

Israeli Labor leaders urge U.S. Mideast role

by William Jones

Israeli leaders from the opposition Labor Party urged the United States to stay engaged in the Mideast peace process, despite the sabotage of the Netanyahu government. A delegation from the Labor Party, led by party leader Ehud Barak, arrived in Washington in early August for talks with administration and State Department officials. Barak, the former head of the Israeli Defense Force and former Foreign Minister, took over the party after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist in 1995.

It was the first high-powered visit Barak has made to Washington since his election as party leader, and he hopes to rally support from an American Jewish community which had been strongly supportive of the Oslo Accords and disillusioned by the systematic sabotage of the peace process by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As Leah Rabin had indicated after her husband's assassination, it was the vitriolic attacks by then-opposition leader Netanyahu that helped create the environment leading to her husband's assassination.

Accompanying Barak on his trip were Ephraim Sneh, a former general and a member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament); Shlomo Ben-Ami, a leader of the Sephardic community in Israel; and former Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the Oslo Accords. This visit was a show of unity by these individuals, each of whom represents a different political grouping within the Labor Party. In the dangerous atmosphere in the Mideast created by Netanyahu's sabotage of the peace process and growing concern over his reliance on the fundamentalists, the Labor Party is gearing up to retake power.

Barak spoke to a large crowd of supporters at the Mayflower Hotel on Aug. 4. Echoing what will undoubtedly become the main campaign theme, he counterposed to the Netanyahu slogan "peace through security," the idea of "security through peace." Only by consolidating the peace process begun by the Rabin government, Barak argued, could Israel hope to achieve real security. The Mideast, Barak warned, "is deteriorating into a kind of apartheid situation at best, or a Belfast or Bosnia situation at the worst. . . . It's a pity we have spent two precious years without accomplishing anything, . . . and the prospect of violence is waiting for us down the road." Unfortunately, Barak talked about the dangers of Iran and Iraq going for a nuclear initiative, playing into the themes on which Netanyahu thrives.

On Aug. 6, at the National Press Club, Barak was more specific. "Now, we have to bear in mind that a new eruption of violence in the Middle East . . . a new wave of violence and bloodshed would not just take us back to the beginning of the Hebron agreement or Oslo or Madrid; it might throw us back a generation and might make the challenge of reactivating the peace process in the Middle East something much more demanding to any future Israeli or Palestinian leader," he said. He warned against passing the five-year deadline of the Gaza-Jericho Accords on May 4, 1999 without any sign of autonomy for the Palestinians. Speaking to *Jewish Week*, Beilin underlined this point: "If nothing happens by May 4, 1999, and if unilateral decisions are taken by the Palestinians, followed by Israeli annexation of the West Bank, we are approaching violence, and not just between Israelis and Palestinians. We know the date; if America is not there as part of the process—if the American policy is 'let them bleed'—it will be the end of the world."

An attempt to restrict citizenship

Barak made clear that if the Netanyahu government goes ahead with legislation which would restrict Jewish citizenship to religious Jews—which Netanyahu, whose base of support is largely among the ultra-Orthodox, is toying with—the Labor Party would move to quash it. "For the first time in the history of Israel, we stated in advance what we are going to do when the law will be put on the Knesset table," Barak said. "We stated that we are ready to fight for the unity of the Jewish people, that we believe in a bona fide dialogue and compromise, but if such a dialogue cannot be accomplished, we will never let such a bill be passed in the Knesset. We are the biggest faction in the Knesset, and we will vote against it."

The Labor Party delegation also took up the cudgels against the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee. The largest support organization for Israel in the United States, and which allegedly supports Israel regardless of which party is in power, AIPAC has a clear proclivity to line up with the hawks. In 1993, Rabin had to personally intervene to bring them into line with the peace process his government had embarked upon. With the death of Rabin and the coming to power of the Netanyahu government, AIPAC went back to its old ways. In April, it had played a decisive role in getting 81 U.S. Senators to sign a letter warning the White House against attempting to exert pressure on Netanyahu to adhere to the peace process.

Beilin led the charge on behalf of the delegation. He said that AIPAC was becoming a "right-wing organization." "The message I wanted AIPAC to hear," Beilin told *Jewish Week*, "is that if you don't want the Americans to be involved, there will be no peace process. And without a peace process, there will be no security for Israel." Immediately, Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, a right-wing hate group, attacked Beilin's comments as "inappropriate."