

# Barak takes office: a second chance for Middle East peace

by Dean Andromidas

“It is now our duty to finish the job and bring about a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. . . . It is our duty to ourselves and our children.” With these words, Prime Minister Ehud Barak officially took office in Israel, on July 6. On the same day, the Prime Minister’s spokesman announced that Barak will be holding meetings with Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and King Abdullah II of Jordan, after which he will travel to Washington to meet with President William Clinton as early as July 16.

The change in government has been widely acclaimed as the first step to reviving the comatose Middle East peace process. For President Clinton, it represents a very rare second chance to create a true foundation for a lasting and durable Middle East peace based on a policy of widespread regional economic development. It must be remembered that the collapse of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister, occurred not only because of an orchestrated campaign of Israeli-Palestinian terrorism, but more importantly, because of the sabotage of the economic development perspective that was at the core of the Oslo Accords. With Barak now in power, and other regional leaders eager to get on with the task, Clinton has the political partners he needs to dump the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other international financial institutions that sabotaged that “first chance.” Such an approach would dovetail with the strategically crucial Balkan reconstruction policy elaborated by Lyndon LaRouche. With its location between east and west, and north and south, Middle East reconstruction would serve as the bridge between Russia, China, Central Asia, and Europe, on the one hand, and Africa and the Indian Ocean region, on the other.

## ‘Our historic duty’

In presenting his new government to the Israeli Knesset (parliament) for approval, Barak said, “It is our historic duty to use the window of opportunity opened to us and bring long-term security and peace to Israel. We know that a comprehensive and stable peace will occur only if it rests on four pillars at the same time: Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and, of course, the Palestinians. . . . From here today, I call on all the

leaders in the region to reach out to our outstretched hand and bring about the peace of the brave in a region which has known so much war, blood, and suffering.”

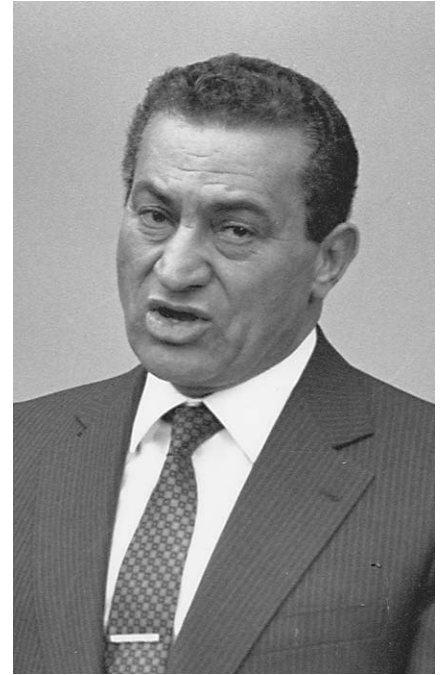
Directly addressing Syrian President Hafez Assad, Barak said, “The new Israeli government is firm in its intent to further, as soon as possible, the negotiations to reach an arrangement of peace and security—reciprocal and full—on the bases of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. We were bitter enemies on the battlefield. The time has come for an open and bold peace which will ensure the future and security of our people, our children, and our grandchildren.”

Addressing the Palestinians, Barak said, “I know not only the suffering of my people, but also recognize the suffering of the Palestinian people. My desire and aspiration is to put an end to the violence and suffering and to act with the elected Palestinian leadership, headed by Chairman Yasser Arafat, working in cooperation and with respect together to find a fair and agreed-on arrangement for a coexistence of freedom, prosperity, and good neighborliness in this beloved land in which two peoples will always live.”

Barak also stated that King Hassan of Morocco could contribute to the peace effort, along with President Clinton, Jordan’s King Abdullah II, and Egypt’s President Mubarak. The reference is important, because relations with this very major North African Arab country had, in effect, collapsed under Netanyahu’s prime ministership.

## Barak’s new government

It took Barak a lengthy 42 days to form a coalition government, but the coalition parties command 75 of the 120 members of the Knesset. The delay had much to do with the fact that both Labor, now called One Israel, and the Likud-allied parties had lost a significant number of seats in the May 17 elections, a political environment that has been splintered into an unprecedented number of parties representing special religious, ethnic, and political interests. Barak’s assemblage of the impressive majority of 75 seats was won at the expense of including seven political parties in his government. While the coalition includes One Israel, the pro-peace and secular Meretz, and the new Center party, it also includes the hawkish National Religious Party, which represents the settlers movement, the Shas party, representing ultra-Orthodox ethnic Sephardic Jews, and the more hawkish United Torah Judaism



*Left to right: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and two of his most important Arab interlocutors, Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Barak pledges to use “the window of opportunity opened to us” to work for Mideast peace and security.*

party, made up of ethnic Ashkenazis. These latter parties, along with the Yisrael B’Aliya party (the ethnic Russian party), all were members of the previous Netanyahu government.

Some commentators criticized Barak’s inability to forge a government much more rapidly, as a mark of political inexperience, and charge that his inclusion of right-wing parties is an indication of his own alleged right-wing tendencies. All agree that Barak has maintained a sphinx-like demeanor, letting few outside his own close circle know what his real intentions are until he finally acts. Nonetheless, Barak seems to have out-flanked the ultra-right-wing Ariel Sharon. The latter, as the new chairman of the Likud, hoped to enter a national unity government with Barak by threatening to organize a very disruptive opposition. But, when Barak finally brought the Shas party, whose 17 seats make it the second-largest party in the Knesset, into his coalition, Sharon was left out in the cold. The opposition could only muster 29 votes against the government, when it was brought before the Knesset for a vote of approval. Since the remaining 10 seats in the opposition are controlled by the Israeli Arab parties, which abstained from voting, Sharon will in the future find it hard to mobilize an effective parliamentary opposition.

Barak’s new cabinet seems as unwieldy as the coalition. In fact, Barak is endeavoring to have the official number of cabinet posts expanded from the legal limit of 18, to 24 ministers, a move of which many of his own party members disap-

prove. With only 18 portfolios to distribute among seven parties, Barak has managed to ruffle a few feathers among his own One Israel leaders and draw criticism from the political commentators. Nonetheless, here again there seems a bit more reason than madness to his choices.

In the Israeli system, the most important ministries, in order of precedence after that of the Prime Minister, are Defense, Finance, Internal Security, Foreign Affairs, and Justice. The ministers who hold these positions are automatically members of the security cabinet, which will play the most important role not only in the peace process, but also in dealing with attempts at sabotage of the process from both within and outside of Israel. It is important to remember that a very high level of personal security has been placed around Barak, since he won the elections. For this and other reasons, his choices for these leading positions take on added significance. All are committed to the peace process, and each is highly regarded in his or her own right.

### **The new cabinet**

Barak will be his own Defense Minister, as had been Prime Minister Rabin. The others are as follows:

**Avraham Shohat** has been appointed Finance Minister, a position he held under Rabin. An engineer by training, former director of Israeli Aircraft Industries, and a founder of the city of Arad, Shohat was not welcomed by the neo-liberal financial community.

**David Levy** has been given Foreign Affairs. Although now a leading member of One Israel, Levy was formerly in the Likud, and had been Foreign Minister under Yitzhak Shamir (Likud). He resigned as Netanyahu's Foreign Minister, because of the latter's obstruction of the peace process.

**Yossi Beilin** has been named Justice Minister. Although not a lawyer, his integrity and honesty have been greatly welcomed by a ministry that had become haunted by allegations of corruption and impropriety under Netanyahu's government. In fact, outgoing Justice Minister Tzachi Hanegbi faces criminal charges for corruption. More important is the fact that Beilin is a protégé of former Prime Minister and architect of the Oslo Accords Shimon Peres. He hopes to use the ministry to initiate a policy that could lead to the eventual drafting of an Israeli Constitution. His inclusion in the security cabinet is significant.

**Shlomo Ben-Ami** has been named Internal Security Minister, putting him in charge of the police and Shin-Bet, Israel's domestic security service. Unlike previous holders of this post, who were usually retired generals, Ben-Ami is a former university professor. Nonetheless, he is the most popular One Israel member of Knesset, is considered a powerful intellectual, and is firmly committed to the peace process.

A new ministry has been created for **Shimon Peres**, who will be Regional Development Minister. The responsibilities of the ministry will be worked out in the coming weeks, although Peres is said to want it to have authority for engaging in regional economic development projects. Peres may also be included in the security cabinet.

Among the other important cabinet positions are that of education, which has gone to **Yossi Sarid**, leader of the Meretz party. A ministry which has traditionally been in the hands of one of the religious parties, Sarid's appointment is considered a minor revolution because the Maretz party, and Sarid in particular, are strong secularists, as well as strong supporters of the peace process.

The Center party's **Yitzhak Mordechai**, the former Defense Minister whose resignation led to the downfall of Netanyahu's government, has been named Transport Minister. He could also sit on the security cabinet.

## The peace process

The big question continues to be what policy Barak will have behind his peace commitments. The two major tracks have been Syria and the Palestinians. Over the last three weeks of June, there was a lively debate and informal interchange between Israel and Syria, mediated through British journalist Patrick Seale, the official biographer of Syrian President Assad. Seale visited both Israel and Syria, meeting top officials of both countries, and also interviewing Barak and Assad. Seale's informal shuttle diplomacy brought out three crucial points that will lay the basis for the renewal of Syria-Israel talks. First, that they begin where they left off prior to Netanyahu coming to power in 1996. Second, a commitment for an

Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights to its 1967 borders, based on mutual agreement, in return for a full peace, including diplomatic relations. Third, is the absolute necessity of the United States playing a decisive role in bringing the two parties to an agreement, and then guaranteeing that agreement. Both expressed a commitment to begin the process as soon as possible.

As for the Palestinian track, Barak is said to have preferred to skip the implementation of the 1998 Wye Agreement, which was signed and then sabotaged by Netanyahu, and to proceed directly to final status talks. But, neither Clinton nor Arafat would agree to that, and therefore it is now expected that Barak will implement the remaining commitments of the Wye Agreement, which includes withdrawal from 17% of the West Bank.

Final status talks are expected to commence at the same time that Wye is being implemented. It is at this point where the more thorny issues will be taken up. These include the question of Jerusalem, which Barak is officially committed to ensuring remains undivided and under Israeli sovereignty. On the question of the Jewish West Bank settlements, Barak has publicly stated that he is against the establishment of new ones, but is not committed to dismantling the majority of settlements that have been established throughout the West Bank.

## Netanyahu may be down, but not out

In what is perhaps the only promise Netanyahu ever kept, he resigned his seat in the Knesset on the day Barak became Prime Minister. This was part of his promise to take leave of public politics for the immediate future. He will probably tour western Europe and the United States, to line his pockets with speaking fees from the same lucrative lecture circuit frequented by George Bush and Margaret Thatcher. It was also reported that he will be raising money for the same ultra-right-wing settlers movements and political parties that were politically responsible for Prime Minister Rabin's assassination, and that now promise to block and destabilize efforts of the new government.

In the last week of June, Irving Moskowitz, the bingo parlor king of Florida and one of the money-bags of Netanyahu's election campaigns, started a housing project in the middle of an Arab neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Moskowitz is one of the major financiers of the most extremist elements in Israel. He is the principal backer of the Ateret Cohanim yeshiva, whose members will live in this Jerusalem settlement. It is this yeshiva which seeks to build the so-called Third Temple, but only after it destroys the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Dome of the Rock, the mosque which was built on the site of the First and Second Temples, neither of which has existed for almost 2,000 years. The Dome of the Rock is the third holiest site in Islam, and it is widely acknowledged that a provocation against it could trigger a new Middle East war.