

Israel's Beilin Forms New Political Movement

by Dean Andromidas

Yossi Beilin, former Justice Minister and a leading dove in the Israeli Labor Party, announced the formation of a new political movement on June 3, to be known as *Shahar*, which means “dawn” in Hebrew, and is also an acronym for peace, education, and welfare. This is a bold initiative, by one of the architects of the Oslo peace accords, to unify the pro-peace opposition into a powerful political movement that can stop Israel's march to war and self-destruction.



Yossi Beilin

Speaking to some 1,000 supporters, Beilin told the crowd, “You called me to run, and I call on you to join me in forming a new movement with the goal of uniting the peace camp and guaranteeing that the state will be founded on democracy, social justice, and peace.”

Beilin lashed out at former Labor Party Prime Minister Ehud Barak for the failure of the July 1999 Camp David summit: “Barak convinced the world of a lie. Camp David failed because Barak did not know how to negotiate, not because peace is unattainable. If Camp David had been handled properly, this debilitating war could have been avoided.” He blamed Barak for convincing the public that the Intifada began as a result of the Palestinians' rejection of peace. He called for a peace plan along the lines of the Saudi initiative and the Clinton proposals, and said that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the only one with an obvious solution. “Achieving peace is not difficult at all,” he said, but it entails the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the evacuation of Israeli settlements, and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Beilin also attacked Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer for keeping the Labor Party in the unity government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Beilin reiterated that, while the polls show a majority of the electorate support Sharon, a larger majority also support a negotiated settlement. He expressed confidence that the right wing, led by either Sharon or former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, both Likud party leaders, could be defeated.

Other speakers at the event included Peace Now founder

Tzali Reshef; Haredi peace activist Tzvia Greenfield; the mayor of Daliat al-Carmel, Ramzi Halabi; actor Moshe Ivgy; and Brig. Gen. (Reserves) Giora Inbar, a former head of the Israeli Defense Forces liaison unit in southern Lebanon.

The event was organized by the “Run Beilin Run” organization, which was formed three months ago by Beilin supporters in an effort to convince him to run for the office of prime minister.

Beilin's initiative comes amid a raging debate within Israel on how to unite the peace camp into an effective political force, one that could defeat the rising right wing. Attempts at achieving this unity have so far failed because of Labor's continued presence within the national unity government, where it has rubberstamped Sharon's most extreme policies, including turning the West Bank into eight bantustans modelled on the Warsaw Ghetto. Labor is also deeply split, with some members sitting at the same Cabinet table with the likes of “Butcher of Lebanon” Sharon and Brig. Gen. (Reserves) Effi Eitam, Israel's up and coming Benito Mussolini, who calls for the “transfer” of Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt. Most of the Labor Party back-benchers in the Knesset (parliament) want to leave the government.

This split in Labor has had a negative impact on the peace movement, which has traditionally been backed strongly by Labor. Peres, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate now serving as Sharon's Foreign Minister, has contributed to the deep demoralization within the peace camp over the last year and a half, a process that has begun to reverse itself only in the last few months.

Beilin was correct to attack Barak, who has become one of the biggest mouthpieces for those denouncing Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat as no longer a “partner for peace.” This treachery by those who claim they are keeping alive the memory of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, has contributed to the “consensus” within the Israeli elite that keeps Sharon in power.

For several months, Beilin and his Labor supporters have been in discussions with the pro-peace Meretz Party, led by Yossi Sarid, the official head of the opposition in the Knesset, and the ethnic Russian-based Democratic Choice Party, led by Roman Bronfman. They have been discussing the possibility of forming a new party along social democratic lines, which would not only deal with the peace process, but also the grave socio-economic crisis that has hit Israel as a result of the war policies of Sharon and the global economic crisis. Polls say that such a party could capture 20 to 25 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, which would make the new formation at least the second-largest party in the Knesset.

Meretz Party chairman Sarid welcomed Beilin's call for forming *Shahar*. “Meretz has worked hard for this,” he said. He commented that he sees Beilin and his Labor allies as “important partners.”

Support for Beilin's initiative goes beyond Israel. For the last year, Beilin has been travelling internationally, especially to Europe and the United States, in an effort to gain support.

In the last few months he has made high-profile trips to South Africa, France, Germany, and Great Britain, where he has been holding discussions with Palestinian representatives including Palestinian Minister and former peace negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo, in an effort to renew back-channel efforts for peace. Israeli sources report that Beilin has received particular encouragement from French political and Jewish circles.

Forming an Effective Electoral Force

Beilin's announcement comes as the Labor Party is preparing for its convention in July, which could witness a major challenge to the leadership of party chairman and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer. Not yet a political party as such, Shahar is calculated to force the pro-peace Labor members to either force the party to pull out of the national unity government with Sharon, or to split from Labor and form a new party with Meretz and Democratic Choice. Within the Labor camp are leaders such as Speaker of the Knesset Avraham Burg, Haim Roman, and others of the younger generation, who share many of the same positions as Beilin, and want Labor to leave the government, but have yet to jump ship. Beilin has said he will not attend Labor's July conference, but he has not yet formally left the party. If Haim Ramon unseats Ben-Eliezer as party chair, Beilin hopes he would lead the Labor Party out of the government, where it could prepare for elections on a pro-peace and social justice program. A rejuvenated Labor Party could cooperate with Meretz and the Democratic Choice in mounting an effective opposition to Sharon and the right wing.

If Ramon fails to unseat Ben-Eliezer, then Beilin will act. Beilin told the London *Financial Times* on June 5, "If Ben-Eliezer remains, there will be a split in the party and I will lead it." Beilin said that the leadership of Peres and Ben-Eliezer has "tainted the Labor Party in Israel irreparably," and that they are responsible for damaging the peace process and failing to provide a real alternative to the Likud and its allies.

Although Israeli elections are not scheduled till 2003, the Sharon government could fall at any moment. There are many on the right who want to challenge Sharon and take even more extremist positions. At the top of this list is Netanyahu, who has strong backing in the ruling Likud party and among the Christian fundamentalist and Zionist right wing in the United States. This support extends to hard-liners in the Bush Administration.

A senior Israeli intelligence source pointed to the strong tie between the U.S. November mid-term elections and the prospects for early elections in Israel. This source said, that Sharon and Netanyahu prefer that Israeli elections be held after the U.S. elections, where they are hoping for a strong right-wing Republican victory, which would ensure continued support by the Christian and Zionist right. But, if the liberal Democrats were to win, it would split the American Jewish community, allowing for more support for the peace camp.

Addressing Israel's Economic And Social Collapse

The formation of a movement not only for "peace" but "education and welfare" is crucial. Sharon has not only turned Israel and the occupied territories into a slaughterhouse, but is destroying the economy and the fabric of Israeli society. There have never been as many attacks against Israeli policy from within Israel since the 1948 war. These attacks have escalated dramatically under Sharon's premiership. The psychological impact on the population cannot be underestimated, as the average person lives in constant fear that he or she, or their children, will not come home alive on any given day. The anxiety is such that cigarette consumption has increased fivefold in the past year. Sharon has manipulated this fear to keep himself in power. But his Achilles' heel is the economy.

Recently, Sharon's government almost collapsed when he ousted the ministers of the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, who refused to support the austerity budget Sharon had submitted to the Knesset. Although the budget is expected to pass, and the government has not fallen, the economic collapse continues.

The Israeli currency, the shekel, continued to inch up to five to the dollar, a 20% devaluation since last year. The depreciation has been fuelled by massive capital flight. In the six months ending April 2002, Israeli investments abroad increased by 50%, to NIS98.76 billion (\$20 billion), as compared to NIS65.49 billion at the end of October 2001. An Israeli intelligence source indicated that this figure is understated, because the "gray market lenders" who operate outside the system have been responsible for capital flight four or five times bigger than the official figure. Many Israelis use these lenders as a way of transferring money out of Israel to avoid taxes. The assessment is that the international credit rating agencies are artificially maintaining Israel's triple A rating, knowing that if it were lowered it would lead to a collapse of the banking sector. It is now reported that Israeli authorities are clamping down on the gray-market lenders for tax evasion. The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reports that billions of shekels worth of taxes are involved.

Moreover, gross domestic product continues to collapse. This year it will contract by 1%, and possibly by much more. GDP per capita has dropped from \$18,500 in 2000 to \$14,500 this year. Unemployment stands at 10.6%.

Beilin knows that none of the parties in Sharon's government, including Labor under its present leadership, has any solutions for the security situation or the economy. Despite huge budget cuts in social services, including national insurance payments—health, unemployment, and pensions—the hundreds of millions of shekels that pour into the settlements have hardly been touched. In fact, that budget line has massively expanded, since much of the military has been deployed to protect the 200,000 settlers, while some 3 million ordinary Israeli citizens are the targets of terrorist bombings within Israel itself.