

Debate and Discussion in the Israeli Peace Movement: Despair on the Wings

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Global Research, August 22, 2004
22 August 2004

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

A number of factors have spread no small amount of despair among many members of the peace movement and the left in Israel regarding the prospects for a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This despair has found expressions in a number of retreats by people on the left from support for the two-state formula and the search for alternatives for moving forward without negotiations and by bypassing the present Palestinian leadership. Without in any way minimizing the serious obstacles on the path to peace, it is necessary to point out the even greater limitations of alternative strategies. It is certainly not accidental that the retreat from the only viable and realistic step for ending the occupation and opening a new stage in the relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis is most pronounced on the right and left wings of the peace movement.

“Disengagement Now”, Peace Later.

Peace Now exemplifies the most drastic reversal in policy. The present leadership, dominated by Tsali Reshef, has teamed up, completely and without any reservations, with Shimon Peres. Peres, who has earned his reputation as one of the most cynical opportunists in Israeli politics, is currently dragging the Labor Party into a ‘National Unity’ government. Reshef has gushingly characterized Sharon’s disengagement plan as a new historical stage and called on Peace Now to give Sharon’s plan its unequivocal and unqualified support. Peace Now’s present partnership with Peres includes unconditional support for a Sharon-led national unity government. Peace Now has even turned its back on the Geneva Initiative people and joined moves to marginalize the Geneva Initiative. At two recent meetings of the Coalition of the Majority, which organized the mammoth peace demonstration on May 15, 2004, Peres and Peace Now suggested ‘shortening the main slogan of the coalition.’

“The original slogan of the Coalition of the Majority was, “The majority rules! – Let’s get out of Gaza and start to talk.” At the last two meetings, the majority of the participants, led by Peres’ and Peace Now’s representatives, supported a new, shorter slogan: “The majority rules! Let’s get out of Gaza.” The only ones who objected were the Geneva people. Gadi Batianski, director of the Geneva Initiative headquarters wrote to the coalition: “withdrawing the call to talk with the Palestinians is tantamount to surrendering to despair, because without talking we will never be able to resolve the conflict.” (Akiba Eldar, “Ha’aretz. August 13, 2004).

The Peace Now revision is facilitated by the fact that the seriously weakened movement is in a long-standing organizational crisis. A tiny group, in control of the movement’s finances, has destroyed all vestiges of democratic or conventional movement life and organizational activity. Decisions are taken by a few ‘insiders’, without any serious debate and all broad

forums for discussion, where the new line might be challenged have disappeared. Even so, there is ample evidence that there is no consensus in Peace Now, supporting the Reshef-Peres gambit.

Disenchantment Among the Militants.

Political shifts on the militant, ideological left, are as usual, more complex and nuanced. Over the years, many activists have expressed their disappointment at the lack of progress on the two-state front, by a growing readiness to seriously examine a solution to the conflict which could be reached in the framework of a single democratic state. This solution had a singular attraction in that in it was clear in principle and even easy to conceptualize. Both peoples would be citizens with equal rights in a single state. The serious question remains as to whether this kind of very long-term goal can serve as a strategy for peace in the here and now.

An important document embodies some of the latest trends in thinking on the left. A group of activists who met at the town of Givat Olga issued a statement, which was subsequently signed by more than a hundred people on the left. [A link to the article which appeared in a recent issue of Jewish Peace News is provided].

The Givat Olga Document: Sincere Anguish over Israel's Policies of Repression and Discrimination http://ga3.org/jvfp/jpn_home.html#2)

The document evoked quite a bit of interest on the left. Many of the initiators and signers have made considerable contributions to the hard and difficult battles of the left for peace and Jewish-Arab understanding. The spirit of the document is close to that of the militant section of the left, the very same section which has been active on the ideological front, battling all the so-called justifications for the policies of discrimination and apartheid implemented by the different governments of Israel for generations. Israel, nor any modern state, for that matter, cannot justify rank discrimination against any section of its population on national, ethnic, or gender grounds.

The document states, inter alia: "the first precondition for a vision of life together is clear, both as an absolute moral commitment and as a matter of the here and now: an immediate end to the occupation." But even a close reading of the document leaves it unclear as to how this passionately desired event - an immediate end to the occupation - is to come about. Since I consider this 'lacuna' a serious flaw, I have had the temerity to suggest adding a paragraph of text to the original document. I do hope that I will be able to justify this exceptional action on my part as the discussion develops. This is the suggested addition:

"The only real chance to end the occupation and the only alternative to its continuation in the foreseeable future is a peace agreement between the state of Israel and an independent Palestinian state. Israel can attain an agreement for lasting peace and such an agreement will meet with world wide political, diplomatic, material and moral support. The bogus argument that Israel lacks a serious partner for negotiations and an agreement is only an evasive trick by the government of Israel, designed to sabotage any chance for peace. As always, Israel's policies are coordinated with the United States and function as an important element in that country's strategy. These axiomatic truths are the core of the policy of this country's peace movement. As always, the chances for peace are heavily influenced by

international and regional developments. In this respect, the serious defeats that the United States has suffered in Iraq are objectively a blow to the Bush-Sharon axis and improve the chances for Israeli-Palestinian peace.”

Of course, one can assume that the lacuna in this respect is not accidental. Since this may be the case, it is necessary to return to the text in order to discern some elements of an answer regarding the path to the dissolution of the occupation. But first, a few words about the continuing relevance of the two-state solution. Temporary reverses, which are the product of the efforts of the enemies of peace in the region cannot negate this relevance.

The two-state solution, it should be noted, bears many names and comes in different forms, such as the Clinton Proposals, the Taba Summaries, the Saudi Plan, the European plan, the Arab League plan, the Geneva Accords, etc.. With all due respect to minor differences between them, they do all submit a core of common proposals. The outline of a settlement on their basis is quite clear:

The June 1967 borders will be the basis for the territorial solution; Jerusalem will be the capital of two-states, Israel and Palestine; its neighborhoods will be divided on a demographic basis and religious interests and sensitivities will be fully addressed. Massive material assets will be mobilized internationally to improve the lives and increase the life-options for the refugees, but only a small minority will be repatriated to Israel.

One cannot exaggerate the existing support for such an agreement. It will enjoy the support of all countries (with the possible exception of the United States, Israel and Micronesia). It will receive overwhelming support by enlightened public opinion. Among the intelligentsia and the peace movement, such an agreement will be considered an important first step in addressing the grievous wrongs perpetrated against the Palestinian people. Such an agreement will be a blow to Israel’s privileged status and an example of the United States’ inability to ignore a strong and forceful international consensus.

Thus, the practical possibilities for a solution in the foreseeable future are linked, of course, to the two-state solution. No less an expert than Ariel Sharon (in an interview with Yedioth Ahronot, April 5, 2004) pointed out that there are any number of versions of this proposal: The European plan, the Saudi Plan, the Arab League Plan, the Geneva Accords, the National Registration. Sharon revealed that there was even a Yoska Fisher plan in the works. Sharon explained in the above cited interview that it was precisely to prevent a political vacuum that would encourage the prospects of any of these plans, he unveiled his Gaza disengagement plan.

However, the achievement of a two-state solution is very far from certain. Bush and Sharon have put in place a series of ‘dirty tricks’, chief of which is to smear the Palestinians and their leadership with the accusation of terrorism and corruption. One central activity in this campaign is the defamation of Yasser Arafat and his imprisonment under conditions unlike any other imposed on a universally recognized national leader. There is some room for apprehension that parts of the progressive public opinion in this country have been influenced by this campaign of degradation. One might ask how is it that here in Israel, where ‘our leader’ Sharon has been officially certified responsible for the mass murder of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla, not to speak of his predicament if he had to appear before any international court of justice, there is such sensitivity regarding the leadership style of Arafat. Sharon, under the cloud of a series of corruption scandals, one broader than the other, is still legitimized, while Arafat’s moral stature is questioned. Of course, Arafat should

not be immune from criticism by the left. But somehow things do get mixed up. It is not entirely clear that criticism from the left was always careful to disassociate itself from challenges meant to undermine Arafat's authority to represent the Palestinians and negotiate in their name. George W. Bush, the great reformer of our time, preconditions negotiations for peace on 'reforms' clearly aimed at weakening the Palestinian side. Isn't this the main point?

The Battle for Peace and Equality

The Givat Olga document stresses the vital importance of deep changes in Israeli society and mentality towards the recognition of the indigenous people of this country and their rights and the complete rejection of their dispossession. The battle for genuine equality and the abolishment of past and present injustices is, of course, an essential element in the battle for peace. However, there are a number of formulations on the question of peace between the two peoples that seem to suggest that peace between the two peoples is not on the agenda at all at this time. These formulations hint that peace is impossible until the progressive forces have won a decisive, total victory, over the prevailing belief structure of Israeli society. This approach seems to suggest that de-Zionization and the cancellation of the Jewish character of the state are preconditions for Israeli-Palestinian peace. There are indications in the Givat Olga Document that might be seen as supporting of this super-radical set of priorities, which maintains that there can be no peace with the Zionist entity or with Israel as a Jewish state. The fight for equality appears in this reading of the document as a diametrically opposed alternative to any two-state solution. Instead of the political battle for a change in Israeli policy, it is suggested that we shoulder the incredibly heavy burden of deconstructing the ideological and legal structures that prevent the Israeli public from recognizing the Palestinians as brothers and sisters and establishing a community based on respect and reconciliation.

Thus, on one hand, the Givat Olga document can be read as an impassioned plea to all of us to do battle with the rising tide of discrimination and repression that has engulfed our country. As such its main sentiments are laudable. However, it can be read as promoting a counter approach to the question of peace, one that seeks to cancel out and erase the fight for Israeli-Palestinian peace, as a practical issue in our time. Since the undersigned feels that most of the people who signed the document have not decided, despite their disappointment and disgust over so many current developments, to reject the possibility of a two-state solution, he has, for the sake of clarification, submitted the aforementioned supplementary paragraph to be read as an integral part of the Givat Olga document.

The Dangers of Purity

There are many serious political drawbacks stemming from the idealistic, but hopelessly naive, thesis that peace is possible only after the achievement of absolute equality between the two peoples. The first relates to the significant difference between the time frame for the realization of very concrete political goals and the time involved in the achievement of utopian, abstract goals in the fight for pure justice. The battle for a two-state solution, with all of its drawbacks, is a current political issue, and its realization can be conceptualized without total, cataclysmic transformation of political and social reality. It requires a shift in the given obtaining power structures. Though this is far from an easy feat, it does not require the revolutionary transformation of the region. We can identify the progression of the required steps towards peace.

On the other hand, the spiritual, psychological and ideological transformation of Israeli society, is not a process with identifiable features and stages. The forces that can conceivably be mobilized for such transformations hardly exist, even on the most theoretical level, and barely lend themselves to conceptualization. Paradoxically, the only reasonable thing that can be said about the progress towards a saner and more humane Israeli consciousness, is that such process would be assisted by a serious reduction in armed confrontations between the two people, and (one fears to state the obvious) a two-state solution that might improve relations on the ground between the two peoples.

But the difficulty is not only the extreme juxtaposition between the very real world politics of the battle for peace and the rather opaque perspectives of a grand project that aims, no less and no more, at the total transformation of a national consciousness and its ideological infrastructure. The introduction into modern political debate of the idea that there can be no peace in the region because of the Jewish nature of Israel would be an unexpected gift to Israeli reaction. One of the Sharonite's last holds on public opinion is the accusation that those who are battling for peace between Israel and Palestinians are really out to cancel the Jewish nature of Israel. The totally dubious thesis that peace cannot be made with Israel because it is a Jewish state can do irreparable damage to the forces for peace and the most loyal friends of the Palestinian. Is it suggested that, in the name of 'truth' that those, all over the world, who fought against the occupation admit that they failed to understand the dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state can alleviate the sufferings of the occupation? It is sincerely hoped that most of those who signed the Givat Olga document do not subscribe to the reading, or interpretation, that might support such clearly absurd and destructive conclusions.

Despite the difficulties of the hour, a world wide coalition for sanity and reason continues to work for a speedy end to the occupation through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. This will not solve all the problems. However, it would be a major advance beyond the current situation of violent and unrestrained Israeli repression, and halt the sufferings and degradation involved in unending cycles of violence. It would mean international recognition for a new modicum of coexistence. This is not quite the establishment of the kingdom of true justice over the earth, but it will have to do for now.

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