

Knesset Leader Hits Sharon's 'Apartheid'

by William Jones

Naomi Chazan, Deputy Speaker of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) and a member of the Meretz party, accused Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of conducting a policy of apartheid against the Palestinians. Speaking at a forum sponsored by the Foundation for Middle East Peace, in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 7, she said, "There has been an effective reoccupation of the West Bank, and now they are taking the first steps of doing the same thing in Gaza, which they previously had refrained from doing." Sharon's policy "has been aimed at carving up the Palestinian territory into small 'bantustans,' a 'pales-tanization,' as I call it," Chazan said. "They have built an electronic fence and have dug ditches around the fences. They are creating facts on the ground that delay the possibility of movement between the areas. This separation makes it impossible for the development of a Palestinian leadership that would encompass the entire Palestinian territory."



Naomi Chazan

Sharon has built a wall through the Palestinian district of Abu Dis in Jerusalem, as well as effectively isolating parts of Bethlehem on the West Bank. He has also escalated the establishment of settlements in the Palestinian areas. "There are now 109 outposts or expanded settlements. These play the role of 'spoiler' in the peace process," she said. While in the past, Palestinian territory was officially recognized as "occupied territories" under the control of the Israeli government, now "they have occupied the territory, but bear no responsibility for what happens in it."

This has been Sharon's policy since his days as army commander in Lebanon in 1982, Chazan noted. He allowed Lebanese Phalangists under his control to carry out the infamous massacre at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps outside Beirut.

Today, Chazan said, "the dynamic is one of escalation. It is a violent situation on an escalating trajectory. And the voices of extremism are taking over in a most pernicious way. Some of the most extreme views are being expressed."

Although the Sharon government, led by his Likud party,

calls itself a "national unity" government, with Labor Party leaders holding important ministerial posts, this is largely a chimera. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, both of the Labor Party, "are not the 'movers,'" Chazan said. "The policy is controlled by a small group of people around Ariel Sharon, some of them in uniform."

"Meretz is considered dovish, while the Labor Party is schizophrenic," she continued. "There the doves are supporting the hawks." Chaim Ramon, one of the challengers to Ben-Eliezer for the Labor Party leadership, is himself in favor of "separation" between the Palestinians and Israel. "And the hawks are supporting a dove, Ben-Eliezer. The opposition is therefore not able to mobilize for a change of government."

Hope for a Change

Chazan hopes to create a focus for opposition, by creating an alliance between the Meretz party and Labor and others. "We must organize new techniques in the fight, utilize the media more effectively. We must link the security situation with the awful economic situation. We have to reframe the political scene in order to make the messenger compatible with the message."

But ultimately, "the answer lies in this city [Washington] and not in my region," she said. "It is impossible to do without an international intervention now. Otherwise the U.S. and the Western world are going to have to pick up the pieces." An international conference should be convened, and the convening parties should be prepared to enforce its conclusions, she underlined.

The Oslo peace process failed, "because it tried to sequence the steps," Chazan said. "The only hope is to move for a permanent settlement immediately. From the permanent settlement will come the roadmap, as was the case with Camp David I, when Prime Minister [Menachem] Begin signed an agreement with Egypt." She said that such a settlement could be based on the proposal of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, which also guaranteed Arab nations' recognition of Israel. "But to this must be added the agreements which had been achieved at Taba," she said. The Taba talks between Israelis and Palestinians were conducted in January 2001, after the failure of Camp David II, and succeeded in reaching agreements on most of the difficult issues: refugees, Jerusalem, and borders. Yet these agreements became moot, with the defeat of Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak in the next election, Feb. 6, 2001.

Now, time is running out. "Every day that passes without positive movement results in negative movement," Chazan emphasized.

If President Bush continues to pursue the Cheney-Rumsfeld "Get Iraq" gameplan, instead of focussing on the explosive situation in the Middle East, the "window of opportunity" that Naomi Chazan indicates still exists for peace in the area, may close permanently.