
Conference Report

Paris meeting reveals paralysis of Middle East peace process

by Dean Andromidas

An international conference on "The Future of the Mediterranean Area after the Peace Process," held in Paris on Feb. 18-20, demonstrated that the Middle East peace effort is sliding into a deep crisis. While much can be said about the various disputes that surfaced, the underlying causes of this crisis lie outside the region.

Number one has been the drive by the British and their allies to destroy the process at any cost. This is being done through a wave of terror-bombings in Israel and the Palestinian territories that has left dozens dead and wounded. More politically effective has been the World Bank's blocking of development assistance to the Palestinians, thereby undermining the political credibility of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and his ability to deal with the Palestinian rejectionists, particularly the Hamas group. Number two, more subjective but just as deadly, is the prevalent perception in the region that President Clinton is weak, besieged by the Conservative Revolutionaries in Congress. These factors have contributed to the parties' shifting their focus from the economic realm to negotiating over the political disputes: a deadly shift indeed.

The conference brought together Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, Palestinian Authority President Arafat, and Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, who met with one another not only at the conference, but on other occasions during their stay in Paris. They also met French leaders, although these discussions apparently proved fruitless. In addition, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Jordan's King Hussein, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak addressed the conference via satellite hookup.

The conference was sponsored by Radio Shalom, a Paris-based Hebrew-language station that strongly supports the peace process, as an attempt to provide an international forum, while at the same time influencing the important French Jewish community. The latter is dominated by a right-wing Jabotinskyite current that has given lavish support to Likud party hardliner Ariel Sharon and the Israeli settlers' movement, the leading edge of Britain's wrecking operation against the peace settlement. It was widely perceived that

the conference was hijacked by the government of French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, who attempted to transform it into an election event in his bid for the French presidency. Despite the presence of not only Balladur, but also Defense Minister François Léotard, Minister of Budget and Communications Nicolas Sarkozy, and Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, the French administration did not announce any new initiatives whatsoever. In fact, Balladur played up to the right-wing Jewish community, coming just short of saying that Jerusalem was the capital of Israel. Nonetheless, by the end of the conference, his government was in the throes of several scandals, proving the French political scene to be even less stable than the Mideast peace process.

Given that France currently holds the presidency of the European Union, the lack of any concrete proposals by the French government was singularly disappointing. In fact, Israeli Foreign Minister Peres saw fit to hold private meetings with Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac, rival to Balladur in the presidential elections. Peres also met French Socialist presidential candidate Lionel Jospin. The Israeli Labor Party traditionally has warm relations with the French Socialists.

Pessimistic atmosphere

In contrast to recent international conferences on the Mideast, a markedly cold atmosphere prevailed at this one. The speeches by Peres, Moussa, and Arafat at the inaugural session emphasized more the differences among the various parties, than the potentials for change. This political shift is directly related to a perception of the weakness of President Clinton following the U.S. mid-term election. This was nowhere more striking than regarding the Egyptian dispute over Israel's nuclear capability. Amr Moussa put forward the Egyptian demand for Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as a precondition for Egypt's signature when the treaty comes up for renewal. During the past several weeks, this issue has brought Egyptian-Israeli relations to their lowest point in years. Observers, Egyptians and Israelis alike, point out that this has been a non-issue for years.

An Egyptian journalist, while making clear that the dispute was not aimed by any means at blowing up the peace process, emphasized that "Egypt and Israel are rivals; they are not enemies, they are rivals." He pointed out that the nuclear issue for Egypt is "a status question," and Egypt perceives that the peace process is at a stage where "Israel got the most out of it" and the Egyptians feel that as the leading Arab country, they must be seen "at least as equal as Israel." He pointed out that the nuclear question demonstrates that "some are more equal than others." The journalist nonetheless emphasized that a *quid pro quo* could be reached, once Egypt felt it was getting the U.S. backing it required.

However, the Moussa speech brought an unusually strong, if not angry, response from Peres, who charged that Israel cannot give up its deterrent at a time when countries such as Iran are openly committed to its destruction.

World Bank sabotage

At the conference, the gap between the Israelis and Palestinians appeared as wide as ever. The Israeli negotiating position was dominated by concern about the Islamic Jihad's terror bombings and demands that the Palestinians do more to restrain terrorists. Reflecting the consensus within the Israeli government on the terror issue, Israeli Environment Minister Yossi Sirid, a leader of the Israeli peace movement, while going so far as to give his full support to the formation of a Palestinian state, nonetheless came out with a hard line on the terror question.

The Palestinians' chief concerns were political: the status of Jerusalem, the Israeli settlements in occupied territory, and the borders of a Palestinian state. But clearly the situation has been aggravated by the World Bank's sabotage of aid for economic rehabilitation and development of the Palestinian territories. Everyone agreed that this was the precondition for the Palestinian Authority's ability to wage the necessary political struggle with their rejectionists. In fact, several Israeli speakers described the deteriorating conditions and detailed various emergency economic measures, including the construction of water desalination plants, emergency health care systems, and employment-creating industrial zones in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Dr. Avishay Braverman, president of Ben Gurion University of the Negev, in his presentation demonstrated the need for desalination as the only viable solution for the water problem, and underscored the almost complete failure of the World Bank and other international institutions to move forward on any economic development for the Palestinians. He underscored that the "house is almost on fire" and that the entire peace process is endangered (see box).

The Israeli settlements

Commenting on the stalemate between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, Nabil Shaath, Palestinian Authority Min-

ister for Planning and International Negotiations, told a closing press conference that he saw the Israeli leadership in a state of "paralysis," the reason for which was "not understandable." He added that the only way to break the deadlock was to move forward, particularly on security and other problems, while opening up discussions now on such issues as the final agreement concerning the settlements, borders, and Jerusalem.

While the last two issues are the most difficult and would require the most compromise, the question of settlements is the hottest issue for the Palestinians and Israeli supporters of the peace process. The settlements are seen as a threat by Palestinians and also by many Israelis, and, along with deteriorating economic conditions, are perceived by Palestinians as demonstrating that the entire peace process has brought little change.

The settlers' movement is one of the principal tools of Britain's operation against the peace process, as *EIR* has shown (see *EIR*, March 11, 1994, "Massacre in Hebron: Time to Name Names"). With a leadership dominated by either Jabotinskyite extremist or religious fundamentalists, their support comes almost exclusively from outside Israel.

In France, the leading rightist Jewish organization is the Herut, and its youth group, the Betar. Their leader is Jacques Kupfer, who only the week before the conference held a Paris fundraising event for Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu which netted 9 million francs for the settlers' movement. While the American Jewish Defense League and the Kach party tend to be middle-class Jewish kids turned small-time gangsters, in France, their counterparts tend to be just plain gangsters; they were very visible at the conference, and five of them were carried out of the conference hall by security personnel during the speech of Israeli Environmental Minister Sirid. Although no one would admit it publicly, it is believed that Kupfer has the unofficial support of French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua.

While Rabin has put off the question of dealing with the settlements, he and his government are committed to dismantling most of them. Yossi Sirid stated that his party is committed to turning over 92% of the occupied territories, and it is believed that the remaining 8% are the large settlements which form suburban Jerusalem. These are occupied predominantly by mainstream Israelis. A former Israeli ambassador at the conference told this reporter that "Rabin has to move on the settlements question; he is obligated in the agreements. It might be unpopular, but he should do it."

The settlers are not only a threat to Palestinian aspirations, but a threat to the state of Israel and even its Zionist principles. The settlers have more than once threatened civil war if the government moves against them. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, chief rabbi of the Gush Emunim and currently living in a settlement, addressed the conference. While presenting the settlers' brand of Zionism and peace, and denying in effect

that such a nationality as "Palestinian" exists, apart from the "Arab" nationality, he concluded his remarks by saying that if peace were to occur, then the "cultural struggle will begin," not between Palestinians and Israelis, but among the Israelis themselves, between those who want a religious state of Eretz Yisrael, and those who see Israel as a secular state and a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

The rabbi was passionately countered by Israeli writer Abraham B. Yehosha, who not only denounced Bin-Nun's brand of Zionism, but declared that the core of Zionism is "the right of return" of all Jews to the "State of Israel," as defined and recognized by the United Nations. He made emphatically clear that the Israeli state stands on international conventions and not on biblical texts or historical claims that are 3,000 years old.

Dr. Braverman: 'The house is almost on fire'

Dr. Avishay Braverman is president of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and a former senior economist with the World Bank. His speech to the Paris conference concerned desalination as the only viable solution to the water crisis. He made the following comment to EIR on the failure of the World Bank and international institutions to act quickly enough to support Palestinian economic development.

I would like to express my great concern about the pace of the economic development in the West Bank and Gaza. We are running out of time. While we Israelis are very much concerned that the peace process did not give us the security we desired, and today we experience more terror than we did before, on the other hand, when it comes to the Palestinians, there were great expectations with great fanfare about the fruits of economic development in the Middle East.

I say it loud and clear: The Middle East is a very difficult place. With a tremendous population growth of 2.5-3% a year, it needs a major transformation all over, but as far as Israel goes, the key issue for us is the economic development and the success of the Palestinians. Whatever will happen in other areas is important, but in our own backyard, it will be very difficult for us to function as a state if we are just a rich ghetto surrounded by hungry and angry people.

I am a veteran of the World Bank. I respect the World Bank; my former colleagues are trying to do an admirable job, trying to navigate the work of the World Bank. But you must know the limitations of the international organizations. As a matter of fact, I say it even more bluntly, because I feel the house is almost on fire.

Take a place like Gaza. Gaza is a small city; right now, we have a structure with the World Bank bureaucracy, the U.N. bureaucracy, now the European bureaucracy, the

Palestinian bureaucracy, and the cumbersome Israeli bureaucracy, with all their bilateral and multilateral relations. Each of these has a tendency toward slowness. You combine the five of them, and you have a nightmare. Now if we want to do things that are normally done on the international scene, then so be it, but that is a very long process. At the same time, time is so short, so scarce. The peace process can go up in flames.

So what is required, in my belief, is a completely different mechanism. It's like the story of Alexander the Great, about the Gordian knot: You have to cut through it. I would suggest an emergency action mechanism. It would probably have to be headed by a businessman who is really action-oriented. You have to start with Gaza. You have to create emergency programs for employment, sewage projects, health projects, and education. Some are for the longer term, but some must be implemented immediately. You need an action-oriented person who can swim the channel from one organization to another.

I am concerned because I feel that if the Palestinians are not economically satisfied, then Israel won't be happy about security, and the peace process may fall apart. It is not enough to move from conference to conference, and try to create new mechanisms. Look at Mexico: It was the U.S. administration and the Federal Reserve which saved it, not the IMF [International Monetary Fund] or the World Bank. The initiative has to come from people who put their butts on the line. Look at Russia, look at Ukraine and Algeria—places where there was transformation. The West was not very responsive. Talks began, but nothing followed, and now all these places are in crisis.

I think the situation is very dangerous. We raised a lot of expectations about the possibility of economic progress in the Middle East, but for me there is no new Middle East unless the Palestinians are moving. For us this is the greatest concern. Of course, there has to be political compromise, but I urge the President of the United States, I urge the key European leaders: Move to a new mechanism. If we want to move on Gaza first, if we want people to see that something has happened on the ground, we have to have a shorter, simpler, action-oriented mechanism. It's an emergency.