
Interview: Shlomo Ben-Ami



Peace in the Middle East Needs a Third Party

On Nov. 16, Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced a new Middle East peace initiative. The plan was subsequently endorsed by French President Jacques Chirac and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, and will be presented at the summit conference of the European Union in December.

The plan calls for an immediate cease-fire; formation of a national unity government by the Palestinians; an exchange of prisoners, including the Israeli soldiers captured in the war in Lebanon; talks between Israel's Prime Minister and the Palestinian President; and an international mission in Gaza to monitor a cease-fire. Zapatero also urged that a major international conference on Middle East peace should be held.

In many respects the Zapatero initiative reflects work being done at the Toledo International Center for Peace, based in Toledo, Spain. Among its directing staff can be found Shlomo Ben-Ami, former Foreign Minister of Israel, who is currently the Center's vice president. Another vice president is Nabil Shaath, former Foreign Minister of the Palestinian National Authority and former peace negotiator. One of the trustees is Miguel Moratinos, current Foreign Minister of Spain. Moratinos had been the European Union's chief envoy for the Middle East and is currently deeply involved in efforts to promote peace, not only between Israel and the Arab states, particularly the Palestinians, but also in the dispute with Iran over their nuclear program. The Center has been the venue for various forums which have brought together Israeli and Palestinian intellectuals and policymakers.

On Nov. 24, EIR's Dean Andromidas interviewed Mr. Ben-Ami on the Spanish initiative, and more broadly on the prospects for a Middle East peace. Former chairman of the School of History at Tel Aviv University, Ben-Ami later served as Israel's Ambassador to Spain. Elected to the Knesset in 1996 as a member of the Labor Party, he served as Public Security Minister in 1999, and then Foreign Minister under Ehud Barak. Ben-Ami was the main Israeli negotiator at the Camp David Summit in 2000, and headed the Israeli negotiation team at the Israeli-Palestinian talks at Taba in January 2001, immediately after the inauguration of President George W. Bush.

EIR: On Nov. 16, Spanish Prime Minister José Luis

Rodríguez Zapatero presented a five-point peace initiative which he will present before the European Union's summit meeting in December. Could you comment on the prospects of such a peace plan?

Ben-Ami: Well, the idea of having a third party engaged in this negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians should be most welcome in my view, because I have come to the conclusion, for quite some time now, that there is no chance whatsoever for a bilateral, freely negotiated agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. I don't believe there is any solution to any of the problems in the Middle East that is bilateral. Not only Israel-Palestine, but take Iraq, or what have you. Whatever conflict in the Middle East you might like to tackle, it can't be done bilaterally. So this is most welcome.

The problem is that this initiative was born with some very fundamental flaws, and these are essentially the following: First, I do not believe that Europe alone can play the role of peacemaker in the Middle East, and things need to be coordinated in advance with America. I believe that the future of a peace deal between Israel and the Arabs lies in America and Europe being able to develop a common strategy in the region, or as common as possible a strategy in the Middle East. So this is one flaw.

And the second is the question of deploying international forces in Gaza. I don't see that this is feasible, and again, I should insist that I am very friendly to the idea of having international forces separating Israelis and Palestinians, but there is no chance whatsoever for this to happen without there being a clear framework of peace on the ground. Without a framework of peace, it would be sending them into an anarchic situation, and I don't see that any nation in the world will send its soldiers to Gaza if it is not done within the framework of an agreed peace map, as it were.

If you compare the Gaza situation with the one in Lebanon, you will get an idea of what I mean. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 accomplished the deployment of the international forces because Israel, the government of Lebanon, and indeed, Hezbollah, for their own reasons, accepted it. Furthermore, you have both an international framework that allows it, and a local framework that makes it possible. Otherwise nobody would have sent their soldiers to that place.

So these are two very fundamental flaws I see in this



Ben-Ami charged that the Bush Administration has “abandoned altogether the culture of conflict resolution in favor of head-on military policies,” leading to “six wasted years in the Middle East.” Shown here is former Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat, with President Clinton in 1993. Ben-Ami was the main Israeli negotiator at the Camp David Summit in 2000.

initiative. Otherwise, I am for an international force, I am for an international conference. I don't believe any kind of peace can be managed or negotiated without this kind of framework. But they should have fine-tuned the initiative.

EIR: We now have the very real problem of the Bush Administration. Their approach is far different than that of the Clinton Administration, to say the least. The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert seems to be taking its cue from the Bush Administration. Nonetheless, the recent U.S. midterm elections promise that there could be a change in policy. What do you see as the prospects for that?

Ben-Ami: You are absolutely right when you mention the divorce of the Bush Administration from Clinton's legacy. They have abandoned altogether the culture of conflict resolution, in favor of head-on military policies. And this has been, in my view, six wasted years in the Middle East. And now everybody is “waiting for Godot”—they are waiting for the Baker-Hamilton report. I hope that the report will change the course of American policy in the region in a way that could also make a difference in terms of the Israeli-Arab dispute.

My sense is that the Baker-Hamilton report will not propose more military operations or a renewed military effort; otherwise, who needs them? If it is for that, the Pentagon can do very well without them. So I guess that what they will

be doing is proposing some sort of political outlet. And if indeed they do so, and they engage the Iranians, even selectively, on issues of common interest, and they understand that Syria is a major spoiler, and that the only way to neutralize it, is by engaging it both on the question of Iraq and on the question of the Golan Heights, then a new more promising horizon might open for the peoples of the region.

Syria will not accept being engaged only on matters of interest to America; otherwise, they wouldn't have been the spoilers they are. I mean, they have an interest in a deal with Israel and in seeing the end of the American boycott. These are things they should be asked to pay for by stopping the assistance to the insurgents in Iraq, by disengaging from Hezbollah and from the radical Palestinian groups with their headquarters in Damascus, and by not meddling in Lebanon's affairs. I therefore think that a change of course, if it takes place, will be most beneficial for the Arab-Israeli dispute;

because neither Mr. Olmert's so far unconvincing leadership, nor the chaotic political set-up in the Palestinian territories, are conducive in any way to the resolution of the conflict. So far, we have seen leaders that do not have initiative, who don't give a sense of direction and hope to their peoples. This is most disheartening and unfortunate.

EIR: We think that an impeachment process has to be initiated in the United States, because as long as Vice President Dick Cheney is there, we will continue to have problems. Cheney would like to see a U.S. military strike against Iran, or even sponsor an Israeli strike. Do you have anything to say on that?

Ben-Ami: Well, I think that this war of rhetoric between Israel and Iran, in a way, is a veil for hidden agendas. I mean, there is no real dispute pending between Israel and Iran. This is an artificial conflict in many ways. We don't have common borders, we don't confront each other on issues such as access to oil resources. Israel does not have any aspirations in the Gulf area, Iran's natural strategic playground. Nor does Iran have territorial ambitions in the inner space of the Arab-Israeli dispute. In fact, there is much more in common between Israel and Iran than things that divide them. We had been allies of the Persians for many years. In fact, this was so, well into the Khomeini regime.

Israel, as you know, together with the Reagan Administration, supported Iran in the war against Iraq. So there is much of a common ground between these two countries. So how to explain, nonetheless, this war of rhetoric?

From the viewpoint of the Iranians, this is a way to divert attention and to mobilize the so-called Arab street against Israel, and away from the policy of the Arab leaders of rapprochement to the state of Israel. For the Iranians, an Arab-Israeli peace is seen as a threat, because the natural enemy of Iran is not Israel by any means. The real enemy is the Arab world, the Arab Sunni world. So, more than being the enemy of the State of Israel, Iran is the enemy of the Arab-Israeli peace process, which is why they consistently tried to derail it in recent years. By catering to the yearnings and expectations of the Muslim masses, Iran undermines the pro-American policies of the Arab rulers and their support for an Arab-Israeli peace.

What I want to say, is that in an Islamic sort of discourse, Iran gains a leadership position. But if the discourse is pan-Arab, Iran is the enemy. And this is one way to explain this Iranian strategy of “diverted mobilization.”

From the viewpoint of Israel, the exchange of threats with Iran serves the purpose of showing how Israel is the bastion of the West against the “wicked regimes” and the “rogue regimes” in the region, and in many ways, it helps create the sense that we cannot now make too many concessions to the Palestinians, because we have a far more formidable challenge which is not exclusively a threat to Israel, but is a challenge to the entire free world, and that is a nuclear Iran.

There were governments in the history of Israel that, when they did not have the political will or the political capacity to address the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, they preferred to dilute it into wider global issues. In the past, we had the war against communism, and then you had the war against terrorism, and now it is curbing Iran’s nuclear folly. Does this mean that Israel should accept a nuclear Iran? It doesn’t mean that, of course, but essentially these are the parameters, as it were, of this dispute.

So, what does America plan to do? Attacking Iran would be a folly, because you might not solve the problem hermetically; you might only enhance the determination of the Iranians to go nuclear. This is one. Second, is the fallout. I mean, these people can react, and they have all kinds of ways to react. You could have, in no time, a barrel of oil reaching \$200. There would be a severe, severe crisis in the region. It might even mobilize many in the Arab world against Israel and America because of the supposed double standard with regard to Israel. So I don’t see that happening. Frankly, I don’t see that America will commit this folly. Indeed you now have a new Secretary of Defense, who is on record as saying that this is not the way Iran should be dealt with.

I hope Israel doesn’t opt for a military response. In any

case, everybody would assume that if Israel attacks, this would have to be done in collaboration, or in complicity, with the Americans. A military solution is definitely not the right way.

The right way, in my view, is undermining Iran’s attempt at mobilizing the Arab world, by actively promoting the Arab-Israeli peace process. An Arab-Israeli peace should be the introduction to a regional initiative leading to the denuclearization of the Middle East. This, by the way, has always been Israel’s official policy. Israel has always said that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear arms into the region, and that it was ready to support a Middle East free of nuclear weapons. But this of course, only in the context of a regional peace, and the putting in place of a system of cooperation and security in the Middle East.

EIR: So, with the introduction of a third party, i.e., the United States, the differences between Iran and Israel can be easily bridged?

Ben-Ami: Well, I believe so. I believe that Iran would not conduct that kind of rhetorical war against Israel if she is involved in working relations with America. One of the tragedies of the last six years of the Bush Administration is that we have seen that our main ally doesn’t speak to our main enemies. In the past, this was not the case. Israel wouldn’t speak to Syria, but America would speak to Syria. And now, America doesn’t speak to Syria, doesn’t speak to Iran, and doesn’t speak to Hamas. It is reasonable to assume that a change in America’s policy in the region leading to negotiations with the spoilers in the region will have a positive effect on us.

EIR: The Oslo Accord posited the idea that economic cooperation, such as joint infrastructure projects, between Israel and the Palestinians was essential for success of any peace agreement. Would you agree?

Ben-Ami: Well, you are talking to a man who has always been very skeptical of the economic dimension of peace, and I will explain myself, and try to be as brief as I can. I do not believe the Arab-Israeli conflict can usher in a peace that is one of profound friendship and collaboration, one of economic integration, and a sort of incipient European Union. I don’t believe that. Why?

Because I don’t believe the Arab world wants it; and second, because many in Israel, first and foremost Mr. [Shimon] Peres, who was the father of this concept of a New Middle East, advanced these kinds of ideas because they really believe that if we develop the economic chapter, this will reduce the price of the political peace. They really believe that if the Arabs or the Palestinians have jobs or opportunity, infrastructure, and education, they will not insist on Jerusalem as the capital, or something like that. So, this was the rationale of the Peres initiative.

In 1997, four years into the Oslo accords, Mr. Peres was

still against the idea of a Palestinian state. I think that the Palestinians right now are not there. Nor are the Egyptians for that matter. They don't want to see Israel translate its military hegemony into economic leadership of the region. They might not mind modernization, but not at the hands of the Israelis. So I think we need to concentrate almost exclusively on the political deal.

I don't believe that our generation will see a warm peace with the Arab world, and let me tell you a secret: I personally can live with it happily. I don't need to sell and buy from the Egyptians. For me, the generation which fought the wars for Israel, it is enough that we don't have wars. It is enough that the Israeli-Egyptian front is calm. This is the most we can expect in this generation. If we bequeath to our children a Middle East that is free of the fear of war, it will be their task to develop friendship and cooperation. Let us make peace, and leave to our children the task of making love. To make peace, one does not have to build trust. Did the French build trust with the Algerians before they made peace with them? Did they have love relations before they made peace with the Germans? Friendship developed later.

I am afraid that some of us do not really appreciate sufficiently the level and degree of humiliation that the Arabs feel at the very existence of the state of Israel. Israel is the measure of the failure of the Arab world. Its vibrant democracy, its dynamic economy, its resourcefulness, high-tech, and educational institutions are a daily reminder of the incompetence of Arab leaders, and the failure of Arab societies in meeting the challenge of modernity.

Frankly, I don't believe today that there is ground for much economic cooperation. We need to concentrate on the political deal. The economic deal will come. It will come. Let us not insist too much on it now. This is not a process of lovemaking, this is a process of peacemaking. We are not about making love—we are about making peace. These projects are most welcome, but they will not be addressed by the parties in a credible way before a political deal is done. If you insist, you can take a lesson from the case of the European Union. It was only after Europe solved its endemic border disputes that very hesitant first steps towards economic cooperation started in the 1950s. In 1919, John Maynard Keynes preached, to no avail, to the leaders of Europe, that the future lay in economic cooperation (he wrote this in a booklet which he submitted to the leaders at the Versailles peace conference “The Economic Consequences of Peace”). He was a prophet whose generation was not yet ripe to assume his lesson.

We and the Arabs are in a dispute that is not only about land for peace; it is much more than that. It's about ethos, history, memory, religion. And I believe at some point we will address the issues of economic cooperation. But to me, frankly today, they are secondary. They will come, but only after the parties have separated into decent and dignified independent states.

Ecuador's New President: 'Life Comes Before Debt'

by Valerie Rush

Rafael Correa, candidate of Alianza País, won the Ecuadoran Presidential run-off Nov. 26, defeating billionaire banana/coffee tycoon Alvaro Noboa by a substantial margin, and giving added impetus to the nationalist tide sweeping the continent. In one of his first victory statements to the press, the 43-year-old U.S.-trained economist declared that he identified his political philosophy with that of Kirchner, Lula, and Bachelet, the Presidents of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile respectively, all of them key players in the informal Presidents Club that has coalesced around the urgent task of unifying and integrating the continent. Correa stated that he viewed his electoral victory as one more proof that “Latin America is changing eras. . . . I think that [Kirchner, Lula, and Bachelet] represent the new progressive current in Latin America which is overcoming the sadly fateful liberal night that has laid waste to the subcontinent.”

Correa had a brief stint last year as Finance Minister of the present Palacio government, but was ousted after he enraged the country's creditors by pushing a new law through Congress that re-allocated surplus oil revenues earmarked for debt repayment, toward education, health, infrastructure, and R&D funding instead. He also backed the decision of the state oil company to annul an Occidental Petroleum contract, because of violations by that oil multinational, and has since pledged to renegotiate contracts with the other oil multinationals as well.

Correa's electoral victory is causing serious consternation on the part of international financial elites. Despite Ecuador's small size and reputation as the quintessential banana republic for much of its history, Correa has publicly targeted a crucial weakness of the moribund world monetary system, which is the illegitimacy of most of the Third World's foreign debt. Correa has pledged to scrutinize his country's debts to determine which are legitimate and which are not, and to renegotiate them from that sovereign standpoint.

Economist Alberto Acosta, who will be Correa's Finance Minister when the President-elect takes office on Jan. 15, told the press that if Ecuador finds itself forced to “suspend service on its obligations, it will do so.” Acosta said that Correa's unequivocal message to Ecuador's creditors is that “life comes before debt,” and that his first obligation is the general welfare of Ecuadorans. Acosta further suggested that other