

Beilin in Washington Pushes for Peace Plan

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Yossi Beilin, the head of Meretz Yachad, the leading pro-peace opposition party in Israel, spoke at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 9, giving an impassioned and very well-reasoned perspective on a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the larger Middle East crisis.

Beilin began his presentation by reviewing the deep frustration of pro-peace activists over the current state of affairs. He presented several very concrete initiatives that could move rapidly towards a two-state solution, but first he made the more general argument that the fact that there are weak governments in Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority, should not be held up as an excuse to do nothing. In fact, Beilin argued, weak governments, like Israel's post-Lebanon war Olmert government, or the Palestinian Authority's post-Hamas election Abbas government, have nothing to lose. Therefore, since they have already lost the political support of the mass of their people, why not take a bold initiative for peace?

Beilin pointed out that the Syrian President, Bashar Assad, has made it clear that he wants to negotiate a peace deal with Israel. So far, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is balking, and has refused to open talks, in part because of pressure from Washington not to negotiate with terrorists. Beilin assailed the idea that there should be preconditions on peace talks, pointing out that former Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and even Benjamin Netanyahu, negotiated without preconditions.

Beilin ridiculed the Bush Administration's refusal to engage in any diplomacy with Syria, and pointed out that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's last trip to the region was a total fiasco, because she would not talk with Damascus, Hamas, or Hezbollah.

'No Need to Start From Scratch'

The second half of Beilin's opening remarks were directed at the opportunities for a final settlement. "There is no need to start from scratch," he said, reviewing the series of peace negotiations that followed from the 1991 Madrid peace talks. He said that the most fair and comprehensive agreement was the one worked out by Bill Clinton in the closing months of his Presidency, but that the Bush Road Map and Oslo Accords also offered concrete steps to peace, which he itemized precisely. The third option, which Beilin



Aviel Luz

*Yossi Beilin:
Israel's
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has advocated, involves the convening of a Madrid II conference. Madrid I was a great success, he said, because there was nothing to vote on; all the key agreements were hammered out in advance of the conference. Beilin concluded by saying that if the Bush Administration decides to invest the last two years of the Presidency on an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, Bush should appoint a special emissary to move it to fruition. But, he emphasized, if the United States is not interested, then the regional parties must take it upon themselves—as was the case with Oslo and with the Israel-Jordan peace agreements.

The first two questions from the floor, both from *EIR*, dealt with the economic dimensions of peace and the prospects of a broader regional peace agreement, also encompassing a solution to the mess in Iraq. Beilin acknowledged the importance of an economic benefit from peace, but noted that Shimon Peres had argued for years that the economic cooperation had to precede the peace agreement, and this had not worked out. He did not dispute the vital role of economic growth and cooperation, but said the situation is such now that a two-state solution must be achieved. Beilin also commented that he saw the arrest and jailing of Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti as a gigantic mistake by the Israelis: He should be released from jail now, Beilin said, even though he was probably the architect of the intifada.

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Beilin also lamented the appointment of Avigdor Lieberman to the Olmert cabinet, noting that such a racist in Israel is “bizarre,” and equating him with France’s Jean-Marie Le Pen and Austria’s Joerg Haider, who appeal to a xenophobic, terrified portion of the population.

Interview: Yossi Beilin

William Jones and Jeffrey Steinberg spoke with Beilin in Washington on Nov. 9.

EIR: What has been the reaction among Israelis to the proposal for a new Madrid peace conference? I know that you have put forward the proposal and other people have given it some support.

Beilin: I cannot say that there has been a lot of enthusiasm about a new Madrid conference. There is a will to make peace and the question is, how you are going to make it? . . . Madrid is a technical issue; it is not a substantial one. What I can say is, there is some support for it, but I must admit it is not overwhelming.

EIR: Do you think this would dovetail with some of the other proposals out there, such as the Abdullah Plan, which is now being revived by many of the moderate Arab countries?

Beilin: The Abdullah Plan is now being taken more and more seriously than before, I believe. And if there is an international conference, one of its phases might be the Abdullah Plan.

EIR: A few days ago there was a proposal by Martin Indyk calling for an “axis of peace” against the “axis of evil.” What he was essentially saying is that the U.S., Europe, the Sunni Arab states, and Israel should ally and line up against Iran, possibly in support of U.S. military action against Iran. And I worry that war in Iran is still on the mind of some people in Washington, and they’re putting “Israel-Palestine” and other things on the table along with the desire to get de facto support for a military strike against Iran. I was shocked that even Akiva Eldar [of *Ha’aretz*] and the *al-Hayat* Bureau Chief here were giving some support to this idea, that there is some credence to a military operation against Iran that may have to be agreed to.

Beilin: I do believe that any military action should be the last resort, and I believe that we have so much to do before such an idea gains credence.

EIR: Do you think there will be greater support in the new Congress for the Madrid proposal?

Beilin: Maybe. I believe that the Democratic Congress will be more enthusiastic about peace in the Middle East and the international conference might be an idea accepted by the majority.