

Offers Little Choice for Israeli-Arab Peace

By Stephen Zunes | October 26, 2004

Earlier this month, in a widely quoted interview in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Dov Weisglass—Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s senior adviser—acknowledged what most independent observers have known all along: that the Israeli government is not actually interested in a peace agreement with the Syrian government or the Palestinian Authority. Israel has occupied the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip and the Syrian Golan Heights since these territories were seized by the Israeli armed forces in 1967, expelling thousands of Arabs and then colonizing these territories with Jewish settlers in contravention of international law.

This past April, Sharon proposed what he referred to as a “disengagement plan,” which—while removing 7,500 Israeli colonists from illegal settlements in the occupied Gaza Strip—would maintain Israeli control of the territory while annexing large swaths of occupied Palestinian land in the West Bank in order to incorporate illegal Jewish settlements there. This was an effective renunciation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, put forward by previous Democratic and Republican administrations as the basis for an Israeli-Arab peace settlement, which call on Israel—in return for security guarantees from its Arab neighbors—to withdraw from Palestinian territories seized in the June 1967 war.

Sharon’s plan immediately received the enthusiastic support of President Bush, who claimed that Sharon’s decision “has given the Palestinian people and the free world a chance to take bold steps of their own toward peace.” Shortly thereafter, both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate passed resolutions by overwhelming bipartisan majorities endorsing Sharon’s proposal.

Weisglass, in his interview, explained, “The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process. And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem.... Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda. And all

this with authority and permission: All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress.”

By contrast, former Israeli deputy foreign minister Yossi Beillin, principal architect of the Oslo Accords, observed, “it is Sharon who is not a partner for peace.” Ahmed Tibi, a member of Israel’s Knesset, added that “the American administration is a partner to Sharon’s political deceit.”

Meanwhile, Syrian President Assad and Palestinian President Arafat have resumed their calls for a permanent peace agreement with Israel based upon UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. Like a number of Arab leaders (including some allied with the United States), both Arafat and Assad have been criticized for their autocratic rule, corrupt administrations, and inability or unwillingness to curb extremist groups operating within their jurisdictions. However, these two governments’ positions on the peace process are far more consistent with international law, UN Security Council resolutions, the positions of America’s democratic allies, and the stated positions of previous U.S. administrations than is the Israeli position.

For example, President Arafat has spoken favorably of the draft peace agreement signed in Geneva last fall by leaders of Israel’s moderate opposition Labor Party and leading Palestinian figures. Under the agreement, a Palestinian state would be established in

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the West Bank and Gaza Strip (with minor and reciprocal adjustments from the 1949 armistice lines), the Palestinians would recognize Israeli control of 78% of historic Palestine, Jerusalem would serve as the co-capital of both Israel and Palestine, Palestinian refugees would be settled in the new Palestinian state or in neighboring Arab states, and there would be firm security guarantees for Israel. Sharon strongly denounced the initiative, however. President Bush has refused to endorse it and a proposed Congressional resolution in support of this effort stalled after only a few dozen House members signed on.

Arafat has also reiterated his support for the “Road Map,” a peace plan put together by the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations that would establish a Palestinian state by 2005 following a series of steps to be undertaken by both Israelis and Palestinians. Sharon, however, stated in an interview in September that “we are not following the road map. I am not ready for that.”

State Department spokesman Adam Ereli insists, however, that—such comments to the contrary—Sharon actually remains committed to the road map.

President Assad has offered to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel and provide internationally monitored security guarantees in return for a full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Syrian lands seized in the 1967 war. Sharon, meanwhile, told *Haaretz* that there was “no possibility” that Israel would resume negotiations with Syria. In recently signed legislation passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority of Congress, however, Syria was blamed as being solely responsible for the failure to peacefully resolve in the conflict.

Weisglass acknowledged that Sharon moved forward with his “disengagement” plan in part because “the Geneva Initiative had gained broad support” within

Israel and they needed to come up with a counter-measure that would receive U.S. backing and silence the growing domestic pressure. Not only did Sharon’s effort to suppress moderate and liberal Israeli demands for peace receive the support of the Republican administration and Republican-led Congress, it received support from the Democrats as well.

Kerry’s Response

Bush’s stance not only reverses the policies of three Democratic and four Republican administrations that had supported the concept of “land for peace,” it

endorses an Israeli position that is in violation of a series of UN Security Council resolutions as well as the UN Charter itself, which forbids countries from expanding their territory by military force. Thanks to Weisglass’ admission and recent statements by Sharon, Bush’s Democratic rival John Kerry was presented with an excellent opportunity to highlight Bush’s disregard for international law and the dangers of his militaristic unilateralism.

Kerry, however, has instead gone on record defending Bush’s endorsement of the Sharon plan, telling NBC’s Tim Russert that he supports Bush “completely.” According to Kerry, “What’s important, obviously, is the security of the state of Israel, and that’s what the prime minister and the president, I think, are trying to address.”

However, the settlements that Sharon seeks to secure are not even in Israel; they are in occupied Palestinian territory. Though no government in the world currently recognizes these illegal settlements as part of Israel, Senator Kerry has joined President Bush in endorsing a proposal that these settlements and surrounding lands be incorporated into Israel anyway. Every one of these settlements, however, violates the Fourth Geneva Convention, which deems it

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illegal for any country to transfer civilians onto territories seized by military force.

In addition, UN Security Council resolutions 446, 452, 465, and 471 explicitly call on Israel to remove its colonists from the occupied territories. Both President Bush and Senator Kerry apparently believe that while violations of UN Security Council resolutions by the former government of Iraq justified draconian sanctions and even an invasion, U.S. allies like Israel can ignore them.

More fundamentally, while Israeli security interests are indeed vitally important, there are other issues that are just as important that both the president and the Massachusetts senator appear to ignore, such as Palestinian rights and international law. Furthermore, it is naïve to think that Israelis will ever be secure as long their government continues to deny Palestinians their basic human rights and runs roughshod over basic, internationally recognized legal principles. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan observed, “Attempts by either side to achieve political goals or security through measures that injure the other are ultimately bound to fail, even if they seem to produce short-term gains.”

Kerry, however, in an open letter sent to Annan earlier this year, criticized the UN Secretary General, even questioning his commitment in the fight against terrorism for insisting that Israel, like all countries, should abide by the Fourth Geneva Conventions. Apparently, Kerry shares Bush’s belief that “You are either with us, or the terrorists.”

Prior to Weissglass’ revelations, Bush and Kerry supporters could plausibly deny that their candidates were aware of these cynical plans by Israel’s rightist government. Now, however, there are no excuses. There is no denying that both candidates are fully

aware that Prime Minister Sharon has no intention of honoring UN Security Council resolutions and basic precepts of international law and that he feels that Israel has a right to try to impose a settlement on the Palestinians rather than to negotiate one through peace talks.

Yet Senator Kerry and President Bush still oppose substantive peace negotiations with the Palestinian leadership. To justify his support for the Bush administration, Senator Kerry has falsely claimed that “Israel has no partner, no one to be able to negotiate with today” and that “Arafat refuses to ... take part in a peaceful process.”

In reality, however, the Palestinian president—along with his prime minister and other Palestinian leaders—has repeatedly called for a resumption of peace negotiations, but Sharon has refused.

The unfortunately reality is that in refusing to alter their positions one iota in the face of these revelations, both Bush and Kerry have made clear that neither of them is interested in pursuing peace between Israel and Palestine. Just as they both lied about “weapons of mass destruction” in order to justify a U.S. takeover of Iraq, they are also both lying about Israel’s desire

for peace in order to justify Israel’s takeover of the West Bank and Golan Heights. At least in regards to the United States in Iraq, neither Bush nor Kerry claims that the occupying power has the right to colonize and annex large parts of the territory it invaded. In the case of Israel, however, both are effectively rejecting the most fundamental principle of the post-World War II international system—enshrined in the United Nations Charter—which declares that it is illegal for any state to expand its territory by military force.

Bush’s stance not only reverses the policies of three Democratic and four Republican administrations that had supported the concept of “land for peace,” it endorses an Israeli position that is in violation of a series of UN Security Council resolutions as well as the UN Charter itself, which forbids countries from expanding their territory by military force.

Last year, Senator Kerry said he would consider former president and recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Jimmy Carter to be his special emissary in the Middle East. However, once Carter endorsed the Geneva Initiative, Kerry said Carter is no longer under consideration and that he will instead appoint someone who supports the position of the current right-wing Israeli government. Kerry apparently believes that the 22% of Palestine that would have been granted to the Palestinians under the Geneva Initiative was too much. Sharon's plan, which he has endorsed, would leave the Palestinians with only half that much territory—and that would be divided into a series of non-contiguous enclaves surrounded by Israeli occupation forces and Jewish settlements. This paints a disturbing picture of the contempt that Kerry has, not only for international law, but for basic concepts of justice.

Senator Kerry's position on Israel and Palestine is far closer to that of Rep. Tom DeLay than to Rep. John Conyers, far closer to the Christian Coalition than to the National Council of Churches, far closer to the Project for a New American Century than to Peace Action, far closer to the Heritage Foundation than the Institute for Policy Studies, and—in terms of Israeli politics—far closer to the rightist Likud Bloc than the liberal Meretz.

That the Democratic Party chose to nominate someone like that as its presidential candidate demonstrates how far to the right the Democrats have drifted on foreign policy issues. And it is not very smart politics: along with Iraq and globalization, Kerry's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the top concern raised by likely Nader voters as to why they will not be supporting the Democratic nominee in the final days of this extremely close election.

Bush's and Kerry's Disregard for Human Rights

President Bush and Senator Kerry have rightfully denounced terrorism by radical Palestinian groups and have correctly insisted that the Palestinian Authority do as much as it can to crack down on terrorist cells that could threaten Israeli civilians. However, they both have insisted that it is the Palestinians alone who are responsible for the bloodshed of the past four years and that Israeli attacks on Palestinian population centers are necessary defensive measures. This comes despite the fact that Israelis have killed three times as many Palestinian civilians as Palestinians have killed Israeli civilians.

Both Bush and Kerry defended Israel's recent incursion into the Gaza Strip that killed over 100 people, most of whom were unarmed; at least two dozen of them were children. Reputable human rights groups, along with UN and private relief agencies on the ground, documented widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and deliberate attacks against unarmed civilians. Despite

this, Kerry's running mate, Senator John Edwards, went to great lengths during his debate with Vice President Dick Cheney to defend the Israeli assaults in the face of this worldwide condemnation, demonstrating that a Kerry administration is likely to have as little regard for human rights as the current administration.

Furthermore, both the Bush administration and Senator Kerry have defended Israel's policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, claiming it is a justifiable means of self-defense. Both have failed to note that Israel's assassination policy has not just targeted terrorist leaders, but has also included local political leaders and nonviolent community activists.

Senator Kerry defended Sharon's use of death squads by saying that "The moment Hamas says, 'We've given up violence. We are prepared to negoti-

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ate,' I am absolutely confident they will find an Israel that is thirsty to have that negotiation." In reality, the Israeli government has stated that even if Hamas made such a statement, they would not negotiate with the Islamic group. Israel even refuses to negotiate with the elected Palestine Authority, which has long since renounced terrorism.

This summer, the International Court of Justice ruled 15-1 (with only the U.S. judge dissenting) that while Israel could construct a separation barrier along its internationally-recognized border, it could not build it deep within the occupied West Bank in order to effectively incorporate Palestinian land into Israel. Both Bush and Kerry denounced the decision, with the Democratic nominee going as far as to claim that the "wall" was an act of legitimate self-defense by Israel.

Both President Bush and Senator Kerry have ruled out linking even part of the \$2.5 billion military and economic aid package the U.S. sends Israel annually—or even the recently enacted \$9 billion loan guarantee—to Israel's observance of international humanitarian law. Even though arms transfers to countries that use American weapons for non-defensive purposes against civilian populations is illegal, according to the Arms Control Export Act and other U.S. legislation, and despite the fact that such aid is no longer necessary for Israel's legitimate defense needs, Bush and Kerry insist that unconditional military aid should continue. Thus, it appears that both Bush and Kerry agree that ensuring profit for American arms merchants is more important than defending fundamental human rights.

Both campaigns have claimed that hostility toward Israel by Palestinians and other Arabs is not a result of the Israeli occupation and colonization of their lands and human rights abuses against their people, but because of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda. While the rise in anti-Semitism in Arab countries

is a serious problem, it is extraordinarily misleading to claim that it is unrelated to the suffering of Arab peoples under Israeli military occupation or that it is the primary cause of Arab anger at Israel.

Why the Candidates Support the Israeli Right

That the Democratic Party chose to nominate someone like that as its presidential candidate demonstrates how far to the right the Democrats have drifted on foreign policy issues. And it is not very smart politics.

President Bush's contempt for the United Nations, international humanitarian law, and humane treatment of civilians in wartime is well-known. A number of the prominent neoconservatives in his administration served as advisers for previous right-wing governments in Israel and openly called on Israel to abandon the peace process, reoccupy lands ceded to the Palestinians in previous disengagement agreements, and unilaterally annex much of

the occupied territories, policies the current Israeli government has adopted with the Bush administration's blessings. In addition, one of President Bush's key constituencies is the Christian Right, which supports the idea that Israeli control of Biblical lands is necessary for the Second Coming of Christ and therefore rejects the notion that Israel should make any substantive territorial compromises.

More puzzling, perhaps, is the way John Kerry has endorsed similar policies despite the absence of neo-conservative ideologues in top foreign policy roles or a large Christian fundamentalist base in his party.

While many Kerry supporters have acknowledged that their candidate has indeed joined President Bush in embracing the neoconservative agenda in some key areas, they argue that the Massachusetts senator somehow has to support the policies of the rightist Israeli government in order to be elected.

There is little evidence to support such a claim, however. Public opinion polls show a solid majority of Americans—particularly Democrats—actually *oppose* the policies of Prime Minister Sharon and his right-wing Likud Bloc. Most Americans instead sup-

port positions advocated by the more centrist Labor party or more left-leaning Israelis who identify with the Israeli peace movement.

Secondly, as this election campaign has demonstrated on a number of issues, no matter how far to the right Kerry has gone—whether it be his vote to authorize President Bush to invade Iraq, his support for the ongoing occupation of that country, his support for increasing U.S. military spending beyond its already-record levels, his attacks on the International Court of Justice, etc.—the Republicans will still accuse him of somehow being soft and weak. Charles Krauthammer, for example, recently wrote in his nationally syndicated column that, as president, Kerry would be prone to “sacrifice Israel” in order to “appease the international community.”

Most disturbing is the tendency of many Kerry supporters who—while fully acknowledging that Kerry’s positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are dangerous, misleading, and well to the right of the majority of American voters—try to defend their candidate by using the time-honored tactic of “blaming the Jews.” These Kerry apologists claim that the Kerry campaign would somehow be denied Jewish votes or Jewish campaign contributions if their candidate did not give unconditional support to the policies of the current right-wing government in Israel.

These opinions belie the fact that public opinion polls show that well over 60% of American Jewish voters support a peace settlement along the lines of the Geneva Initiative. Nearly half believe the United States should take a tougher line toward the Sharon government for its human rights violations. Barely more than a quarter actually support Sharon’s policies

and most of these are Jewish conservatives who will probably vote for Bush anyway.

It is also noteworthy that despite the fact that George W. Bush has been the least dependent of any modern president on Jewish voters, he has still taken the most hard-line positions in support of the Israeli right of any American president.

Some Kerry supporters may buy into such anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and really believe that powerful Jewish interests effectively control the foreign policy agenda of America’s major political parties. That, however, is letting Kerry off the hook: the only one to blame for John Kerry’s embrace of Israeli right is John Kerry.

The problem with President Bush’s and Senator

Kerry’s policies is not that they are too “pro-Israel,” given how dangerous and ineffective Sharon’s policies have been regarding the long-term interests of the Jewish state. The problem is that they are too right-wing.

In other words, Kerry’s support for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was no fluke. His support for President Bush’s backing of Sharon, like his support for Bush’s request for authorization to invade Iraq, shows

that he shares the Bush administration’s contempt for international law and fundamental human rights, including the belief that the United States and its allies have the right to invade and occupy Arab nations at will.

It is a demonstration of the sad state of American politics that the focus of the campaign this fall has been which candidate would take the toughest stand against terrorism rather than which candidate could best change foreign policies so as to actually prevent terrorism.

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What Choice Do We Have?

Moderate and progressive Israelis, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, had been desperately hoping that Americans would vote Bush out of office come November. So, of course, were most Palestinians. Since Kerry has become the presumptive Democratic nominee, however, most Israelis and Palestinians have little reason to care who wins: based upon statements he has made during the campaign, it appears that a Kerry administration would be as bad as—if not worse than—the Bush administration.

Indeed, the few times Kerry has separated himself from President Bush on this issue during the campaign, he has challenged Bush for not supporting Sharon *enough*. Does this mean that those for whom U.S. policy toward the Israel-Palestinian conflict is their number one issue should vote for Bush?

Not necessarily.

Indications are that Kerry genuinely cares about Israel's legitimate security interests. As a result, as president, he may be more likely than Bush to recognize that Sharon's policies are ultimately harmful to Israel's long-term security and may therefore be more likely to push that government to compromise for its own good. Widely seen as far more knowledgeable and less ideological than the incumbent president, Kerry may see how substituting militarism for diplomacy only encourages terrorists and Islamic extremists who seek to destroy Israel.

Despite Kerry's decision to block any influential foreign policy staffer from meeting with prominent American Zionists who oppose Israel's occupation, he has not surrounded himself, as has President Bush, with Christian fundamentalists who see the current conflict as simply a continuation of the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines.

Perhaps most significantly, an important base of the Democratic Party includes liberals who—while committed to Israel's right to exist in peace and security and for the United States to be a guarantor of that right—oppose the occupation and U.S. support for the occupation. Should Kerry be elected, one can hope that the base of the party will no longer choose to ignore his right-wing positions on Israel and Palestine and demand that his policies change.

If not, there will be no hope for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

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