and to get the wheels of the Israeli economy turning again. . . . As someone who cares deeply about the country's future, I decided I could no longer wait on the side while it falls through our hands. The security situation is getting worse every day. Every day, more people are losing their jobs, there are more people with less food in their refrigerators, and more people have nothing to look forward to."

Sharon Government's War-Fever Campaign

Although elections are not scheduled until November 2003, that date could be moved up to next January, as Sharon's



*New Labor Party
leadership candidate
Amram Mitzna.*

government could collapse if the Knesset (parliament) votes down the 2003 budget in October. On Nov. 19, the Labor Party will hold its primaries to determine its leadership and Prime Minister candidate. Mitzna is being seen as a welcome alternative to current Party Chairman and Israeli Defense Minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who shares Sharon's waistline and his hard-line policies. New polls show that Mitzna could get 52% of the Labor Party primary votes.

On Aug. 13, when Mitzna announced his candidacy, Sharon and his generals launched a propaganda campaign aimed at preparing the Israeli population for military—including nuclear—strikes against Iraq. The government initiated a debate, with banner headlines in the Israel press, on the need for mass smallpox inoculation of the entire population, in case Iraq fires biological weapons of mass destruction. The Defense Ministry has announced the mass distribution of Lugol's Iodine tablets for protection against radiation poisoning, in case of a "dirty nuclear bomb" attack. Wild allegations are being made that Iraq could be financing "mega-terror" attacks to come, by Palestinian organizations.

Israeli commentator Meron Benvenisti, in *Ha'aretz* on Aug. 15, exposed Sharon's real intentions. "Fanning anxiety with reports of 'Home Front readiness' are not about 'defensive' measures. They are about declarations by the Sharon government that 'this time Israel will certainly respond to any Iraqi attack.' The worse the hysterical fear of an NBC attack . . . the more pressure will rise to 'stick it' to Saddam Hussein, whether it is necessary or not. . . . The warnings about the destructive ramifications of an attack on Iraq for the entire Middle East are not deterring Israel—they are encouraging it. . . . An American assault on Iraq and an Israeli involvement, even if only symbolic, leads to the collapse of the Hashemite regime in Jordan. Israel executes the old 'Jordanian option'—expelling hundreds of thousands of Palestinians across the Jordan River." Benvenisti concluded that America should be "warned that an assault on Iraq could unleash ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. Nobody should be allowed to say they weren't warned."

Growing Support for New Alternative

Support for Mitzna has come from key Labor leaders, including Tel Aviv mayor Ron Huldai; Culture and Science Minister Matan Vilnai, also a retired General; Yossi Katz, an important Labor party Knesset member from Haifa; and northern Israel party boss Yisrael Savyon. Even Yossi Beilin, the architect of the Oslo accords, said that Haim Ramon, the other party candidate, would most likely pull out of the race and support Mitzna. One of Labor's founding fathers, 96-year-old Yitzhak Ben Aharon, declared his support: "If we are able to present a clear candidate who speaks from the heart and who people can believe can be counted on, it will only strengthen the country." Ben Aharon, who had been a minister in David Ben-Gurion's 1960s government, had announced his resignation from the party, declaring that it had lost its way by joining Sharon's government. He pronounced Ben-Eliezer and Ramon "not the people who are able to turn over a new leaf with regard to Israeli society and our relations with the outside world."

One senior Israeli peace camp leader told *EIR* that it is too early to be over-optimistic, since it is not clear that Mitzna could beat Sharon or the other Likud front-runner, Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu. But he added, "Even if he doesn't win, a real opposition is finally forming. . . . Everyone is talking about Mitzna, and the right wing is totally freaked out." Those backing Mitzna not only want to start talks with the Palestinians, but are very nervous about an Iraq war. This nervousness is being felt in the military-security establishment.

A senior military source who knows Mitzna told *EIR* of "The Mitzna Affair" of 1982 during the Lebanon War. At a meeting of senior Israeli military officers convened by then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon at Paratrooper House, Amram Mitzna stood up and called upon Sharon to resign because of his handling of the war. "You have to be pretty courageous to do something like that," the source said. Mitzna resigned from the IDF in 1982, over Sharon's speech denouncing the formation of a commission of inquiry into the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon. But Mitzna's resignation was not accepted by the Chief of Staff, despite Sharon's demand that he be cashiered; instead, Sharon was thrown out of the government and declared unfit to ever be Defense Minister again. Sharon has not forgotten "The Mitzna affair," nor has he forgiven Mitzna.

The 'Intifada General'

Although Mitzna was close to slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, he is not well liked by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In February 2001, a few days before Barak resigned as Prime Minister, Mitzna wrote an open letter demanding that Barak leave office. This followed Barak's fiasco at Camp David, and his attempt to invite Sharon into a national unity government.

Mitzna was called the "Intifada general," because he commanded Israeli troops in the West Bank in 1987, during the

first Intifada. Criticized at the time by the right as too soft, and by the left as too hard-line, Mitzna resigned as commander in 1989 after a search-and-arrest mission led to the death of four Palestinians and the wounding of 12 others.

Israel needs a leader who can not only pull together left and right, but who can also bridge the gap between secular and ultra-Orthodox. He must also address the desperate needs of Israel's Arab community, caught between a rock and a hard place since the beginning of the Intifada. Having been Mayor of Haifa, Israel's third-largest city, for almost ten years, Mitzna may well be prepared for this task. Haifa is unique, in that it is an important port and industrial center and a Labor party stronghold, and represents a cross-section of Israeli society, with secular and Orthodox Jews and a large Arab population. As mayor, Mitzna has forged a coalition that includes the Labor party, the religious parties, and Hadash, the pro-communist and overwhelmingly Arab political movement. He even has support from city councilmen from the Likud.

But winning Labor Party leadership will be easier than beating Sharon or Netanyahu. While Sharon is responsible for the horrendous security situation—with now over 600 Israelis having been killed, mostly civilians—the polls say that Sharon's Likud party is expected to beat Labor by a considerable margin. Nonetheless, if Mitzna replaces Ben-Eliezer as head of the party, "They will have a choice," says one leader. This source pointed that Mitzna's connection between the need for peace, and reviving the collapsing Israeli economy, is crucial, including regional economic projects.

In the coming weeks, Mitzna's candidacy will be intersecting a social explosion caused by the impoverishment of broad sections of the population, which Sharon's war and killer budget will make even worse. In September, during the month of all the important Jewish holidays, the media will be filled with stories of how thousands of Israelis will not be able to buy all the special food for the celebrations. Thus, when the Knesset reconvenes in October to debate the killer budget, says this source, "there'll be a social explosion; it will be just too much for people to bear."

A senior member of the peace camp cautioned that Sharon, with the backing of the war party in Washington, may launch his war before Israel goes to elections. And if war is forestalled, can Mitzna succeed, where Rabin lost his life, challenging the right wing, the settlement enterprise, and the fascist ideology it is premised on? His chances of success here depends a great deal on what happens in Washington.

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