

REVIVAL

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News

Disengagement from Gaza

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Historic vote in Knesset

By Colette Avital MK, International Secretary

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On October 26, the Knesset, Israel's Parliament will be called to vote on Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan. This will be the opening shot of a politically tense and emotionally charged winter parliamentary session in Israel.

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In a move that brought about a split in the right and in his own party, Sharon has put on the national agenda a plan, which despite being unilateral in nature, has its merits, including a total withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the dismantlement of settlements.

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The settlers' movement is currently leading a vigorous, emotional campaign. A group of extremist Rabbis has issued public calls for religiously observant soldiers serving in the Israel Defense Forces not to obey orders. Threats of violence are in the air. In this atmosphere, the response of the political class hinges on the absurd: Sharon enjoys the support of the center and left in this country, but is besieged by his old political allies and friends. A militant group of Cabinet Ministers and members of parliament of the PM's own party recur time and again, to political tactics designed to tie his hands, delay votes and defeat his plan.

Though faced with many dilemmas, the Labour Party faction in parliament will lend the Prime Minister its support in crucial votes on the disengagement plan, and thus ensure the required majority. It will do so even through the plan is partial. Our position has been all along that a retreat from Gaza is necessary, that it should be considered as a first step in a wider scheme, and that preferably it should be as the result of an understanding with the Palestinians.

It is difficult, at this moment to predict what the immediate future holds in store. In this volatile political situation, everything is possible: from a change of government (based on a different coalition) to early elections.

Should the disengagement be approved, as we expect, we believe that our friends in the international community should step in and help the Palestinians prepare the security and economic infrastructure for the day after.

The countdown has begun: let us hope that this is a first step which will engender a different dynamic in the Israeli society and in the region.

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Sharon's plan will perpetuate war

By Ephraim Sneh, MK



What Prime Minister Ariel Sharon played down in his Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) interviews was clearly exposed by his former bureau chief, Dov Weisglass, in an interview in Haaretz Magazine (October 8). The goal of the disengagement plan is to perpetuate Israeli control in most of the West Bank, and to repel any internal or external pressure for a different political solution.

Sharon is consistently trying to realize his vision: Israeli control over the eastern and western slopes of the West Bank, and maintaining traffic corridors along its length and breadth. The Palestinians will be left with seven enclaves connected by special highways for their use. The disengagement plan will facilitate the realization of this vision, at a bargain price from his point of view: He is giving up the Gaza Strip, where 37 percent of the Palestinians live, but whose area is only 1.25 percent of the Land of Israel.

Anyone touring the West Bank will have no doubts regarding the hidden agenda of the disengagement plan. Construction in the settlements, including the illegal ones, is proceeding at full speed. About 4,000 housing units are now under construction. When they are populated, the number of settlers in the West Bank will grow by approximately 10 percent.

Most of the Israeli public supports the Sharon plan. It naively believes that its outcome will be the end of the war and a significant economic improvement. The international community also supports the plan. It is tired of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and is no longer investing any real input in attempts to solve it.

Even after Weisglass' damning confession in Haaretz, the peace camp will continue to support the Sharon plan. More than anything, this uncritical support expresses weakness and lack of confidence. Many of this camp's leaders no longer believe in their ability to lead a daring political move, which includes a clash with the extreme right, and to convince most of the public that they are right.

Anyone who supports a unilateral step and prefers it to a serious attempt at rapprochement, is accepting Sharon's basic assumption that "there is no partner" - an assumption that he has made every effort to ensure: Anyone who was likely to be a partner received nothing from him, with the exception of harmful compliments. It's true that there is no Palestinian partner to the seven-enclave plan, nor will there be.

Many good people seriously hope that the exit from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of the settlements will begin a dynamic that cannot be stopped. Such a dynamic would make the continuation of the process in the West Bank unavoidable. This possibility is what is influencing the extreme right to react with violent opposition, which has not yet reached its peak.

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However, such a scenario will occur only if Gaza is handed over to a responsible Palestinian government, through close coordination with Israel, and with active and generous support from the international community and wealthy Arab states. A Gaza that is not a source of terrorism or a place where terrorism reigns, which is rehabilitated economically, and which is run by a Palestinian government, is likely to be a positive model for the future.

I am not certain that this is the model Sharon has in mind. An opposite, negative development seems more likely at the moment: Gaza in chaos, supported by international welfare organizations, and controlled by armed gangs - that is the model that would prevent any Israeli from even considering a continuation of the process in the West Bank. A continuation of the war after the Israeli exit from Gaza will cause the Israeli public to lose any desire to reach a future agreement. In such a public atmosphere, our grip on 2.5 million Palestinians in seven enclaves in the West Bank will turn into a perpetual one.

Anyone touring the West Bank will have no doubts regarding the hidden agenda of the disengagement plan. Building in the settlements, including the illegal ones, is proceeding at full speed.

If general elections are held before the disengagement plan is carried out, they will of necessity focus on support for or opposition to the Sharon plan. Without any other plan, the public will support Sharon and his plan, and thus will indirectly prepare the ground for the continuation of lawless settlement on the West Bank. When it turns out that the conflict has not been solved, that the war with the Palestinians is continuing, that the Israel Defense Forces are busy protecting the settlers and that the country's political isolation is increasing, Israelis will be left for four more years with a government that in effect doesn't want anything else.

Weisglass openly told Haaretz: "The disengagement supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians." Formaldehyde, it should be remembered, is the liquid in which dead bodies are preserved.

The parties that want a political process - Labor, Shinui and Yahad - must present an alternative. The real choice is between an end to the war and a continuation of the settlements. There will be no agreement with the Palestinians when 250,000 Israelis live in 230 settlements and outposts in the West Bank. Unless about half of them return to the borders of the State of Israel and a new map is drawn separating Israel and the Palestinian state, there will be no end to war in the land.

On the new map, about 80 percent of Mandatory Eretz Israel will be within the borders of the State of Israel. Such a division, achieved through agreement, means a historic victory for Zionism. The choice between the settlements and the end of the war should be the focus of the next elections. The majority, which is tired of being dragged into an endless war by an extremist minority, will then have its say.

The writer is a former Cabinet Minister and the chair of the Knesset Subcommittee on Defense Planning and Policy. This article first appeared in Ha'aretz on October 11, 2004.

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Hitech: the next victim of the Likud's failed economic policy

Revival editor, Guy Spigelman, highlights the connection between the crisis in local authorities and the closure of a bio-tech plant last month in Israel.

Last month, at the height of the Jewish New Year holiday period, when typically Israelis take time out to be with their families and friends, the Histadrut Labor Federation called for a general strike that closed the country down for 24 hours. The reason for the strike was the non-payment of wages, in some cases for up to 2 years, of local authority workers.

The Likud, together with its neo-Liberal governing partner Shinui, was insisting that local authorities sign onto recovery plans. In a cruel and manipulative manner, the government turned the workers into pawns in the battle with the mayors of local authorities.

The overwhelming majority of Israelis were disgusted by the behavior of the government and the strike gained popular support. Within 24 hours the government was ordered by the National Labor Court to immediately pay wages, including back pay, with out any connection to recovery plans.

Since 2001 when the Likud came back to power, the Government has slashed R&D spending by 50%.

Of course the strike could have been prevented if the government had taken a more constructive approach to restructuring – which, Labor agrees, is critical for many local authorities. However, as we all know when the right says ‘restructuring’ what they really mean is massive budget cuts. The source of the crisis was an overnight 50% reduction in payments to local authorities in the 2004 budget. This was followed by the inhuman policy of non-payment of wages.

In a seemingly unconnected event, last month Serono, the leading Swiss drug concern, closed down its Interpharm research and production plant in Rehovot. For 25 years, Interpharm, which was acquired by Serono in the mid-nineties, was one of Israel's leading bio-tech companies, employing 180 scientists, lab technicians and other staff. Developments by the Israeli plant were critical to Serono's success over the past 10 years, in particular regarding the development of a drug for the treatment of multiple sclerosis.

The company's stated reason for the closure was that Israel was not an ‘economic’ place to do business. The real reason is a failure by government to create the conditions necessary for multinational companies to operate. Just half a year ago, Serono had applied for a government grant in order to expand activities in Israel. Unfortunately, the government did not

treat the application seriously and offered too little, much too late. Serono has voted with its feet and it won't be too long till others follow.

This is not simply mishandling, it is part and parcel of the economic policy of Finance Minister Netanyahu. Since 2001 when the Likud came back to power, the Government has slashed R&D spending by 50%. In most other countries budgets for innovation are being doubled. Further to this, funding for Universities has also been cut – with Israel's recently awarded Nobel Laureate's for Chemistry predicting an 'innovation' crisis if the trend is not reversed.

During Labor's tenure in the nineties, innovation budgets reached the highest levels of any country by international comparison

The connection between these two events is the adherence to neo-Liberal economic policies. Government should be small is the mantra and the people, be they workers in local authorities or lab technicians, need no encouragement or protection.

During Labor's tenure in the nineties, innovation budgets reached the highest levels of any country by international comparison and this is where Israel must be to ensure its economic future. Also in the nineties, major reforms of the economy were started – without the need for general strikes such as the one held last month.

Only the Labor Party has the track record and future plans to strengthen Israel's human capital, invest in innovation and to conduct reforms through consensus rather than confrontation. The main thing we really need to cut, and fast, is the time that this government has left in power.

Guy Spigelman edits Revival and chairs I-tech, the hitech forum of the Labor Party



During a recent visit to Sydney, Revival Editor Guy Spigelman (2nd from left) met with Premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr (2nd from right) together with NSW Upper House Member Eric Roozendaal (Left) and George Newhouse (Right), Founder of the Jewish Labor Forum

Labor launches 'lunch in schools' campaign

By Leah Goeppinger-Levy

In March 2004 Labor submitted a bill to the Knesset plenum requiring the Ministry of Education to provide each child in the public school system with one hot meal per day. At the same time, Labor launched a nation wide public campaign, promoting the bill. Local branches set up booths outside schools and distributed campaign materials to parents and a snack to children.

The main purpose of the bill was to combat growing hunger and poverty problems, which have taken on unprecedented proportions under the current Likud administration. Since coming to power to 2001, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government has failed to reverse the trend of high unemployment and growing income gaps, leaving many towns in the periphery in dire straits.



Activists from the Tel Aviv branch campaign for hot lunches in schools

In 2003 it was estimated that 1.4 million people were living under the poverty line out of a total of 6 million. Among those are 680,000 children. All official reports indicate that the situation has gotten worse during the course of 2004.

Today, thousands of Israelis are in such dismal financial situations that they cannot afford food to feed their children. Consequently, many of Israel's children come to school in the mornings on an empty stomach and have no option for lunch. And when kids are hungry, they cannot learn, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Many of Israel's children come to school in the mornings on an empty stomach and have no option for lunch

A further motivation behind the bill was the growing evidence of poor and mal-nutrition of many of the nation's children. According to the bill's sponsor, Labor MK Yuli Tamir, there is a desperate need "to fight a huge disease of the consumption of junk food." Consequently, Tamir continued, "There is a growing demand for healthy food and proper nutrition."

The bill required the Ministry of Education to go beyond supplying daily meals, ensuring that all meals would be nutritionally balanced. Supplementary to a healthy daily diet, the bill also instructed the Ministry to implement educational and public awareness programs about proper nutrition. The legislation is an overall attempt at improving children's health through the provision of meals and by teaching children to maintain certain standards independently.

Tamir's bill was passed during a preliminary Knesset reading (all bills must undergo three votes) by a vote of 46 for and 44 against. However, the Government, in an attempt to earn political points, introduced its own bill, that has now taken center stage.

The government's bill is a significantly watered down version of Labor's bill. The Labor-sponsored bill was meant to provide every student with a hot lunch, while the Likud's version is designed to reach only a fraction of the nation's children and it is up to the government to decide which schools will receive the program. This will place much of the financial burden on the shoulders of private donors.



MK Yuli Tamir
Sponsor of Labor's
bill to introduce school
lunches

The legislation is an overall attempt at improving children's health through the provision of meals and by teaching children to maintain certain standards independently.

Tamir and other opposition members fear that the Government will use the bill for their benefit by implementing the program in areas where they seek votes, rather than providing it to the neediest first. Labor will be keeping a close watch on the government's behavior during the implementation of the bill and will not hesitate to take the Government taken to court if the lunch program is not implemented fairly across the country.



Labor MK Eli Ben Menachem (Right) with Shmulik Mizrachi, Secretary of the Tel Aviv Division of the Party, campaigning outside a school in Tel Aviv