

## Continuing Conflict

**Thalif Deen**

*[The president of the UN General Assembly, Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann blamed the UN for failing the Palestinians and denounced Israel's apartheid-like policy on the Palestinian people.]*

The President of the General Assembly, Father Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, dropped a political bombshell during meeting when he lashed out at Israel for its repressive actions in the occupied territories, including the recent blockade of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

"What is being done to the Palestinian people seems to me to be a version of the hideous policy of apartheid," he told delegates, during a meeting commemorating the "International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People".

A senior UN official told IPS: "I cannot remember any Assembly president so publicly vocal in denouncing Israel." D'Escoto damned both the Israelis and the United Nations for the plight of the Palestinians. "And he was on target," the official added.

"I believe," D'Escoto said, "that the failure to create a Palestinian state as promised is the single greatest failure in the history of the United Nations."

Nadia Hijab, senior fellow at the Washington-based Institute for Palestine Studies, told IPS that D'Escoto's comments are a welcome reminder of the reality on the ground, and "a valiant attempt to hold the international community responsible for its posturing on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and siege of Gaza."

Obama's position on Israel is harder to categorize. McCain charged late in the campaign that in 2003 Obama spoke at a dinner honoring Rashid Khalidi, a distinguished Arab-American professor of Middle East studies at Columbia University. The charge was true. Obama and Khalidi became friends while Khalidi was teaching at the University of Chicago and Obama was working as a community organizer. Yet at AIPAC's national convention this year Obama told the audience that all of Jerusalem must remain part of Israel, and one of his top foreign policy advisers is Dennis Ross, a former Clinton administration envoy to the Middle East who now works at the distinctly Zionist Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Stephen Zunes, professor of politics at the University of San Francisco and Middle East editor of *Foreign Policy in Focus*, points out that Obama was critical of Clinton's unconditional support for Israel's occupation and called for an even-handed approach to peace negotiations. Obama has also acknowledged that "Israel must make difficult concessions for the peace effort to start;" and as recently as last March said, "Nobody is suffering more than the Palestinians." Zunes concludes that "As president [Obama] may well be better than his more recent Senate votes and public statements would indicate."

But even if Obama hopes to change US Middle East policy, there is no guarantee he can do so, given such political realities as the financing of congressional elections by special interest groups and the power of the Israel lobby. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert recently provided an illuminating example of how political necessity constrains a leader's policy decisions. In an interview on Sept. 8, the formerly hard-line Israeli declared that if Israel wants peace it must withdraw from nearly all of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. He dismissed as "megalomania" the idea of an Israeli attack on Iran.

In a blistering reference to Israeli defense strategists, Olmert said, "With them it is all about tanks and land and controlling territories and this hilltop and that hilltop. All these things are worthless." He went on to admit that he had been wrong for 35 years,

and said, "I was unwilling to look at reality. We are a country that has lost a sense of proportion about itself."

A year ago Olmert's words would have caused Palestinians and many Israelis to celebrate. Instead, his change of heart was a sad reminder of Israel's dysfunctional electoral system. Olmert could say what he did only because he has resigned and will not run for re-election. Several years ago former president Gerald Ford also spoke out in favor of a two-state solution and an end to Israel's occupation. When a reporter asked him why he had not done so while he was president, Ford answered, "Because I was president."

Obama is likely to find himself similarly hobbled by a lobby composed of right-wing Jews and Christians, and a powerful defense industry. He faces the additional problem of taking office just when Israel is also in the process of choosing a new leader. Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni replaced Olmert as head of the Kadima party last September, but proved unable to put together a majority coalition in the Knesset. The ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which had been part of Olmert's coalition, refused to join with Livni unless she agreed to take Jerusalem off the negotiating table. Since this would have ended the possibility of peace talks, she refused.

Another religious party, Yahadut Hatorah, also turned her down, so, with too few votes in parliament to be sure of a comfortable majority, Livni was forced to ask for new elections. According to current polls, Likud chairman Binyamin Netanyahu, an extreme rightist who opposes any concessions to the Palestinians, is likely to win.

Livni's dilemma was the product of an electoral system that gives small religious parties disproportionate power in the government. Referring to Shas' demands, her chief negotiator Tzachi Hanegbi said Livni had "decided enough blackmail." Shas not only exacts generous subsidies from the government for religious purposes, it is a powerful spokesman for ultra-Orthodox settlers.

According to the Foundation for Middle East Peace's September-October *Report on Israeli Settlement*, Shas member Ariel Atias told Olmert last April that "unless you approve 286 new housing units in Beitar Hit, all of our Knesset members will just get up and leave... when the next no-confidence vote comes." Two days later, Olmert approved the construction. The Report also noted that settlement construction has almost doubled in the past year, and the government recently approved a new settlement in the Jordan Valley.

A growing number of messianic settlers regard themselves as subject only to the will of God, who gave them the right to all of the land of Israel. Extremists continue to take over West Bank hilltops. If the army tries to evacuate them, they vandalize Palestinian property (part of a policy they call "price tag") and attack soldiers with stones and clubs. On Sept. 24 a pipe bomb went off outside the home of Ze'ev Stenhell, a Hebrew University professor and outspoken critic of West Bank settlements. Fliers were found on the scene offering US\$300,000 to anyone who killed a member of 'Peace Now'.

Olmert charged the right-wing settlers with creating "An evil wind of extremism, of hatred, of malice, of violence, of running amok, of breaking the law, of contempt for the institutions of the state [that] threatens Israeli democracy." On Nov. 3 the departing prime minister said public funds no longer would be given to unauthorized outposts - an admission that the government had been subsidizing them despite promises to the United States. Olmert would not have dared to take such action if he intended to remain in office.

Obama will face daunting problems in attempting to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace. He may have more success, however, in getting US troops out of Iraq, and finding an approach to the Taliban that does not rely on military force. Neither of these acts will be easy to accomplish, but he can count on Iraqi and Afghan support if he undertakes them. —*TWNF*