

# Only Clinton's intervention can get the Mideast peace process moving

by Dean Andromidas

Despite the elimination of Benjamin Netanyahu from the Israeli political scene, it seems to be the case that only through the personal intervention of U.S. President William Clinton will real progress be made toward peace in the Middle East. The impasse on both the Syrian and the Palestinian tracks has earned Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak the name "Barakan-yahu," while many Palestinians, Syrians, and Israeli peace activists are beginning to wonder whether the situation has really changed since the election of Barak.

The Palestinians first became unnerved after Barak announced that he did not want to implement the Wye Agreement. Signed by the Netanyahu government last year only after personal mediation by President Clinton, the agreement was nonetheless shelved by Netanyahu almost before the ink had dried. Barak's logic was to immediately begin the final status talks so as to complete the entire process, including the establishment of a Palestinian state, within 15 months. This proposal was a focus of discussion during his marathon talks in Washington with President Clinton in July. Nonetheless, Clinton's backing was conditional on agreement with Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat. This condition has been taken quite seriously by Clinton, who has held more than one discussion with the Palestinian leader since his summit with Barak. It was not only an indication that Clinton was not about to abandon the Palestinian leader, but confirmed that the relatively strong relationship the President had developed with Arafat during the Netanyahu years still held.

As soon as it became clear that Arafat was not prepared to forgo implementation of the Wye accords, the talks bogged down over how to proceed, including the time frame for the first and second redeployment of Israeli troops out of Palestinian territory. As of this writing, Clinton has sent personal letters to both Barak and Arafat. Although the contents have not been revealed, and the appropriate diplomatic statements have been made denying that Clinton was "pressuring" Barak, it is important to note that shortly after the letter's arrival, Barak retreated from some of his demands. It is now expected that implementation of the Wye accords could begin on Sept. 1, the day that U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is due to arrive in the region.

Similarly, the Syrian track seems bogged down. The Aug. 18 *Jerusalem Post* quoted the Syrian *Al-Baath* daily making

the point that U.S. intervention is necessary. "The U.S. role is urgently demanded due to the Israeli premier's circumventions and maneuvers that contradict the series of obligations and promises he launched at the beginning of his election campaign and that [made within] the first weeks of his winning," the daily commented.

## The search for a face-saving formula

While negotiations seem inevitable, a source close to both the Syrian and Israeli sides pointed to the need to come up with a "face-saving" formula that will bring them to the table. Furthermore, the Syrian demand that negotiations resume where they had left off when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was slain, must be taken seriously.

The source said that the Syrian demand for a withdrawal to the so-called "June 4 lines," i.e., before the 1967 war, is one of the stumbling blocks to the talks. Israel does not recognize these as the international border. It views the border as that established in 1923, which defined the Palestine Mandate. This border included the entire shoreline of Lake Tiberius, including a 10-meter-wide strip on the Golan Heights (Syrian) side of the lake. Between the 1948 and the 1967 wars, this was never the actual border, because both sides were always technically at war. The Syrians and Israelis only recognized "cease-fire lines," and these lines kept changing over that 20-year period. Prior to the 1967 war, Syria controlled the territory on the other side of Lake Tiberius, while Israel controlled parts of Syrian territory in other sectors of the 1923 border. The difference in territory is only 20 square kilometers, but the big issue is access to Lake Tiberius, which is Israel's major source of water and the region's largest body of fresh water.

Our source commented, "In the context of war, this 20 square kilometers would constitute a great problem, but not in the context of peace." The source underscored the necessity of vigorous involvement by President Clinton.

## Economic development . . .

The failure to make economic development and cooperation an integral part of the negotiations, is the most alarming development since the Israeli elections. The much-touted "land for peace" formula rings hollow without concrete proposals for the development of regional infrastructure projects

and expansion of water resources. In fact, the reduction of the issue to division of real estate, will doom the peace process before it even gets restarted. Even if the Palestinians were to achieve control of 92% of the West Bank, without massive economic aid, its land area could not support the current population, let alone the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees living in camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria who want to return. Furthermore, a peace agreement, in itself, will not prevent the collapse of the current regimes surrounding Israel if their economic conditions do not improve. These conditions are in fact worsening.

Mohammed Shtayyeh, head of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, confirmed a report in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on Aug. 18 that the Palestinian National Authority has received only \$65 million of the \$800 million promised for 1999. The Palestinian budget of \$1.3 billion needs \$700 million of outside financing. He also said that only \$210 million of the \$480 million pledged for 1998 ever materialized.

The need for economic aid was underscored by President Clinton on Aug. 16, in a speech to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Kansas City, Missouri. Clinton assailed those Republicans who have blocked allocation of funds for war-torn areas, and made the point that the most expensive peace agreement were far cheaper than the least expensive war. After reviewing the situation in Russia and the Balkans, Clinton turned to the Middle East:

“Another challenge is to create a durable and comprehensive peace in the region that every President since Richard Nixon has considered among the most dangerous in the world, the Middle East. Today we have a real opportunity to do that. The new Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, formerly the commander of all Israel’s military forces, has set forth an ambitious agenda to reach agreement within the next 15 months and to move the process beyond the setbacks of recent years.

“Both Israelis and Palestinians now are determined to move forward, but the enemies of peace stand ready to strike, to undercut this path. That is why last fall, when the two sides made a commitment to peace at the Wye River talks, we made a commitment to them as well. As the United States has done ever since the Camp David accords in the late 1970s, we told the Israelis that we would help them minimize the risks of peace and lift the lives of the Palestinian people. We told the Jordanians that we would help promote their safety and their well-being.

“Now I know that’s a long way away, but you know if there’s a full-scale war in the Middle East, it will affect our interests and our values. The Middle East is home to all three of the world’s great religions that hold we are created by one God. We have a chance to see it become a place of peace. If it becomes again a place of war, it will cost us far more than investing in a common, shared peaceful future.

“The conflict has gone on for too long. We have a historic opportunity to end it. If the Israelis, the Palestinians, the



*President Clinton cuts the ribbon opening the Gaza International Airport, December 1998. With him is Palestinian President Arafat. The chance for Mideast peace now hangs on what Clinton does—or doesn’t do.*

Jordanians—ultimately, the Syrians and the Lebanese—if they all are willing to do their part, we must do ours. And we ought to begin by keeping our word to fund the Wye River peace process.”

### **... or terrorism**

The deployment of terrorism to sabotage the process has already begun. So far in August alone, several incidents have occurred, including two pipe-bomb explosions at a bus station in a suburb of Tel Aviv, while three more pipe bombs were seized by Israeli and Palestinian authorities outside the West Bank city of Ramallah. There was also the shooting of an Israeli settler in Hebron, and an accidental explosion at what is described as a Hamas bomb factory in the same city.

Meanwhile, radical Jewish settlers continue to expand their settlements, and are attempting to start new ones. It was revealed in mid-August that, during the Netanyahu government, the Israel Defense Forces deployment underwent a dangerous transformation. Since 1996, entire IDF units deployed in the West Bank are comprised exclusively of soldiers who come from the West Bank settlements. Given the fact that these soldiers all share the same right-wing views, their deployment has called into question whether they would implement government policy.