

Israelis See Palestinian Letter As Opening for Peace

by Michele Steinberg and Dean Andromidas

Events since May 13 in the Palestinian National Authority and Israel have eclipsed the “unilateral” moves by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to seize Palestinian territory with a permanent “Berlin wall,” which in fact is his desired “permanent border.”

The following report, of the initiative by imprisoned Palestinian political leaders, including Marwan Barghouti of Fatah (the main group in the Palestinian Liberation Organization) and Sheik Abdel Halek Natshe of Hamas, and the positive response by leading Israelis, including former chiefs of the intelligence services, Ephraim Halevy of the Mossad and Ami Ayalon of the Shin Beth, should be a wake-up call to the U.S. Congress.

Congress must recognize that now is the time to seize the opening for peace, instead of bowing down to the warmongering aims of Vice President Dick Cheney’s shrinking cabal, as it did on May 23, when the House of Representatives passed the so-called Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006 (HR 4681). Bill 4681 is nothing but the codification of the anti-Palestinian provisions of the 1996 neo-conservative war plan, called “Clean Break, a New Strategy for the Realm,” which was the driver for the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which led to the Iraq War. Today, the co-author of Clean Break, David Wurmser, sits in Dick Cheney’s office as his chief Middle East advisor, while the other co-authors of the plan, former Defense Department officials Douglas Feith and Richard Perle, evade answering for the intelligence hoax they perpetrated on Congress and the American people to start the Iraq War.

Woe to the nation that cannot learn the lessons of its own follies.

An Opening for Peace

Although currently imprisoned in Israel, four key Palestinian leaders have set forth their vision for future Palestinian-Israeli relations, and guidelines for future political steps, in an 18-point initiative which includes calls for the integration of Hamas and Islamic Jihad into the PLO; the formation of a national coalition government between Fatah and Hamas; and structural reform and regulatory control in the security services. It was signed by Fatah Secretary General Marwan Barghouti; Sheik Abdel Halek Natshe, a member of Hamas’s senior leadership; Sheik Bassam al-Saadi of Islamic Jihad; and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Deputy Secretary General Abdel Rahim Malouh.

Under way for some time, the initiative was only revealed on May 13, and it immediately changed the geometry of the deadlock that had been imposed by the Bush Administration’s boycott of the democratically elected Hamas government in the Palestinian National Authority. The initiative has begun a debate among both Palestinians and Israelis, for the reopening of serious negotiations.

That was not an accident. Well-placed intelligence sources, with decades of experience in the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, have pointed out to *EIR* that the discussions among these imprisoned high-level Palestinian leaders was something that needed approval by Israeli authorities. That small point is a further confirmation of reports to *EIR*, which indicate that top members of the Israeli institutions increasingly realize that there is *no alternative* to a negotiated two-state solution, and that the time to go forward with that perspective is now.

The document reads, in part: “The Palestinian people,



Fatah Secretary General Marwan Barghouti (left) is one of four imprisoned Palestinians who set forth their vision for future Palestinian-Israeli relations, which could reopen serious negotiations between the two sides. The letter has elicited some positive response from Israelis, including Knesset Member Ami Ayalon (above), of the Labor Party, who was once head of the Israeli domestic intelligence service, Shin Beth.

in the homeland and in the Diaspora, aspire to liberate their land and realize their right of freedom, return, and independence, and their right to self-determination, including their right to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital on all the land occupied in 1967, guaranteeing the right of return for the refugees, liberating all the prisoners and detainees, drawing upon our people's historic right in the land of our ancestors, the UN charter, international law, and what international legitimacy guarantees. . . . We call on everyone to accept the changes in the Palestinian arena and expand the legitimacy of the PLO as the sole legal representative of the Palestinians and the supreme legal political address."

Since the imprisoned Palestinians are held in the highest of regard by all Palestinian factions, this has tremendous weight in the eyes of the Palestinian public. It has additional significance in two respects. One is that it is a joint agreement, and that it recognizes the 1967 borders, an implicit recognition of the right for Israel to exist, which indicates that key leaders in Hamas have now taken this position.

On May 26, the document was at the center of discussion at a dialogue conference of all the Palestinian factions, including Fatah and Hamas, chaired by Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) in Ramallah, and which included Prime Minister and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, as well.

"All the Palestinians, from Hamas to the Communists, all of us agree we want a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders," Abu Mazen said.

Abu Mazen challenged Hamas to approve the agreement signed by Barghouti and his Hamas counterpart, Sheik Abdel Halek Natshe or he would bring the document to a national referendum. On the same day, in an interview with the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, Barghouti called for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to join the PLO.

"We declared in the text that the PLO is the only body with the legitimacy to represent the Palestinian people in negotiations," Barghouti said. "Hamas and Islamic Jihad must join the organization, which will lead negotiations along with Abbas (abu Mazen). A final agreement will be brought to the people to vote on in a referendum."

Dramatic Israeli Response

The response of leading Israelis from the permanent institutions—intelligence services and the military, the Knesset, and the literary world—is dramatic.

On May 26, Knesset Member Ami Ayalon, of the Labor Party, former head of the Israeli domestic intelligence service, Shin Beth, travelled to Ramallah to meet with President Abu Mazen, and then told the Israeli press that within two months, a national referendum proposed by Abu Mazen, could mean that "this will be the end of unilateral policies." Ayalon's meeting with Abu Mazen was on the sidelines of the Palestinian national dialogue meeting.

On May 27, the former director of the Israeli Mossad, Ephraim Halevy, seconded Ayalon's statement, in Israel's second largest daily, *Ha'aretz*. Halevy told *Ha'aretz* that while Hamas must make a commitment not to carry out attacks, and must accept past Israeli-Palestinian agreements, "I think that now is not the right time for a permanent status agreement since it's not possible because of the great hatred between the sides. *But if Hamas wants . . . a long-term armistice, there is a meeting between the desire of the two sides*" (emphasis added). Halevy added that such an understanding could be the basis for future negotiations on interim borders between the two entities.

In yet another statement on dealing with Hamas, Gen. Eival Giladi (ret.), who had coordinated last Summer's Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip, said, "The Hamas will change its ideology quickly and easily. It's not a Hamas 'problem'

only; the Jewish people spent 2,000 years in the Diaspora without changing its beliefs. What is achievable is a thorough change in the means and patterns of conduct.” He predicted that the composition of the Hamas government will eventually change, with members of other factions joining.

On May 30, in its lead editorial, *Ha’aretz* called for opening up contacts with Hamas officials, pointing out that Hamas Prime Minister Haniyah had issued a directive that Palestinian officials should have contacts to work out practical problems. *Ha’aretz* warned that the boycott of Hamas is not only creating a humanitarian disaster, but is in fact failing politically to weaken Hamas:

“It is clear, however, that residents of the territories and Gaza are suffering the most from this. Moreover, it turns out that the siege on the Hamas Government is not weakening it. . . . On the contrary, it is boosting support for it. Despite severe suffering in Gaza, there have been no protest actions or demonstrations against the Hamas government.”

“Furthermore,” *Ha’aretz* continued, “cooperation on practical issues is no less important to Israel than it is to the Palestinian side, since it can be beneficial when it comes to matters like the bird flu, economic affairs, commerce, and services. Such cooperation could help gradually normalize Israel’s relations with the Palestinian public and leaders.”

On May 31, Israeli commentator Gideon Samet, also writing in *Ha’aretz*, said that not negotiating with Hamas hurts Israel. “Something worse comes up through the moralistic lecturing of Israeli and American leaders regarding Hamas,” wrote Samet. “The basic mistake, to the point of utter folly, is that the profound refusal to speak with the organization hurts Israeli interests.” He contrasted current policy to the bravery of Israeli peacemaker Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who opened negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, despite claims of “Arafat’s Satanism.” Samet added that the prisoners’ document calling for a two-state solution is crucial, and that Israel must make a positive response.

‘Africanization’ Must Be Stopped

What is stopping the Israeli talks with Hamas is the Bush Administration, which has imposed collective punishment on the Palestinian people for exercising their democratic right to elect the Hamas party to lead their government. The suspension of funds to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) by the United States and the European Union, has not weakened Hamas as an organization, but has deprived 152,000 PNA employees, including teachers, health and sanitation workers, police, and other public workers, of their salaries for the last two months. Thus, over 1 million Palestinians, directly or indirectly, have lost their only means of livelihood.

This has led to “Africanization” of the West Bank, and especially the Gaza Strip, according to Arnold Vercken, rep-

resentative of the UN World Food Program (WFP) in the West Bank and Gaza, whose previous posting was in Senegal, Africa. Vercken told Akiva Eldar of *Ha’aretz*, “Since the donations were frozen and the Karni crossing point closed, the Gaza Strip reminds me more and more of Dakar.” He said when he visits Gaza, he sees children digging in the garbage bins.

According to the latest data from the WFP, every second Palestinian—about 2 million people, of whom half are under 18—is suffering from a “lack of food security,” as opposed to 37% last Summer. Vercken warned that in the coming months there will be a further 25% increase in the number of mouths the WFP will have to feed—reaching a total of 600,000 non-refugees.

This is in addition to the hundreds of thousands of refugees who depend on food from United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which, on May 31, issued an alert that it is running out of resources. Since the cut-off of aid to the PNA, over 100,000 refugees have flocked to UNRWA offices, seeking short-term jobs, in Gaza alone, while in the West Bank there has been a 600% increase in applications compared to April last year. Furthermore, the culling of poultry due to the threat of the bird flu has destroyed the most important source of protein for the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, the United Nations released a report indicating that 40% of Palestinians live on less than \$2.10 a day. Those living in absolute impoverishment increased from 600,000 in 1999 to 1.6 million in 2005.

The criminality of the Bush Administration’s collective punishment is exposed by the fact that the World Bank announced that it already has a fund called the “Emergency Services Support Project,” which could be used to channel the funds in a way that would bypass Hamas authorities and be transferred directly to PNA employees. Not only has the Bush Administration ignored this, but it has also pressured Arab banks not to allow funds to be transferred to the PNA.

Now is the time for the United States to change its policy of unilaterally supporting Israeli unilateralism. In a panel discussion on May 30 at the Palestine Center in Washington, D.C., Maen Areikat, the Director General of the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, confirmed to *EIR* that only the United States and Israel (limited in both cases to certain right-wing circles) take the position that there is “no partner for peace” for Israel.

Areikat stated that Israeli unilateralism “is not going to bring about peace or stability to either Palestinians or Israelis.” His PLO delegation was in Washington as part of an “outreach” effort by the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, to meet with U.S. officials to convince them that the only way to peace is a negotiated settlement.

There is a “partner for peace” on both sides, and the United States must stop supporting fanatics.