

Middle East: War, or peace, to be decided in Washington

by Dean Andromidas

While the Palestinians and Israelis inch their way along in the peace process, the biggest danger for the Middle East continues to be what does or does not happen in Washington. This was dramatically demonstrated when the Republican-controlled Congress cut out \$1.9 billion in aid promised by the Clinton administration for implementation of the 1998 Wye Accords between Israel and the Palestinians, to which the United States is a signator.

The failure to provide funding for the Wye Accords is reinforcing an image that President Clinton is a lame-duck President who lacks the power to bring about a Middle East agreement. Already, commentators throughout the region are speculating that Clinton's designated heir, Vice President Al Gore, if nominated, would lose the Presidential elections to George W. Bush, an assessment with implications far more dangerous than these commentators understand.

Mobilization against Wye

The cut in funding for the Wye agreement followed a massive mobilization of the entire circus of right-wing pro-Israel lobby elements and "Christian right" groups, which are, by and large, aligned behind George W. Bush. This included Americans for a Secure Israel, Christian Action Campaign for Israel, the so-called Group of Three (Yoram Ettinger, Yossi Ben Aharon, and Yigal Carmon), and the Coalition of National Unity for Israel, an umbrella group comprising the American Zionist Organization, the Center for Security Policy, the Hebron Foundation, Christian Friends of Israel, the Christian International Embassy of Jerusalem, Bridges for Peace, and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition.

In an effort to ensure that the Wye aid is approved, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak tried for three weeks to have a telephone discussion with House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), but has yet to speak with him.

According to a report in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on Oct. 20, Barak sent Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh to Washington to help deal with the situation. Sneh spoke before the leadership of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee, the top Israel lobby group, saying, "They cannot do

this to someone like Ehud Barak, who is so serious in his intentions to further the peace process. Nobody here has given me any rational reasons why they failed to approve Wye. Everybody told me that this was part of something else, and had nothing to do with us." He fumed, "This goes beyond all bounds of stupidity. Wye is providing hundreds of millions of dollars to combat terrorism, plentiful funds for strategic armaments, and they are thinking of giving up. What do they want, to bring Bibi [Netanyahu] back? This propaganda will not scare anybody."

The Wye aid included \$1.2 billion for Israel to finance its redeployment out of the West Bank, \$400 million which is desperately needed by the Palestinian Authority, and \$300 million for Jordan. On Oct. 18, Clinton vetoed the appropriations bill in which the GOP had cut money for Wye, among other things. With the House of Representatives having approved the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill by a vote of 214-211, and the Senate by a vote of 51-49, it is unlikely that Congress will override Clinton's veto. Nonetheless, Clinton's use of the veto has been touted as a major defeat for him. It is not at all clear whether all the aid will be included in a compromise budget, which will now have to be negotiated between the White House and Congress.

This perceived defeat for Clinton comes at a time when a "secret channel" has been established in Washington, under the sponsorship of the Clinton administration, between the Israelis and Palestinians. According to a report in the Oct. 20 London *Financial Times*, these talks are aimed at bridging the most sensitive issues between them in preparation for the final status talks, which will determine the nature of the future Palestinian state and its relationship to Israel. This includes the questions of Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements on the West Bank, and the borders of Israel and the future Palestinian state. This is in line with the agreed strategy between Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, that the principal outlines of the agreement be agreed upon prior to formal negotiations. This is a strategy aimed at preventing long-drawn-out negotiations that could easily be politically sabotaged, but it requires the good offices of a strong American Presidency committed

to a just peace and able to apply pressure where and when needed.

Inching toward peace

Mid-October saw the first modest steps toward implementation of the Wye agreement, including Israel's release of a second group of Palestinian prisoners—which, for the first time, included prisoners who had committed violence against Israelis. Also in recent weeks, the negotiation of a safe passage route between the Gaza Strip and West Bank has been finalized, to allow for easy passage by Palestinians through Israel, a situation that never existed prior to the Wye agreement.

But, when Israeli Prime Minister Barak began to close down illegal outpost settlements in the West Bank, it triggered a potentially dangerous response from the most extreme elements in the settlers' movement. Some 4,000 settlers organized by the "Dor Hamshech" (Next Generation) movement, demonstrated in front of Barak's house. The reaction seems overplayed, because Barak ordered the dismantling of only 12 of the 42 outpost settlements which were created in the last weeks of the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Moreover, the order was given in cooperation with the senior leaders of the settlement councils. Furthermore, these settlements have nothing to do with the dozens of Jewish settlements throughout the West Bank which will have to be closed down if any meaningful Israeli-Palestinian final settlement is to be reached.

Nonetheless, the demonstrations prompted Leah Rabin, the widow of murdered Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin,

to warn that a Jewish settler might carry out a suicide attack on Barak. Rabin told Israeli Army Radio, "There could indeed be one who will commit an act of suicide."

Rabin's assessment was shared by a senior Israeli military expert, who told *EIR*, "With fanatics, all means are justified and we are not immune from this virus." He also said that the settlers are split between the older and younger generations. The former are willing to accept what Barak gives them, because they know they do not have the support of the majority of Israelis, while the latter are far more extreme, as their parents had been 25 years ago.

The source said, "If people believed that working with the established leadership of the settlers would be enough, they were wrong. This is not going to be a one-shot crisis, but will continue to be ongoing."

Meanwhile, Barak's settlement policy is being seen as "a deceit" by leading Palestinians. Palestinian Parliamentary Speaker Ahmed Korei charged that "all settlements are illegal, and in particular, all of the 42 settlements. . . . They should be demolished."

Preparing for the next war?

One Israeli observer from the peace camp told *EIR* that if President Clinton does not take leadership in the peace process, including putting pressure where necessary, then the situation can only degenerate into a major conflict.

Given this warning, it is important that, almost unreported in the international press, is the fact that the region's largest military exercises since the 1991 Persian Gulf War are taking place in Egypt. As if preparations are being made for a new

More trouble for Netanyahu

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Australian multibillionaire financial backer, Joseph Gutnik, have been accused of defrauding the Jerusalem municipal government of \$25,000. The charges follow a complaint by municipal council member Roni Aloni.

The complaint involves a 100,000 shekel contribution which the Jerusalem Finance Committee made for a mass bar mitzvah ceremony held at the Jewish holy site, the Western Wall, last March, just before the election. The contribution had been made on the basis that the ceremony would not be political. But, in an obviously planned arrangement, Netanyahu, along with his infamous campaign spin-doctor, Arthur Finkelstein, showed up and took the opportunity to make a campaign speech.

There was also a complaint that Ethiopian Jewish immigrants—the Falasha—were denied permission to take part in the ceremony.

The complaints were brought before the Justice Minister, and the police are expected to decide within days whether to pursue a criminal investigation.

Gutnik owns diamond- and gold-mining companies in Australia. He is a major shareholder, with Rio Tinto (one of whose major shareholders is Queen Elizabeth), in a diamond-mining company called Striker Resources. As leader and major money-bags behind the ultra-Orthodox Lubavitcher movement, Gutnik has been a key financier of Netanyahu, and of the most radical elements of the settlers' movement.

Meanwhile, on Oct. 20, Israeli police searched Netanyahu's home, as part of an earlier investigation of corruption, abuse of trust, and fraud, centering on \$100,000 worth of renovations on his two Jerusalem homes (see *EIR*, Oct. 1).