

Israeli news

News analysis:

Labor, Likud gaps narrow on talks with Palestinians

By DAVID LANDAU
JERUSALEM (JTA) - Six months after a bitter election contest, the Labor and Likud parties may not be all that far apart on how to approach the final-status talks with the Palestinians. The talks, slated to be completed by May 1999, will address the thorniest issues confronting the two sides, including the status of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, Palestinian statehood and Palestinian refugees. Resumption of the final-status talks, which opened ceremonially several weeks before Israel's May elections, is expected after an agreement is reached on the redeployment of Israeli forces in Hebron.

Anticipating that a Hebron agreement is near, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his Cabinet December 6 that they would soon begin discussing Israel's positions in the final-status negotiations. When that time comes, the Cabinet may well be discussing a series of proposals worked out jointly by representatives of the governing Likud and opposition Labor. Knesset member Yossi Beilin, who recently an-

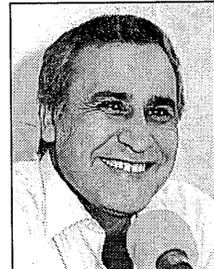
nounced his own candidacy for the Labor leadership, and Likud Knesset faction Chairman Michael Eitan have been heading up talks with a view to mapping out areas of agreement between the two parties. Beilin said during a visit to Washington two weeks ago that he expected an agreement to be finalized in the next four to six weeks. Political observers in Israel who believe that there is the possibility of forging common ground between the two major parties cite the imminent redeployment from most of Hebron as a watershed.

The talks with Labor carry an implied threat from Netanyahu to hardliners in his government: If you do not shape up, we can dump you and make common cause with Labor leader Shimon Peres.

On a note that goes through, they say, Likud will have irretrievably compromised its key doctrine of a "Greater Israel." Beyond Hebron, they continue, the question then becomes one of how much and West Bank land Israel should keep. This is the very same question that Labor



YOSSIBEILIN, Labor Knesset member: Heading talks with Likud, to map areas of agreement. (ISRANET photo.)



MOSHE KATSAV, tourism minister: Claims Labor, Likud could reach agreement on West Bank with ease. (ISRANET photo.)

itself has been grappling with ever since the 1967 Six-Day War. Therefore, according to this viewpoint, there has been a dramatic narrowing of the gap between the two parties on the core issue.

This perspective was recently given public support by Tourism Minister Moshe Katsav, who declared that the two parties could reach agreement over the West Bank with relative ease. On the issue of settlements, for example, there possibly could be room for accord between Israel's two main parties - given the Likud's new readiness to give up parts of the West Bank. Beilin, aided by the team that secretly negotiated the original Israeli-Palestinian accords in Oslo, reached in 1995 an informal but detailed accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization's No. 2 man, Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu-

Mazen, on a permanent-status agreement. Israel was to withdraw from most of the West Bank, but annex areas close to the pre-1967 border that contain many of the settlements and most of the settlers. Settlements in more outlying areas would either be dismantled, relocated into the retained settlement blocs close to the border or remain under Palestinian rule. This informal agreement was concluded just days before Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated last November, after which the plan was effectively shelved. It remains, however, the only agreed basis for a permanent settlement.

It is predicated, however, on two conditions that would presumably be difficult for many in the Likud to swallow: * It calls for full Palestinian statehood in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The Likud is committed, at least for now, to oppose Palestinian statehood. Nevertheless, some observers point to Netanyahu's recent comparisons of Andorra and Puerto Rico to the potential makeup of a future Palestinian entity.

* This, they say, proves that he is pragmatic enough to accept that the permanent-status talks must satisfy in some measure the Palestinians' demand for sovereignty while assuring Israel's security. * The annexation of the settlement bloc was to be set off, in the Beilin-Abbas agreement, by Israel's ceding some of its sovereign soil alongside the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians. Here, too, some observers say that the Likud of today is much more pragmatic than in the past - and much more pragmatic than some of its current coalition partners.

A land-for-land deal enabling Israel to hold onto the major settlements could yet find supporters among Netanyahu's camp. If there

is indeed ease in forging a consensus on talks with the Palestinians, what keeps Labor and Likud apart, according to Katsav, is the Golan Heights. Other politicians and political observers, however, maintain that there is much flexibility in Netanyahu's ostensibly hard-line position on the Golan.

They cite a recent flurry of diplomatic messages from Jerusalem to Damascus, all to the effect that the Netanyahu government is ready to resume the long-stalled talks with Syria - though not necessarily from the position at which the previous Labor government broke them off in March. Labor, according to the Syrians - and according to the Likud - was ready to trade all the Golan for a full peace with Damascus. The Likud is not ready to do so. But neither is it clinging to the "peace-for-peace" position, opposing territorial compromise, originally put forward by the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir when the talks with Syria began in 1991.

SOME LESS OPTIMISTIC
In contrast to these essentially optimistic assessments, there are many political pundits here who dismiss such views as pie-in-the-sky. They maintain that Netanyahu's call for resuming permanent-status negotiations immediately after a Hebron redeployment are

intended only to avoid the further West Bank redeployments called for in the Interim Agreement. These observers maintain that Netanyahu believes he can effectively halt the peace process after the Hebron redeployment and let the Palestinian entity crystallize in its current condition: a series of autonomous municipal enclaves surrounded by Israeli troops.

The Labor-Likud discussions on final-status talks come against a backdrop of ongoing speculation regarding the prospects of forming a national unity government. This speculation has been encouraged by key figures in both parties, though there are also vigorous opponents of the idea in both camps. Netanyahu's own sentiments are unclear. Some observers see the Likud's ongoing flirtation with Labor designed to soften any recalcitrance among hard-liners within the current governing coalition.

The talks with Labor carry an implied threat to the hard-liners: If you do not shape up, we can dump you and make common cause with Labor leader Shimon Peres. The other reading is that Netanyahu wants to achieve maximum consensus among his partners as a way of strengthening his hand in subsequent talks with Labor.

He would then retain the option of keeping some or all his partners in an expanded unity government. Peres, for his part, does not conceal his desire to join a unity government.

Hebron spokesman freed from jail

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The spokesman of Hebron's Jewish community, who was arrested December 6 during clashes between settlers and Israeli border police, has been released. Despite police protest, Noam Arnon was freed December 8 after the Ashkelon Magistrates Court said evidence submitted in the case did not prove that he had assaulted a police officer. Police had said Arnon attacked an officer who tried to prevent him from removing a sign placed by the Islamic Trust at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Arnon told the court that the officer attacked him. After Arnon's arrest, dozens of Jewish settlers confronted Israeli border police at the site. A Jewish child was lightly hurt in the disturbances.



NOAM ARNON

Cabinet member visits Hamas leader

JERUSALEM (JTA) - Public Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani visited last week jailed Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The ailing Hamas leader said he was receiving good treatment from the two doctors assigned to him, and requested that his wife and 11 children be allowed to visit him more frequently. Kahalani reportedly said Yassin's release should be considered in light of his medical condition. Yassin was jailed for life by Israel in 1989 for planning terrorist attacks and kidnappings of Israeli soldiers.

Israeli news

Israeli Bedouin soldier killed by Hezbollah bomb in Lebanon

JERUSALEM (JTA) - An Israeli soldier was killed and another was wounded when a roadside bomb exploded during the weekend in southern Lebanon. Mohammed Hujirat, 27, a Bedouin tracker from the Galilee, was killed December 7 while leading a patrol in the eastern sector of the southern Lebanon security zone. Another tracker who was with him suffered light to moderate shrapnel injuries.

An initial inquiry conducted by the Israel Defense Force found that the bombs were set a day or two before by members of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement and that the charges were detonated by remote control. Several other explosive devices, which did not go off, were found in the area.

The inquiry indicated that the Hezbollah members had come from the nearby Tivnit village. In retaliation, Israeli forces shelled the area, causing the injuries of seven Lebanese civilians. Lebanon filed a complaint against Israel with the United Nations and called for a meeting of the five-nation monitoring group that was established in April to oversee a cease-fire ending cross-border fighting at the time between Israel and Hezbollah.

A senior Israeli military source said in response that Hezbollah, not Israel, had violated the truce by opening fire on the IDF from civilian areas. Under the terms of cease-fire, the two sides agreed not to launch attacks from or target civilian areas on either side of the border.

Search for IDF soldier widens

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The family of an Israeli soldier who has been missing for more than three months met last week with Jibril Rajoub, the head of Palestinian security forces in the West Bank. Shlomi Edri, the brother of missing soldier Sharon Edri, said Rajoub had assured the family that Palestinian officials would continue their efforts to determine what happened. "We were given no promises, just that the contacts which have been until now will continue," Edri told Israel Radio. "There was a good atmosphere at the meeting, but it was also disappointing, because nothing is different."

Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai has said the army believes that Sharon Edri is being held against his will. Edri disappeared in August after leaving an army medical clinic in central Israel. His family has not received any word from him. Nor has any group claimed to have kidnapped or murdered him.

Palestinians blame terrorism on Netanyahu's peace policies

NEW YORK (JTA) - The Palestinian Authority said last week that the fatal attack on an Israeli family in the West Bank was caused by Israel's refusal to implement the Israeli-Palestinian self-rule accords. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu obviously has not "learned the lessons of last September's tragic events," the Palestinian statement said, referring to the Palestinian rioting that erupted after Israel opened a new entrance to an archaeological tunnel near the Temple Mount. No condemnation of the December 11 terror attack

Terrorists kill two Israelis

(Cont. from page 1.)
Among the outstanding issues is what powers Israeli troops will have to pursue suspected terrorists into the self-rule areas. Aharon Domb, the director-general of the Yeshiva Council of Jewish settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, urged Israel to use its right of hot pursuit to search for the terrorists who carried out the December 11 attack. "The Palestinian Authority must not become a shelter for terrorists," Domb told Israel Radio. "Today it is for attacks on Beit El, tomorrow it will be everywhere else." Israel has protested in the past to the Palestinian Authority over its failure to extradite suspected terrorists who fled to the self-rule areas. In May, two Israeli high school students were killed in a terrorist shooting near Beit El. The family of one of those boys, David Boim, issued a statement December 11, demanding that Arafat hand over the terrorist responsible for their son's murder. The December 11 shooting drew sharp reaction from coalition members, who called for the immediate suspension of negotiations with the Palestinians. The opposition called for the talks' continuation.

Iran, Syria beef up support to Islamic Hezbollah fighters

JERUSALEM (JTA) - A senior Israel Defense Force officer was quoted last week as saying that Syria is increasing its cooperation with Iran in providing military assistance to the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. Citing an unnamed IDF intelligence source, the Israeli daily Ma'ariv reported last week that an "unprecedented" supply of arms has been flown from Iran into the Damascus airport. From there, trucks transport the weapons to Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon. Hezbollah has "control of over 90 percent of South Lebanon, including villages which were not previously run" by the Iranian-backed Shi'ite movement, the source was quoted as saying. The arms shipments from Iran have enabled Hezbollah to "entirely rehabilitate itself" to the level of arms it possessed before the 16 days of cross-border fighting with Israel that erupted in April, the source said.

Hezbollah had recruited hundreds of villagers in southern Lebanon to provide the organization with intelligence information, the source added.

"Our answer to these murderers," he said, "is that we are staying here. We are building here. We live here." Netanyahu said December 11 that Israel viewed the attack as a serious matter and that the Palestinian Authority must not give shelter to terrorists and child murderers. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine claimed responsibility for the attack, which occurred on the 28th anniversary of the front's founding. The group vowed to carry out more attacks. The terrorists fled to nearby Ramallah, which is under Palestinian self-rule. In its statement, the Palestinian Authority said, "For quite a long time, Palestinian officials and those in the international community have voiced their concern about the possibility of a strong popular reaction to the increasing Israeli measures on the ground, especially on the illegal settling activities being implemented by the hard-line Israeli government."

Netanyahu's government, "by contrast, has turned its back on these calls of warning," added the statement, which was posted December 12 on the Web site of the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Information.



Jerusalem mayor under pressure to resign
Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert (L) November 27 hosting Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma in the Mayor's Office in the Jerusalem Municipality. Copyright: ISRANET. Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert is under pressure to step down until the end of any judicial process that will determine if he is guilty of aggravated fraud, falsifying corporate documents, tax code violations and violating the Party Funding Law. All this is alleged to have happened when he was treasurer of the Likud Party in 1988. Olmert denies that he was responsible for any wrongdoing during his time as Likud treasurer. It was business as usual November 27 for the mayor when he entertained President Leonid Kuchma, who was in Israel on an official three-day visit.

Israeli Cabinet approves more cuts in 1997 budget

JERUSALEM (JTA) - The Israeli Cabinet has approved additional budget cuts of about \$550 million. The government already had approved a total of \$1.6 billion in cuts from the \$64 billion 1997 budget. The Knesset must approve the budget by the end of the month. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the additional cuts were essential to reduce the deficit and get the economy back on track. "If we don't cut, let there be no doubt that we will pay with a deterioration in our standing in the financial markets and in our credit rating," the prime minister was quoted as telling the Cabinet on December 9 before the vote. Many of the additional cuts will come in the areas of education, social welfare and housing. Foreign Minister David Levy, Tourism Minister Moshe Katsav, Interior Minister Eli Suissa and Labor and Social Welfare Minister Eliahu Yishai voted against the additional cuts in the 14-4 Cabinet vote. A compromise was reached to lessen the cuts in education to only 0.6 percent.

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