

Clinton undertakes bold steps for Mideast peace

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

As *EIR* goes to press, it is not yet clear whether Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will accede to the demands made by President Clinton, as a precondition to hold talks on the Middle East in Washington. What is clear, is that the U.S. stance has shifted, decisively, away from unconditional support for Israel, to increasing understanding of and alignment with the Palestinian Authority (PA) of Yasser Arafat. President Clinton has acknowledged the fact—through deeds, not just words—that the single most significant obstacle to peace is the head of the Israeli government; and, it appears that the U.S. President has decided to wield the unique power of his office, which is the only way the deadlock that has lasted more than one year, could possibly be broken.

Whatever Netanyahu decides to adopt as his next delaying tactic, the fact remains that the events of the first week of May, have irrevocably altered the position of the chess pieces on the board. And, unless Netanyahu decides to face the new reality, he may find himself checkmated.

Although American irritation with Netanyahu's intransigence has been growing visibly over months, to the point that the U.S. President refused to receive him in Washington on his last visit, relations between Washington and Tel Aviv approached the breaking point on May 4, when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and British Prime Minister Tony Blair held talks with Netanyahu and Arafat. The talks had originated as a U.S. proposal, which Blair attempted to hijack.

No one on the American side had any illusions that the talks, conducted separately with each of the partners, would yield anything of substance. As State Department spokesman James Rubin said after the first sessions had been fruitless, and Albright had convinced the two sides to prolong their stay one day more, "We are hoping for the best and preparing for the worst." He added that there were no signs of a breakthrough, and warned of "grave risks of disillusionment and

violence in the Middle East," should the talks fail. Arafat, who looked terrible after the first day of talks, said that Netanyahu would "have to bear the responsibility of the repercussions and the chaos that will ensue because of the breakdown of the peace process, because of his negative attitude to the American proposal."

On the second day, Netanyahu refused to compromise on the amount of occupied land Israel would hand over to the PA's autonomous control. Although the Oslo peace accord had stipulated that Israel would withdraw in three phases from most of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, in the interim period leading up to negotiations on the "final status," it has conducted only one withdrawal. Netanyahu has refused to respect the accords, on grounds that Israel's security would be threatened. He has flaunted America's role, by stating that he would not accept any "dictates" regarding security. Albright was to try to convince him to accept the proposal (not yet made public) to withdraw from another 13% of the territories, which Arafat had accepted, despite the fact that it falls far short of the original withdrawal plans in Oslo.

With Netanyahu's refusal, the United States got tough. Albright presented him with an ultimatum: Netanyahu should convince his cabinet to accept the withdrawal, and only then travel to Washington for talks in mid-May. In an interview with the *Financial Times* after the London fiasco, Albright made clear that the United States was not bluffing. Describing the process as "instead of glue, it's been sandpaper," Albright said that if Netanyahu were to refuse to accept the U.S. ultimatum, the United States would "reexamine" its approach to the peace process. The *Financial Times* interpreted this to mean that the United States would "spell out in public why the process has broken down, which would put intense pressure on Israel."

Albright said, that though she understood Netanyahu's

difficulties in Israel, she thought “he [was] in a pretty strong position in his cabinet,” and could “persuade them of what we’re all persuaded,” that although “Israel’s security is obviously for Israel to decide upon, a nation is inherently much more secure if it can get along with people who are living cheek-by-jowl as well as with its other neighbors.”

As the *International Herald Tribune* commented on May 7, the London events manifested a “growing estrangement” between the United States and Israel, as the United States began more visibly to “treat Israel as an adversary than traditional ally,” and “Mr. Clinton and Mrs. Albright [are] no longer hiding their antipathy for Mr. Netanyahu.” Inside Israel, more level-headed people tried to warn Netanyahu of the risk he was running. Yossi Beilin, the Labor Party figure associated with the Oslo Accords, said in a radio interview on May 6, that Netanyahu was risking a break with the United States, which would constitute a greater threat to Israel’s security than anything else. Beilin ridiculed Netanyahu’s quibbling over percentages, arguing that Israel would not be “more secure” if it withdrew from only 9% than if it withdrew from 10%. At the same time, Israeli sources said that either Defense Minister Mordechai or Chief of Staff Shak had stated that there was no difference between 11% or 13%, from a military security standpoint.

Mark Heller, from the Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv, summed up the earthquake Netanyahu’s intransigence had provoked: “The most significant transformation is that Israel is not negotiating with Palestinians, but negotiating with the U.S., acting on behalf of the Palestinians,” he said. He called this “revolutionary,” and added, “it’s a major failure of this government to have transformed the process that way.”

A Palestinian state

While Netanyahu, back in Israel, was going through the motions of discussing the issue with his security cabinet, the White House went into high gear. Hillary Clinton dropped a bombshell in a speech to a conference of Arab and Israeli students, in Villars, Switzerland, on May 6. Without any forewarning, the First Lady endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state. “I think it will be in the long-term interests of the Middle East for Palestine to be a state,” she said, “and for it to be a state that is responsible for its citizens’ well-being, a state that has responsibility for providing education and health care and economic opportunity to its citizens, a state that has to accept the responsibility of governing.” Speaking via WorldNet satellite with the 70 or so youth gathered there, she added, “I think that is very important for the Palestinian people, but I also think it is very important for the broader goal of peace in the Middle East.” In answer to a question, she added, “The territory that the Palestinians currently inhabit and whatever additional territory they will obtain through the peace negotiations should be considered and evolve into a functioning modern state that is responsible for the well-being of its people and is seen on the same footing as any other state, in terms of dealing responsibly

with all the issues state governments must deal with.”

With these words, obviously not impromptu personal opinions, but clearly formulated policy statements, the First Lady sent a powerful message to Netanyahu. The substance of her speech not only endorsed the Palestinian view of the Oslo Accords, but went beyond them.

As if to drive the point home, the President spoke at a forum of the Arab American Institute, on May 7, the “first sitting President,” he pointed out, to address an “Arab-American conference.” He said, “In almost every area of human endeavor, opportunities do not last forever. They must be seized, and I hope this one will be.” He added, “We have got to get this one done.”

The ball is in Netanyahu’s court

If Netanyahu decides not to cooperate, the onus of responsibility for the failure of peace will be laid on his shoulders, and a concerted international effort to force through the accords will come into being. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, who had forecast the London farce, said on April 28 in Gaza, that if the talks failed, an Arab summit, which Arafat has been calling for, would be convened. Speaking to Palestinian Television, Moussa said, “Contacts are going on between [Arab] foreign ministers [for a summit] more than at any time in the past. . . . It the London talks fail, and this is probable, the alternative is not just to hold an Arab summit. It must be an international effort.”

Moussa blasted Netanyahu for rejecting the U.S. plan for 13% withdrawal. “Peace cannot come at any price,” he said. “Peace has a meaning, and it is not that which Netanyahu calls for.” Moussa said Israel must withdraw to the 1967 borders, and leave both the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon. He called on pro-peace groups inside Israel to “take a historic stance against any policy which opposes peace and puts it out of our reach. . . . A stand by the forces of peace in the region, both Arab and Israeli, will open a new page in Arab-Israeli relations and bring hope for a better future in the region.”

If such an Arab summit were to take place, there would definitely be proposals on the table, to break relations with Israel and reinstitute an economic boycott. It is not to be excluded that even Jordanian King Hussein, who has publicly expressed his disgust with Netanyahu’s antics, would acquiesce. It is also not to be excluded that Laith Shubeilat, the leader of the opposition in Jordan, now on trial for his criticism of the peace treaty with Israel, may be given a mild sentence on May 12.

An Arab summit in and of itself would not bring peace, but, if embedded in a broader “international effort,” as Moussa mentioned, with the United States taking the lead, it could create a situation in which the current Israeli government could be brought down. If, for example, President Clinton were to threaten to withhold the \$3 billion per year in aid to Israel as a stick, there is no question as to what the effect would be. Such action by Clinton would be supported throughout the world.