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Elba Haid, President & CEO
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Comment



EHUD BARAK, Israeli prime minister, demonstrates how to make and fly a paper airplane to visiting Israeli schoolchildren in his office a few weeks ago. Now that the religious Shas Party has pulled out of his coalition, he's adopted policies intended to appeal to Israel's large number of secular Israelis. *Israeli photo.*

Read my lips, says Barak

He's now trying to appeal to more secular voters, but may not be able to pull off change of direction

Israelis find Ehud Barak a bit confusing. Two months ago, with Shas in his coalition, he presented the Knesset with a bill entrenching the exemption from military service for ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students.

COMMENT ON ISRAEL



By SHIRA HERZOG

Two weeks ago, with Shas out of the government, he announced a "secular-civil revolution", that could dramatically redraw the political balance on religious-secular relations in the country. One week later, the same principles were redrafted by Shlomo Ben-Ami, a senior Labor cabinet minister, under the heading of a "civil-social reform".

In its most recent version, the platform contains several related principles, carefully drafted to appeal to a broad spectrum of Israelis, including the traditionalist center. These include a basic curriculum of general studies in all state-supported schools, including the ultra-Orthodox ones; no preferential treatment for ultra-Orthodox schools in allocation of resources; an effective dismantling of the ministry of religious affairs and transfer of its functions to municipalities; and a key element - completion of the process leading to an Israeli constitution that will incorporate freedom of religion.

Loyal supporters see this as Barak's opportunity to move on an agenda that he believes in, but could not implement, as long as he was dependent on Shas, a party with an Orthodox bent. Cynics see this as a transparent ploy to regain support in the secular centre, and more importantly, the Russian immigrant community. Both groups acknowledge that Barak is preparing his domestic agenda for the next election campaign, which will likely take place next spring.

Ironically, just as on the peace issue, a strong majority of Israelis support the policies in the plan, while support for Barak himself is at all-time low.

The writer lives in Toronto and also comments on the Middle East for the Canadian Jewish News.

A right to return

Many 'Palestinians' immigrated there from other countries

As of this writing it appears that the sole obstacle to peace between Israel and the Palestinians is the problem of Jerusalem. If a solution for that can be found, it would appear that a blissful regional peace is in the offing. Nothing could be further from the truth.



Muslim worshippers wait to enter the Majlis Gate to pray on Jerusalem's Temple Mount. The Arabs claim there are 4.5 million Palestinian refugees - most from areas in Israel, and they demand the right to return there. *IPPA photo.*

INSIDE ISRAEL



By CARL ALPERT

border lines will have to be drawn in the division of the West Bank and some Jewish settlements dismantled - a task which under present circumstances will require Herculean effort and goodwill on both sides - there remains the problem of the Arab refugees, which has temporarily been pushed aside.

To the Palestinians this is an issue no less vital than that of Jerusalem, and it will test to the utmost the possibility of any true relationship between the two peoples.

Most reliable estimates place the number of Arabs who fled the country at 600,000. The Arabs today maintain that the number of refugees, with natural increase, now amounts to four and a half million, most of them in various camps in and around Israel, where the host countries refused to integrate them locally. Their existence constituted a precious weapon in the struggle against Israel.

Their demand: The right to return. Arrangements would be acceptable for the payment of compensation to those who elect not to go back, but the fundamental and basic demand is recognition of the right to return for all four and a half million. This has been a major element in the Palestinian program, and if it seems to have been brushed aside in the present stage of negotiations, watch for it to emerge in full strength and fury in the near future.

No words need be wasted in noting that fulfilment of this demand, even in part, would spell the end of Israel as an independent Jewish state. It is simply impossible. The cause of the refugee problem has been thoroughly analyzed. They fled the country when the war broke out in 1947, and even if they were in some cases compelled to leave, it was the direct result of an aggressive war against Israel proclaimed and waged by the neighboring Arab states. That war was a great mistake, as the Arabs now realize, but the creation of the refugee problem was one of the painful results which they brought upon themselves.

But there is another factor as well. Every visitor and traveller to the country for hundreds of years always reported that the land was desolate and with a sparse population. It was when the Zionists arrived and began to create a local economy that Arabs began

to drift into the country. As Professor Atalia Ben-Meir points out in the latest issue of *Nativ* (an Israeli periodical comparable only to *Commentary* in the U.S.), during the period between 1922 and 1939, immigration of Arabs from neighboring countries swelled. During these 17 years, the Arab population of Haifa increased by 216 per cent, of Jaffa, by 134 per cent, and of Jerusalem, 97 per cent.

At a time when the British were limiting Jewish immigration, they were unwilling or unable to prevent the seepage across the borders by people attracted by better economic conditions. One commentator has pointed out that to this day, Arab family names here are indication of their origins: Haurani, from the Syrian hills of Hauran, Masri, from Egypt, Turkeman, from Turkestan, Turk from Turkey and many others.

These are the ones who now call themselves Palestinians, with the right to return. As David Bar-Ilan has pointed out, there was a time when *The Jerusalem Post* was called *The Palestine Post*, the national orchestra was the Palestine Philharmonic, and even a component of the United Jewish Appeal was the United Palestine Appeal. Only the Jews of the country identified themselves as Palestinians, and served as such in the British army. The Arabs, from the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem down, refused to be known as Palestinians. Only later did they discover the public relations value of identifying themselves as the Palestinian people.

Joan Peters has written a book, *From Time Immemorial*, which draws upon reliable statistics to show how erroneous is the claim that the Arabs of today are descendants of those who had lived here for centuries. Advocates of the Arab cause have sought to belittle the book, but a reputable and distinguished historian like Barbara Tuchman said of the Peters work: "This book is a historical event in itself, a discovery that has lain in the dark all along until its revelation by Joan Peters' unrelenting research..."

Even UN resolutions 242 and 338 refrain from making a direct reference to Palestinian refugees, but rather refer to refugees as a generic term, observed Professor Ben-Meir.

These are facts which should be borne in mind when the Arabs return to their demand for the right to return. *The writer lives in Haifa, Israel.*