

Most Israelis Want A Palestinian State

by Dean Andromidas

In a Roman circus atmosphere, the Likud party's Central Committee voted up a resolution declaring that the party would not allow the creation of a Palestinian state. The vote was seen as a great victory for its primary sponsor, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, over the incumbent Ariel Sharon. But the issue, quite evidently, was not a Palestinian state, as much as a power struggle between Sharon and Netanyahu for leadership of the party.

Political commentator Gideon Samet wrote May 15 in *Ha'aretz* on the event, that "Nobody 'won' in the classic sense of the term, and nobody lost—except for the nation whose ruling party can conduct itself in such a manner while debating one of the nation's most important national issues." Pointing out that no one in the political class is supporting a sovereign Palestinian state, Samet wrote: "Sharon wants a Palestinian state? In your dreams. That's just something he promised to the Bush Administration about behaving in a balanced manner." As for Netanyahu's thumbs down to a Palestinian state, Samet wrote: "For him it's a cheap trick. . . . He knows that before anyone starts doing anything about a Palestinian state, it will take a lot more time than the next primaries, whether here or in Washington. . . . Nor does the Labor Party [accept Palestinian independence]. Its hidden platform from 1997 did not 'rule out' a 'state with limited sovereignty.' "

Then, Samet came to the key irony: "The most amazing aspect of it all, of course, is that a majority of the general public favors setting up a Palestinian state and making many concessions necessary in the process leading to it."

To Prove the Point

On May 11, less than 24 hours before the Likud vote, an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, for Israel's largest peace demonstration since the beginning of the Palestinian Intifada 19 months ago. It was three times bigger than the previous demonstration, held several months ago. Organized by Peace Now, its participants included the full spectrum of peace organizations, including Gush Shalom, the Peace Coalition, and many signers of the Combatants Letter 2002 issued by reserve officers and soldiers declaring their refusal to serve in the occupied territories.

Yossi Sarid, the head of Meretz, the main opposition party, told demonstrators: "The economic crisis is threatening the entire country. Only the settlements and the government

are big and fat. . . . Withdraw from the settlements and return to ourselves. The settlements are a burden. . . . If Israel attacks Gaza, they will do it without us." Sarid also told Agence France Press, "It is a very important message to the Israeli government, the Arab world and the international community. There is a peace camp in Israel and it is raising its voice. From tonight, Sharon can be assured there is no consensus for a military operation" in Gaza.

Yossi Beilin, the leading dove in the Labor Party who was one of the architects of the Oslo Accords, made a not-so-veiled response to President George W. Bush's views on Sharon: "We are told Sharon is a man of peace, but it is not true: He doesn't want to go to the negotiating table, because he has nothing to say. Sharon is dragging us into a catastrophe."

The huge turnout—comparable to a million-strong demonstration in Europe or the United States—surprised the organizers, and reflected the disillusionment of more and more Israelis with the endless hardline policies of the Sharon government. Despite this amazing turnout, the international media gave scant coverage to the demonstration. Within Israel itself, there has apparently been a media policy of not covering the peace movement, even when it holds such extraordinary events. Nonetheless, the Arab media have broadcast these events throughout the region.

Throughout the 19 months of the Intifada, the temper of Israel's population has been characterized by sharp swings between the desire for brutal revenge against particularly brutal suicide attacks, and more moderate positions. This was witnessed by the reaction to the suicide bombing of a Passover celebration, which served as the trigger for Sharon's launching of Operation Defensive Shield, better called Operation Warsaw Ghetto. The approval ratings for that operation were so high that even 60% of the pro-peace Meretz party supported it. Yet after the operation ended, a poll revealed that 59% of Israelis would support withdrawal from the occupied territories in order to restart the peace process. Surprisingly, 56% of the population would support the deployment of a United States-led international force in the West Bank—the nightmare of the Sharon government, even among Labor Party ministers including Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

Soldiers Also Affected

The most powerful expression of the shifting sands of public consciousness continues to be among reserve officers and soldiers, who represent the most important cross-section of Israeli society. The signers of the Combatants Letter, now approaching 500, now are becoming a moral force in the country. Almost 50 reservists have served prison terms of up to three weeks for their refusal.

Although these reservists continue to be a small minority, their political act is having a ripple effect throughout the reserve corps. This became evident when the planned "Operation Defensive Shield II" into the Gaza Strip, following the May 6 suicide bombing in the working-class town of Richon Leutzion, was called off. While pressure exerted by the United



The May 12 rally for peace in Tel Aviv included perhaps as many as 100,000 Israelis, a huge demonstration in a country of 8 million people, and a reflection of views in Israel's population which have been ignored by the Likud governments and much of the international media.

States and other nations was seen as the main reason for getting the operation called off, nonetheless vocal opposition in the reserves corps was also responsible.

On May 10, *Ha'aretz* noted that "senior officers question the wisdom of the Gaza operation." The daily reported that despite the fact that Sharon and Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz were determined to attack Gaza, there were "also questions among reservist officers about the planned operation and senior officers were very outspoken. They said that unlike Defensive Shield, which was perceived as necessary, going into Gaza will break the public consensus. . . . Many expressed worry about likely casualties. Some said the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] crossed a psychological barrier in the call-up for Operation Defensive Shield, and the current call-up does not have the same justification. The response rate to the call-up was high yesterday, but it still appears to be accompanied by more doubts."

One senior officer is quoted saying, "Tanks going into Gaza will leave a lot of damage, even if we don't mean to do so. If they tell us to go, we'll follow orders, but that won't reduce our questions about the wisdom of the order." There is no doubt that the IDF's four-week rampage in the West Bank—especially the assault on the Jenin refugee camp where 25 reservists, 15 in one day, were killed—had a chilling effect on morale. Many of these reservists felt they were risking their lives for the defense of unwanted settlements and the political ambitions of politicians like Sharon and the right-wing lunatics in his government. Confirming this, a senior Israeli peace activist said that the "man in the street" had no stomach for an attack on Gaza, where the eight large refugee camps have about 100,000 residents each, and where large casualties on both sides are likely.

As the Gaza operation was at least postponed on May 10, some 15 reservists, who had served in Operation Defensive Shield, held a demonstration in front the Israeli Defense Ministry protesting the intention to go into Gaza. Although these reservists are not signers of the Combatants' Letter—they declared they would continue to comply when ordered to serve in the occupied territories—they nonetheless called for an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Despite these hopeful signs, the fight for peace by Israelis is an uphill battle; Sharon has not only declared war on the Palestinians, but is using that war to transform Israeli society to accepting the fascist outlook he has employed all his life. Former Meretz chief Shulamit Aloni told *Ha'aretz* May 16, "The anti-racist and anti-fascist antibodies of Israeli society have been weakened. In the past 20 years, our society has fallen victim both to Sharon's manipulation of the terror, and the anti-Semitism and Holocaust paranoia that is being nurtured. They never cease to mention the Holocaust, and anyone who offers any criticism is immediately labeled an anti-Semite. It is reprehensible manipulation. Terror is a problem, but it does not pose an existential threat to Israel. Sharon, by endlessly repeating his lies, has succeeded in persuading the public that it does pose an existential threat, and that we are about to be thrown into the sea. Sharon hasn't changed; we have changed."

For the Israeli population, Gideon Samet pointed out, not since Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated in November 1995, "has there been a public personality who inspires trust, and through whom the real passions of Israelis for a clear policy could flow. Still alive and kicking is the decisive influence a genuine leader can wield in creating a majority in favor of a peace initiative."