

Uri Avnery: U.S. Must Change Its Policy

Israeli peace leader Uri Avnery held a conference call on the Mideast situation with the Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), on Aug. 17, 2006. The moderator was Charles Lenchner, the New York State coordinator of the PDA and a former assistant to the national campaign manager of the Dennis Kucinich for President campaign. Lenchner introduced Avnery and asked all the questions. The discussion was taped, transcribed, and slightly abridged by EIR. An audio version can be found on the PDA website, <http://podcast.com/show/3399/>.

A brief biography of Avnery appears in the accompanying box.

Q: What's happening with the Israeli peace camp right now? What are their positions?

Avnery: The radical peace movement in Israel has protested against this war from the very first moment. We have demonstrated against the war from the first day, in Tel Aviv. We believe the war was superfluous, senseless, hopeless, right from the start. It had no aims which could be achieved by the means at our disposal. It was doomed from the first moment to lead to nowhere.

The other parts of the peace movement, like the movement Peace Now, have supported the war, and only in the last two or three days have started to object to the way it was conducted, but we were and still are against the war, as it was, totally.

Q: What is the main difference of opinion between you and Peace Now regarding the war? Why did they support it, and why were you so quick to oppose it?

Avnery: Well, as I said, Peace Now has supported the war, and its outstanding intellectuals, like the writer Amos Oz, had come out openly, and clearly, in favor of the war, justifying it, around the world, while we said, right from the beginning, this war is wrong, it's wrong in its conception, it's wrong in the way it's being conducted, it will not do any good to Israel, nor to anyone else, and I think events have proved that this was right.

Q: Is public opinion changing in Israel, now that the guns have stopped firing?

Avnery: There is a general feeling of dissatisfaction in Israel right now. Everybody is demanding a board of inquiry to investigate what went wrong militarily and politically, but the

real question is, what was wrong with the basic conception which led to this war. The situation as it is now may create an atmosphere that will push Israel into another war, because if you say what was wrong with this war, was that we didn't hit strong enough, or not soon enough, then the conclusion is, let's wait for the earliest opportunity to, I quote, "finish the job," instead of looking for the basic reason why was this war wrong, why was it bound to go wrong, and what should we do to make another war impossible by attending to the roots of the conflict.

The roots of the conflict in the north, is that we are occupying a big chunk of Syria, namely the Golan Heights, since 1967, and because of this, Syria has an interest in not letting Israel achieve any calm on its northern border. In this sense, Hezbollah is also serving Syrian interests. What we need is a peace solution in the north, which includes Lebanon and Syria, including Hezbollah, is to remove the basic reasons for the unrest we have had now for many years on our northern border.

Q: Is it likely that the Israeli political establishment is going to make moves to renew negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights?

Avnery: We need negotiations with Syria, but all Israeli Prime Ministers, since Barak, have refused even to start negotiations with Syria. And Mr. Barak, as you may remember, had negotiations with Syria, arrived at the point where he nearly had a peace agreement with Syria, and in the very last moment, he put an end to the negotiations. The basic problem here for any Israeli government, namely, is in the Golan Heights you now have a lot of Israeli settlements, and you need a government strong enough and determined enough to decide that it can remove settlers from the Golan Heights in the framework of a peace agreement.

We don't have a government like this. The Israeli government now, the one headed by Mr. Olmert, is now so weak that it could not possibly dare to do anything of that sort.

Q: What are the factors that could lead to a pro-peace government, either before an election or after an election?

Avnery: One of our problems at this moment is that there is no viable alternative to this government in Israel. The Knesset, which has been elected only four months ago, doesn't allow for any other government. So this is what keeps Mr. Olmert alive, his government alive yet, because no one knows what would happen if Mr. Olmert would be pushed out of office.

Q: Some activists in the United States are asking what they can do to help pressure Israel to make more steps toward peace, to be more ready to compromise with the Palestinians or the Syrians. What kind of pressure from outside of Israel is likely to be most productive or least productive?

Avnery: The United States has pushed Israel into this war.

The United States has cooperated with Israel in all stages of the war, in all phases of the war. Israel would never have *dared* to start this war without the consent of the United States. Throughout the war, the United States has done everything possible to prevent a ceasefire, and I have a strong suspicion that the United States would have really liked Israel to provoke Syria into a war, as a part of the general move to enlarge its confrontation with Iran.

I don't think that the United States will exert any pressure on Israel to come to an agreement with the Syrians—except if there is a major change of policy in Washington, D.C.

Q: Do you think that the call by some peace activists to boycott Israeli cultural figures or divest from Israeli corporations—do you think those measures are likely to be productive against Israel the way they were against South Africa? The way they were helpful in getting rid of apartheid in South Africa?

Avnery: I think this comparison with South Africa is misleading, because the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are quite different, and circumstances are different. In South Africa, the solution was to create a unified state in which

the black majority would rule democratically. The solution of our conflict here could not possibly be one state in which Palestinians and Israelis live together. This is an unrealistic idea. What everybody is calling for now is a two-state solution. The state of Israel living side-by-side with the state of Palestine. This is what my friends and I have proposed more than 50 years ago, when we were a handful of people all over the world who believed in this idea, and this has now been adopted by practically the whole world, including the United States, Europe, Russia, and the United Nations.

So this is what we have to do: If we want to put an end to the war between Israel and the Arab world, then we must first of all solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem. The solution is clearly to allow the Palestinians to set up their state in all the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in Arab East Jerusalem.

This I think is the solution which everybody knows is the right one, but for reasons for which we are to blame, but not only we Israelis, this solution does not come about. Instead we have a very brutal war in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, which has been overshadowed by the Lebanon war, but

Uri Avnery: Peace Warrior

Uri Avnery is a man of principle, who, at every point in Israel's history, acted on the basis of doing what was moral, and could achieve justice for all the human beings concerned. Throughout his long political career, he has organized friends, "enemies," Knesset members, and American Jews, among others, to also act morally. (Gush Shalom, the Israeli Peace Bloc which Avnery heads, has posted an extensive biography of Avnery at <http://www.avnery-news.co.il/english/uri2.html>, of which the following is a condensation.)

Born in Beckum, Westphalia, Germany in 1923, he and his family moved to Palestine in 1933, just after Hitler came to power. His family was very poor, and Avnery left school at age 14 to work. At 15, he joined the Irgun, the underground force fighting the British colonialists, but he left the group after three years because of its anti-Arab attitudes, its terrorist methods, and its right-wing ideology.

Avnery's first political group, in 1946, "Young Palestine," contended that the new Hebrew nation was "part of Asia and the natural ally of the Arab nation." A year later, he published a pamphlet calling for "an alliance of the Hebrew and Arab national movements in order to liberate the common 'Semitic Region' . . . and create a Semitic

community and common market, as part of the emerging third world." He used the term Semitic in order to avoid the colonial designation of "Middle East."

He served in the 1948 war as a combat soldier, and his reports from the battlefield were published in *Ha'aretz*. These reports were collected into a book that became a bestseller, but a follow-up book, *The Other Side of the Coin*, which described the war atrocities and the expulsion of the Palestinians, was boycotted.

Avnery was severely wounded just before the war ended. After a long convalescence, he joined *Ha'aretz* as an editorial writer, but left because he was not allowed to say what he thought, especially about the Ben Gurion government's expropriation of Arab lands. He then started his own mass-circulation magazine, *Haolam Hazeh*, which aggressively attacked the Israeli establishment, exposing political and economic corruption, and proposing alternative national policies. It advocated a secular state, equal rights for all citizens, and, since the 1950s, the creation of a Palestinian state.

Perhaps the most telling compliment paid to Avnery was the accusation by a right-wing ideologue that Avnery had "poisoned" two generations of Israeli youth, turning them toward an ideology of "integration in the Semitic Region." He was also labeled "Public Enemy Number 1," by Israel's secret service chief; his editorial offices were bombed several times, wounding staff members, and he himself was ambushed and had both his hands broken.

has not gone away. It's going on all the time—before, during, and after the Lebanon War.

Q: Some of us read that Israel can't make peace with the Palestinians right now because there's no one to talk to, and they've elected a government that is against the very existence of Israel. How do you feel about that?

Avnery: I think that this is a stupid idea, because the Palestinian people is there. They have elected a government. With this government, you must negotiate. When you are playing football, you cannot appoint the opposite team and the opposite coach. You have to play with the team which is in the field. If the Palestinians have—for reasons which we don't need to go into, but which are perfectly understandable—if the Palestinians have elected the Hamas movement as its leader, then we have to negotiate with Hamas, as much as we have to negotiate in the north with Hezbollah.

It's no use to demonize the other side, and say we can't talk with them because they are like this, or that. We have to negotiate with whoever is leading the Palestinian people, and I don't care a damn who he is. What I care for is what terms

Avnery created a new political party in 1965, and gained a seat in the Knesset the same year. In 1969, his party gained two seats. During his years in the Knesset, Avnery made more than 1,000 speeches, and served as a beacon for justice. Golda Meir was so irritated by Avnery that in a Knesset speech she announced, "I am ready to mount the barricades in order to get Avnery out of the Knesset."

As an advocate for Palestinian independence and a two-state solution, Avnery was at first attacked by the Palestine Liberation Organization, but by 1974, as the PLO position changed, he was holding secret meetings with PLO officials. In 1977, he joined with other peace groups to form a new party, and again served in the Knesset in 1979, giving up his seat two years later for an Arab colleague.

Avnery first met with Yasser Arafat at the height of the battle of Beirut in 1982, and subsequently met with him several times. The Gush Shalom group grew out of a Jewish and Arab Israeli protest to expulsions of Palestinians in 1992. In recent years, Avnery and Gush Shalom have held hundreds of joint Israeli-Palestinian demonstrations against settlements in the Occupied Territories, house demolitions, and land confiscation.

Avnery's regular commentaries on the peace front and the crimes of the establishment are available on the Gush Shalom website.

—Marjorie Mazel Hecht

can we achieve.

Hamas is ready to negotiate. I can say this from personal knowledge because I have conducted contacts with the leadership of Hamas. They are ready to negotiate, and we must come to terms with Hamas on the same basis as we should have come to terms with Fatah and Yasser Arafat.

Q: Can you say something more about the relationship of the Israeli peace camp with the Palestinians after the election of the Hamas government?

Avnery: Well, we had the same difference of opinion as we had about the Lebanon War. Peace Now and this part of the peace movement has refused to negotiate with Hamas. As my friends and I and the radical peace movement have said, as I said just now, we must negotiate with Hamas, because Hamas has been elected. We cannot choose the Palestinian leadership. The Palestinian people have elected both Mr. Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) as its President, and Hamas as its government, and we must negotiate with any or both of them. It really does not make a big difference.

The question is not with whom we negotiate. The question is what do we want to negotiate about. Are we ready to relinquish the Occupied Territories, the territories which we have occupied since 1967. Are we ready to give them back? Allow the Palestinians to create a real, viable Palestinian state within the borders of 1967, or not? If we are not ready to do that, then it's not really important with whom we do *not* negotiate, and with whom we do *not* reach agreement.

If we are ready to do that, we shall, and we must negotiate with anyone whom the Palestinians accept as their leadership. Otherwise, it is stupid to conduct negotiations with somebody who cannot deliver. The only force which can deliver is the force which has been elected by the Palestinians.

Q: Isn't there a risk that if Israel returned the West Bank, that there would be rockets fired against its cities, as there is today in Gaza?

Avnery: There are rockets in Gaza because the war is going on. Rockets are a part of the war. We sent our airplanes to destroy houses and kill, assassinate, Palestinian leaders, and they sent rockets. That's what the war is all about. It's the same as we had in Lebanon. We bombarded Lebanon almost back to the Stone Age, and they sent rockets against our towns and villages. This is war. We are not talking about the situation of the war, we are talking about peace. When you have peace, you don't get rockets.

Q: What kind of activity from the Israeli peace camp is most likely to help sway public opinion there? What's most productive for Gush Shalom and your allies on the left?

Avnery: Our job is to convince public opinion. As I said, at this moment, there is a general dissatisfaction with the war in Lebanon. People realize that we did not win the war. This by



Rachel Avnery

Uri Avnery (center, with white hair) at July 22, 2006 Gush Shalom demonstration against the war in Lebanon. "We have demonstrated against the war from the first day, in Tel Aviv. We believe the war was superfluous, senseless, hopeless, right from the start."

itself is a remarkable fact, because we have the fifth strongest army in the world, and this huge military machine has not been able to overcome a few thousand guerrilla fighters of Hezbollah. But the feeling is that something is wrong, that we have to look for new perspectives, and our job is to turn this mood into a general acceptance of the fact that we must negotiate, that we must make peace, both in the north and in the south, both with Lebanon and Syria, and with the Palestinian people.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to say about the United States role in keeping the conflict going on between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Lebanese?

Avnery: I think the whole policy of the United States government in the last few years is wrong. It rests on a disregard for what is happening in the Arab world, in the Muslim world in general. I think the Iraq war was a terrible fiasco. It's leading to more and more bloodshed. It's very damaging to the interests of the United States. And I think what the United States is doing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resting on the same misconceptions and ignorance.

I would like the United States, for its own good, to completely change its policy throughout the Middle East and especially as far as Israel is concerned.

Q: Are there any contacts between the Israeli peace camp and any Lebanese organizations or personalities.

Avnery: No, I cannot say that. Perhaps we are to blame,

because the last years we have so totally been occupied with trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem, that we did not really get involved in the Lebanese problem. Perhaps we should have done so, but it looked until now that on the northern border, nothing dramatic would happen, while things are happening all the time between us and the Palestinians. It looked much more urgent, and more important—I still think it's more important and more urgent—but we should have perhaps also have tried to come to terms with some of the leadership in Lebanon.

You know that I met Yasser Arafat in 1982, at the height of the battle for Beirut, and perhaps my friends and I should have tried to establish some contact with the leadership of Hezbollah. Maybe—I don't know. This is something which we can think about, but it concerns the past, not the future. I think if there is an opportunity to have this contact with diverse

parts of the Lebanese political scene, I think we should do so, but this is becoming even more difficult after this war.

Anyhow, any one of our listeners at this moment, who want to know more about the Israeli peace movement can easily open our website, www.gush-shalom.org.

Q: I have one last question, which is, one of the problems we run into as an organization inside the Democratic Party, trying to take a position that is very outside the party's mainstream, is that we are being "anti-Israel," or that we are in some way less interested in the welfare of both sides, but only in the welfare of Palestinians. How would you respond to that as an Israeli war veteran and patriot?

Avnery: Well, we are doing our job, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, or easy or difficult. And of course, nothing is more difficult than to demonstrate against a war while the war is going on. Emotions run very high, and in a war, the public always, in every country, always tends to rally behind the government, supports the government. And so when we were marching through the streets of Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem, and Haifa, during the war, demonstrating against the war, it is quite a lot of physical and moral courage for our people to do so.

I suppose in the United States, it was the same about the war in Iraq. It was difficult to demonstrate against the war in Iraq on the first day of the war, and I suppose those people who did, deserve all the respect for their courage, which can be given to them.