

Israeli Elections: Time Running Out To Stop Region-Wide War

by Dean Andromidas

The prospect of early elections in Israel, gives Prime Minister Ehud Barak six months to either conclude a peace agreement with the Palestinians, or see the “limited” war with the Palestinians engulf the entire region in a conflagration. If the world is hoping for the “peace option,” the only way Barak will make that choice with any hope of success, is with the intervention of the U.S. President, whoever that may be.

The decision for early elections came in the midst of a late-evening Knesset (parliament) debate on no fewer than five early election bills, submitted by various opposition parties. When it became clear that at least one of the bills would have passed, Barak surprised everyone, including members of his own party and cabinet, and announced, “I am not afraid of elections. In all those I have run in until now, I have won. I am proud of the steps taken by my government. If you want elections, I am ready for elections.”

Elections could be held in May 2001. Until that time, Barak’s minority government maintains its executive powers, but cannot legislate, because it lacks a majority in the Knesset.

A senior Israeli intelligence source commented to *EIR*, that the situation is “clear cut”: For the next six months, Barak retains the executive powers required to wage a war against the Palestinians. Nonetheless, he could also pursue a peace agreement; but it would never get through the Knesset. Any agreement would have to go unratified and become part of Barak’s election campaign. In order to get an agreement, he would have to offer Palestinian President Yasser Arafat more than he offered at Camp David. Given the ongoing battles between Israelis and Palestinians, such a possibility would require, not just an American initiative, but an intervention to shift the conflict from religious war to peace based on eco-

nom ic development. This is the path outlined by American statesman Lyndon LaRouche.

After the Knesset decision, the Israeli Justice Minister, and leader of the peace camp, Yossi Beilin, left for the United States to meet U.S. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger on Nov. 30. He conveyed a message for President Bill Clinton from Barak, that he is still interested in coming to an agreement with the Palestinians before Clinton leaves office.

As of this writing, a joint Egyptian-Jordanian effort has been launched to arrange a summit between Arafat and Barak, to be held either in Egypt or Jordan.

While Arafat has made no direct comment on these developments, the senior leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Fatah, Marwan Barghouti, commented, “Barak’s only chance for political survival is an agreement with the Palestinians. The early elections are the result of his failure to bring peace and security to the Israeli people.” Barghouti, who is one of the key leaders of the *Intifada* in the West Bank, added that Barak must “be courageous and withdraw from the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, like he did from Lebanon.”

On the Verge of a Regional Explosion

This latest development follows the dramatic decision by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to recall his nation’s ambassador from Israel, in a powerful signal that the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict threatens to lead to a popular uprising throughout the entire region. The Egyptian move was followed, within minutes, by a similar move by the Jordanian government, which announced that it would not accredit a new ambassador to Israel. The Jordanian government has also



A sketch of an Israeli Defense Forces aerial photo showing the exchange of fire in which a Palestinian child was killed, at the outbreak of hostilities. Inset: Ariel Sharon.

indicated that if the situation does not improve, the Israeli ambassador to Jordan would be expelled.

According to well-informed Middle East intelligence sources, President Mubarak personally made the recall decision without consulting any of his advisers. The move represents Mubarak's realization that the growing popular support for the Palestinian Al Aqsa *Intifada*, and the outrage against Israel within Egypt, would lead to a popular uprising, not just in Egypt, but throughout the Arab world. He also realized that if he did not act, he and Egypt would both have been totally discredited, and therefore unable to politically intervene, when the situation degenerated further, or threatened to lead to a regional war. The Jordanian government's decision was based on precisely the same assessment, especially given the fact that over half of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin.

Although Mubarak has publicly spoken out against the use of a 1973-style oil embargo against the West, Osama Al Baz, a top adviser to Mubarak, told Egyptian television on Nov. 22, "If the United States agrees to cover for Israel and protect it from international law, American interests could be harmed." This statement followed calls in Egypt and Jordan for a boycott of American and Israeli goods.

The Egyptian and Jordanian moves follow the breaking off of the lower-level relations with Israel by Morocco, Qatar, and Oman, and are in line with resolutions made at the recent summit conference of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference.

After Israel, Egypt is the second-largest beneficiary of U.S. military and economic aid; therefore, the move is a strong signal to the United States. The Egyptian announcement came within hours of the arrival of U.S. Secretary of Defense Wil-

liam Cohen, who was on the last leg of a tour of the Persian Gulf states. On that tour, Arab leaders informed Cohen of their concern that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will set off internal unrest in other Arab countries, if not a regional war.

Palestinian Authority Could Implode

Israeli rocket attacks from helicopter gunships, tanks, and other weapons have left almost 250 Palestinians dead and 12,000 wounded. While this "excessive force" has been denounced internationally, far more potentially destructive have been the Israeli economic sanctions imposed on the Palestinian Authority. An announcement by the Israeli government that it was lifting some of these restrictions as a "confidence-building measure," was, according to a senior Israeli military source, the result of the realization that these sanctions, if continued, could lead to the "imploding" of the Palestinian Authority. This would leave the Israeli government without a negotiating partner in the midst of a popular uprising.

Israeli sanctions have had a devastating impact on the Palestinian economy, which is said to have lost \$1 billion in income and damage to its economic and social infrastructure. The Israeli sanctions include the closure of the territories, which has prevented 100,000 Palestinians from travelling to their jobs in Israel. This represents one of the largest sources of livelihood for a very large percentage of the Palestinian population. Furthermore, Israel has refused to transfer the remittances of these workers for the period just prior to the closure, which is some \$70 million. They have also refused to transfer taxes and duties Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, which amount to another \$100 million. They have brought to a standstill all commerce between Gaza and Egypt, and the West Bank and Jordan. This has caused

a food shortage and a financial crisis. With unemployment reaching 80%, the population is running out of money to buy food.

Israel has also imposed internal closures that have sealed off Palestinian-controlled areas as well as Palestinian communities still under Israeli control. This has prevented thousands of Palestinians from reaching their jobs in other parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This is especially serious for medical personnel who cannot reach Palestinian hospitals, which have already been filled with the thousands of casualties from the daily clashes. The Gaza Strip has been cut up into four sectors, making it impossible to get food from food-surplus areas to food-deficit areas.

In a demonstration of Arab solidarity, Arab finance ministers meeting in Cairo on Nov. 23, pledged \$700 million in aid to the Palestinians. In a sign of the times, most of the aid came from the moderate Arab states known to be close to the United States. This included \$250 million from Saudi Arabia, and \$150 million each from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

The Settlements: A Moment of Truth

The current crisis has dramatically called into question the legitimacy of the Israeli settlements policy in the Occupied Territories, and reasonable voices, although a minority, are beginning to be heard in Israel itself.

The number of Israelis killed in the last two months is small compared to those of the Palestinians; nonetheless, it far surpasses the number killed annually during the last years of the occupation of the so-called security zone in southern Lebanon. Barak, backed by a broad consensus, withdrew from that security zone last June, because such losses were intolerable.

All the Israeli military casualties have occurred in the defense of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. A recent survey revealed that only 11% of the settlers were born in Israel. In fact, most, particularly among the leadership, are from extremist Jewish groups in the United States and Europe. These radical religious Zionists and Jabotinskyites have little in common with mainstream Israeli society. They represent, in fact, the Israeli equivalent of the "Southern Strategy" of the right wing of the U.S. Republican and Democratic parties. They are not only linked to, but also play the same role as these U.S. Christian fundamentalists in distorting and manipulating the political environment. Backed by foreign monied interests, these fundamentalists groups, both Jewish and Christian, have become a force in Israeli politics, on both sides of the political spectrum, way beyond their numbers or popular appeal.

In the liberal Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on Nov. 24, senior military commentator Ze'ev Schiff wrote, "What the settlers want, along with many of those who want the government to 'let the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] win,' is the conquest of the territories that are under Palestinian control . . . and the

expulsion of the Palestinian population."

While Schiff outlined how the various violations of the Oslo Accords and other agreements by the Palestinians have contributed to the continuing conflagration, Schiff also lays blame squarely on the Israeli government's own support of the Jewish settlements. "But above all there was the relentless expansion of the existing settlements and the establishment of new settlements, with a concomitant expropriation of Palestinian land. Israel is responsible for creating new facts, which will effect the final agreement. . . . The territories that were seized shut in the Palestinians from all sides. Their conclusion was that the prospect of being able to establish a viable state was fading right before their very eyes. They were confronted with an intolerable set of options: to agree to the spreading occupation . . . or to set up wretched bantustans, or to launch an uprising."

Schiff also blamed the United States for not acting to stop the settlements while making do with mere "wrist slapping" and "non-committal" statements. He concluded, "It is clear in retrospect, that this was their [the Americans'] great mistake."

Another commentator attacked the settlers' hard-line policy, calling it a recipe for "Masada 2000."

Voice of Military Professionals

Another reasonable assessment of the situation came from Avi Dichter, the head of the Israeli General Security Service, the Shin Bet. Although not directly blaming Ariel Sharon's visit to the Al Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount as the match that ignited the current conflagration, he nonetheless testified in the Knesset that the killing of five Palestinians on the Al Haram Al Sharif, which followed Sharon's visit, served as the catalyst for subsequent violence and clashes as the Palestinians expressed their "frustration that nothing was moving forward in the peace process."

These voices are not those of "Peace Now," but of professionals who know that Israel faces a popular uprising, not only of the Palestinian people, but the Arab public throughout the region. They know that there is no "military solution" outside of a negotiated settlement.

Less reasonable is Israeli "public opinion." According to a recent poll, the notorious former Prime Minister, Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, could win 51% of the vote against Barak, if elections were held now.

If Bibi decides to break his self-imposed political exile, he could become the opposition's candidate in the next election, either as head of the Likud party, or even as head of a new right-wing bloc. If Barak tries to run his campaign as the "strong leader who knows how to deal with Palestinian violence," to out-Bibi Bibi, then Netanyahu could very well become Prime Minister. Barak won his 1999 victory over Netanyahu because the electorate wanted peace agreements. If the electorate are offered two Bibi's, they will elect the genuine article.