



The Former Israeli Peace Camp: Trouble Coping with Reality

Photograph by Cynthia J. Kobl

Peace Now claimed that settlers lived in caves near Nablus in order to attack passing Arabs

By David Bedein

Shortly after the Israeli election in February, Amos Asael, veteran left wing columnist for *The Jerusalem Post* was asked whether he would define himself as a “former peace activist.”

Amos retorted that he is part of the “former peace camp.”

The ideology of that “former peace camp” had long advocated that the Israeli government cede the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for a peace deal with representatives of the Palestinian Arabs. Their motto was “territories for peace.”

That “peace now” formula was dealt a fatal blow during the Camp David negotiations in the summer of 2000. It was then that Barak offered Yasser Arafat 92% of the West Bank and Gaza along with the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, an idea which was soundly rejected by Arafat and the PLO.

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Senior Israeli negotiator, the Chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, Dan Meridor, told me that the PLO resisted the generous “peace now” offer of the Israeli negotiating team, since Barak would not give Palestinian Arab refugees the option to return to their homes and villages from 1948. Meridor mentioned how the senior members of the Israeli negotiating team, most of whom emanated from the “peace now” movement, had universally assumed that the PLO would welcome the “land for peace” offer. Meridor described just how surprised the dovish delegation was to discover that the Palestinian delegation was serious about its demand for the “right of return.”

The concept of “land for peace” first entered the mainstream of Israeli political parlance after it was endorsed by IDF Intelligence Chief General Aharon Yariv following the Yom Kippur War, after Yariv successfully negotiated a cease-fire with Egypt at

the famous #101 kilometer post. This agreement would pave the way for the Sadat visit and formal territory for peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1979.

Yariv, however, was prophetically skeptical about the chances for success of the current negotiation process with the PLO. Shortly before his death in 1994, Yariv told me that he feared the Oslo process because he favored “territory for peace,” not handing over “territory before peace.” And Yariv was the uncle of then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

With the demise of the “peace now” formula at the Camp David summit, there were those who pronounced premature eulogies of the “peace now” movement and its allies.

However, in October, following the outbreak of riots, senior Peace Now activist Janet Aviad dispatched a wide-ranging proposal to members and supporters of her organization. She called for a \$675,000 budget to focus the energies of the Israeli public on what she viewed as the main impediment

remaining in the way of peace, the Israeli Jewish “settlers” of Judea, Samaria and Katif.

In late October, after receiving more than \$100,000 from the Americans for Peace Now, Peace Now in Jerusalem ran ads in all the major Israeli papers, and, for the first time, in Palestinian Authority papers, in which they declared that the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza remained the greatest impediment to peace. With the influx of journalists as a result of the riots, Peace Now initiated tours of the settlements for journalists, stopping off near Nablus to show underground caves in which they claimed that settler families were living for the purpose of staging surprise attacks on passing Arabs. Peace Now confirmed these activities, only after being confronted with the pictures taken of such caves and testimonies of journalists who had been fed that line from Peace Now tour guides.

These Peace Now ads called for the Israeli government to unilaterally dismantle at least 40 of these Jewish communities as a confidence building measure for peace.

In early November, Peace Now convened a press conference in which it presented its updated statistics on the expansion of settlements. Speaking on behalf of Peace Now, Ben Gurion University Professor Aryeh Arnon stated its passionate position that if Israel were to immediately withdraw from these 40 settlements, then the Palestinian Authority would stop the shooting — in the direction of Gilo in Jerusalem.

I asked Professor Arnon if any official in the Palestinian Authority had ever made a statement at any time in Arabic to express his willingness to accept a two-state solution and to recognize the state of Israel at any time.

Arnon said that he could not answer that question.

I dispatched that same question to more than 100 agencies that have been involved in covering or researching the peace process: Does anyone have any record of any statement in the Arabic language at any time in which an offi-

cial of the PLO or the Palestinian Authority states their recognition of a two-state solution — in other words, of territories for peace? No organization associated with any peace organization or any section of the PLO or PA has any record of such a statement in the Arabic language which conveys recognition of Israel or the two-state solution.

Peace Now is not alone in its continuing campaign against the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Defining the settlers as colonists, the European Union allocated \$250,000 to the “peace now” campaign against the settlements.

To augment the effort to target settlers as the problem of the peace process, the

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EU commissioned the Israeli Human Rights Organization *Bitzelem* to report on “settler violence,” in which *Bitzelem* hired Arab staffers who interviewed Arab residents of the West Bank and Gaza. As a matter of policy, *Bitzelem* would not interview any Jewish residents of the West Bank or Gaza.

Meanwhile, in conjunction with Peace Now, the Rabbis for Human Rights has conducted an international campaign to expose Israeli West Bank settlers who they claim regularly uproot trees from Arab villages. This organization has conducted a campaign to raise funds for every tree that has been uprooted by settlers, and has

made regular appearances on CNN and BBC to advance the cause. Yet when these rabbis were asked if they can point to a specific time, witness or police complaint in which settlers uprooted Arab trees, they could not cite a single example of such. “We just know that this goes on,” said the spokesman for the Rabbis for Human Rights. The Rabbis for Human Rights were awarded the Abraham Joshua Heschel Award for their efforts in this regard.

Yet what ultimately upsets the Peace Now settlement apple cart remains that the official PLO definition of settlements includes any area where Israel placed its civilians in place of Arab civilians where Arab villages were overrun. That is in accordance with their understanding of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids a conquering nation from doing just that. In other words, the PLO definition of illegal settlements includes the Israeli cities, collective farms and woodlands that replaced Arab villages in 1948 — places like Ramle, Lod, Jaffa and Ashkelon.

For that reason, the Voice Of Palestine radio news described Netanya and Hadera as illegal settlements when bombs were detonated in these Israeli cities, both of which annexed neighboring Arab villages following the 1948 war.

Since the Palestinian Authority declared a “death sentence for settlers,” it would surprise many of the people in the Peace Now camp to know that most of the population of Israel now lives under the threat of a nascent regime that will justify, rationalize and condone the murder of most Jews in Israel, even if they do not live in the West Bank or Gaza.

Surprisingly, the Peace Now position has not been shaken. Their position remains that the way to peace is to cede the West Bank and Gaza to the PLO, even though the PLO does not accept any such formula for peace.

An icon is not easily broken, even though Israel’s peace camp has been transformed into an ideological dinosaur. 