

Sharon's Israel Needs Tough Love

By Stephen Zunes, FPIF Middle East and Northern Africa Editor

The election of the far-right Ariel Sharon as prime minister of Israel, while not unexpected, has sent shock waves through the Israeli peace movement. His participation in war crimes, his overt anti-Arab racism, and his refusal to endorse the already inadequate concessions of ousted prime minister Ehud Barak significantly dim the prospects of peace with Israel's Arab neighbors.

And many in Israel are openly blaming former President Bill Clinton for this disappointing turn of events.

Those who follow Israeli politics closely understand why. On the left of the Israeli political spectrum is the peace camp, which—for moral or pragmatic reasons—recognizes the need to evacuate Israel's illegal settlements from lands captured by the Israeli armed forces in the 1967 war, withdraw their occupation forces, share Jerusalem, and find a just resolution for the Palestinian refugees driven from their homeland during the Israeli war of independence. On the right are those who—for nationalistic or religious reasons—oppose such compromises.

Most Israelis are in the middle, willing to hold on to as much captured land as possible if they believe that Israel can get away with it. However, if they believe the country would suffer as a result—such as jeopardizing Israel's special relationship with the United States and the largesse of military and economic aid granted annually—this large centrist bloc leans strongly toward supporting the peace camp.

Israelis narrowly ousted rightist prime minister Yitzhak Shamir in June 1992 only after the Bush administration announced it would withhold loan guarantees until Israel froze its construction of new settlements in the occupied territories. As a result of pressure from Democratic nominee Bill Clinton, however,

Bush approved the loan guarantees that August without an Israeli promise to end the illegal settlement drive. Israeli settlements have since grown dramatically, making the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank virtually impossible.

The Clinton “compromise” on Palestinian autonomy presented during the summer of 1993 was less generous than what the Israelis were secretly offering to the Palestinians in Oslo at the same time. Indeed, on several occasions during the peace process in subsequent years, the Clinton administration took a harder line toward Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians than did the Israelis themselves.

Israeli negotiators quietly requested that the Clinton administration publicly pressure the Barak government to compromise more in their peace talks. That way, it was argued, Barak could tell the Israeli public that the country's close relationship with Washington was at risk unless further concessions were made.

However, the Clinton administration declined to do so. It did the opposite.

When the Camp David talks ended without a peace deal last July, President Clinton and other administration officials openly declared their belief that the Israelis had made more concessions than had the Palestinians. This played into the hands of Ariel Sharon and other Israeli hawks, who could then claim that even the Americans believed Israel was conceding too much.

Within weeks, an emboldened Sharon made his deliberately provocative visit to the Muslim holy site of Haram al-Sharif, located on the site of Solomon's Temple, provoking the Palestinian uprising that has since cost over 400 lives.

The Clinton administration made similar comments following the initial failure of the Israeli-



Syrian talks last spring, likewise effectively ending the possibility of a peace treaty for the foreseeable future.

Despite what critics may say, Israel's territorial conquests, human rights violations, and its construction of illegal settlements on confiscated land are not inherent manifestations of Zionism. Indeed, Zionism—like any nationalist movement—has both chauvinistic and pluralistic elements,

and includes both those who subscribe to a militaristic ideology as well as those willing to live at peace with their neighbors.

There will be no peace or security for Israel unless the United States applies some “tough love:” unconditional support for Israel's right to live in peace and security coupled with a willingness to pressure Israel to accept the necessary compromises for peace.

With Ariel Sharon as prime minister, the need for such decisive actions by the United States is underscored. Whether the new Bush administration is up to the task remains to be seen.

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