



Israel lurches to the Right

Interview with Uri Avneri

Uri Avneri is the editor of *Haolam Hazel* which is the most popular political weekly in Israel. It was established soon after the formation of Israel and has a long-standing anti-establishment reputation. He has been an MP for several periods, on the last occasion for the left-wing Zionist group Sheli. He was one of the first Israeli figures to seek contact with the PLO. During the war against Lebanon, he went to West Beirut and interviewed Yasser Arafat, an act which received widespread international publicity and almost resulted in his arrest in Israel. He is a leading member of the Israeli peace movement. Here he is interviewed by Avishai Ehrlich, an Israeli Marxist.

How would you evaluate Begin's objectives vis a vis the occupied territories, and what are his chances of accomplishing them?

Begin has a very consistent policy for which he has been struggling all his life. His is a vision of a greater Israel. Its boundaries, which have been imprinted in the consciousness of his movement for several generations, are the boundaries of the original British mandate Palestine, namely, the state of Israel as it was before 1961, the West Bank, Gaza and all of Trans-Jordan. This is Israel as Begin understands it. I don't think he has conscious plans for conquering Jordan but he is determined to absorb the West Bank and Gaza into Israel. This is often called annexation, but here it is really absorption. Annexation would mean to annexe the people who are living there, but Begin wouldn't dream of doing that. It's not a question of giving citizenship to another million and a half Arabs — he wouldn't entertain this because the dream of the greater Israel goes with the dream of the Jewish state. The Jewish

state of greater Israel means either the expulsion of the Arabs from the territories, which is in people's minds but very rarely expressed, or keeping the Arab population in the greater Israel in status of non-citizenship. A population without civic rights, without national rights, perhaps, at best, with some human rights. This is the real concept of Begin.

What are his chances of achieving this?

By default, yes, because no one is able to stop him. The official opposition in Israel, the Labour Party, is ineffective because basically it subscribes to many of the assumptions of the Begin concept.

What do you see as the key differences between them, if there are any?

Very few. You could make a case for saying that Begin is actually a direct continuation of Ben-Gourion. Begin's heritage, the concept of Israel as it is now, was imprinted on the state from the very beginning by David Ben-Gourion. But Labour is not as doctrinaire as Begin is, not as fanatical. It is more pragmatic, more sensitive to American pressure than Begin is. It is more aware of the dangers inherent in a state where 40% of the population is composed of different people who hate the state. In this respect Labour is, you might say, more moderate. In practice this does not mean very much because you don't see any distinct break between the policies of the Labour Party and the policies of the Likud government. When Likud took over from the Labour government there was no break in any policy. Everything which has been done since then —

in Lebanon, in the West Bank and elsewhere — was actually a continuation, perhaps a more extreme continuation, of the Labour line.

So how do you explain the crisis of the Labour Party and its causes? Why is the Labour Party in such a crisis. And what is the social base of Begin?

The Labour Party is the victim of the demographic and social changes in Israel. The Labour Party is the party of the Ashkenazi upper crust. Under the Labour regime hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Arab countries have been brought to Israel. They are now the majority in Israel and they hate the Labour Party. They hate their guts. This is a very profound, nearly racial, hatred. They identify the Labour Party with the white, Ashkenazi establishment, with the privileged. To them it is responsible for their humiliation, their discrimination, their lower status. For example, the kibbutz, which was once a symbol of progressive Israel and of socialism, has for them become the symbol of exploitation and upper class discrimination. The working class in Israel hates the Labour Party. This is a fact. Now this is a peculiar kind of working class, not organic, but imported and de-classed. These are not the sons of workers, but the sons of shopkeepers, of intellectuals, of Jews from the oriental countries and they have all the symptoms of a de-classed society, uprooted, dispirited. They have lost their own traditions and cultural heritage, indeed they despise them. They were looking for something to give them an identity and express their resentments and Begin was exactly that. Not because Begin was oriental — no one could be less oriental than Begin, who is a typically Polish, Jewish, gentleman.

Why didn't the resentment express itself in the creation of oriental parties, or in a vote for the Left?

This is a good question. I think it is part of their being de-classe of having lost their own authentic elite, either it was destroyed or it went somewhere else. I am very curious as to why this happened, but the fact is that they found themselves one day in Israel, without any authentic elite whatsoever. Begin symbolised two things for them which were and still are very important. First of all there was the hatred towards the Labour Party. In this context, Likud was also in a way, de-classe because it was deprived of legitimacy under the Labour regime. In principle, for many years, it was excluded from any kind of government coalition, together with the Communists. This was a famous tactic of Ben Gourion for many years. So, by being outside the system, or half outside this system Likud became a good candidate to represent this class. The second and perhaps more profound reason is that these people, deprived of identity and humiliated, were and still are desperately looking for some identity. And belonging to the master race, the Jewish master race, being superior to the sub-human Arab race, gives them a kind of identity and dignity they could not achieve in any other way. They are therefore chauvinistic — not least because they believe they have been mistreated in their native Arab countries. But this is wrong — first, because they were not and second, the case of German Jews has shown that you can be mistreated and yet love your country and its native culture. There is another factor, it is not just hate of the Arab culture, it is a kind of self-hatred, they are part of this culture and don't want to be. They have accepted the values of the Ashkenazi upper class because it legitimises them. It is a way of saying: 'I may look like an Arab, I may talk like an Arab but I am not sub human, I am now part of the master race and I am a proud Jew and Israeli, I am equal to the biggest and the

mightiest among my people.' It is Begin's demagogic style which directly appeals to this class.

How do you view the growing potential split or polarisation in Israeli society?

I don't believe it is inevitable but we have to recognise the situation as it is today. There is a polarisation. It could lead to an Israeli fascist movement, everything is ripe for that in Israel, or it could lead in a different direction. There is a new oriental intelligentsia growing up. There is a second generation which already has quite deep roots in Israeli society. Hopefully we might see a reversal that, with growing dignity, with growing self assurance, these symptoms will disappear and something different will come forth. It is possible. I would not try to assess the chances of this happening.

Do you still see Israel as a democratic country or not?

That depends very much on what you call Israel. First of all the problem is to define the regime in Israel. It is like a cream tart, it is a question of layers. There are four different regimes in Israel today. You have one regime for Jews in Israel. This is certainly a democracy which can compare favourably with many other democracies in the world, including Britain, better in some respects, less good in others. Certainly the whole episode of the enquiry on the massacre in Lebanon showed the strengths of the democratic spirit and institutions which some people say do not even exist in many Western countries. This is one layer. Then there is a different regime altogether for the Arabs in Israel proper (pre 1967). Formally they are citizens of the state but practically they are deprived of many rights, including political. Then you have a quite different regime for the Arabs in the occupied territories who are deprived of all rights completely both national and human. You can say that this is a colonial regime at its worst. Then you have a different regime still for the settlers, the Jews in the occupied territories who are beyond the law, who are above the law, who are a group completely free to do whatever they want to do. They are not bound by any law whatever. They can kill, they can build homes, they can pay no income tax, they can do anything they want. Now, you have all these together in Israel. Some Arabs see Israel as a colonial state and some Jews can see it as the best democracy in the world, there is no contradiction here; they are speaking about two different layers of Israel.

When you were talking about the danger of fascism in Israel, did you mean fascist groups or something else?

Yes, you do have fascist groups in Israel today. Fascist groups who openly advocate fascist policies. You have a group led by the so-called 'Rabbi' Kahane who advocates forcible expulsion of the million and a half Arabs from the occupied territories and from Israel. By any standard, people would call this fascism. If you talk of fascism it depends on how you define it. If you take fascism as we know it — a hatred of foreigners, a love for war, a love for violence and a hatred of democracy — then there are fringe groups in Israel who are real fascists like the Kahane — Jewish Defence League. Some are semi-fascist like the Gush-Emunim and the Tcheya movement. The Tcheya movement would probably be called neo-fascist in any country. But these are fringe groups, although now legitimate fringe groups. They are interviewed on television, on the radio, they openly advocate their views. I believe there are fascist elements in every society. The question is when do they become dangerous? They need a certain set of circumstances.

You probably analyse them economically, I might analyse them in a different form, but you need a certain set of circumstances, a breakdown of society, for fascism to become rampant. I can imagine such a thing happening in Israel because, when you have this great mass of declassé people, who are living in this perpetual slate of grudge, dissatisfaction and humiliation and if you have a potential leader like Sharon, then you can imagine a situation, which is not there today, but the symptoms are evident, where these can suddenly breakthrough — a completely new force which would become unstoppable. This has happened in other countries. I will not say that this must happen, I will not say it is ever likely to happen, but the possibility is there. The events of the last few weeks, the first political murder in Israel — a hand grenade thrown at a 'Peace Now' demonstration — and subsequent ugly mass manifestations are the scenes which must give us food for worry.

Well, you have mentioned 'Peace Now'. The peace opposition in Israel, who does it include? Does it pose an alternative to the major parties?

The peace movement is a very loose term. It is really three different things, one inside the other. I would say you have a small nucleus of really serious peace movements in Israel in which I would include all the groups who advocate peace between Israel and the Palestinians, a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza and a readiness to negotiate with the PLO. Public opinion polls indicate these tendencies receive the support of up to about 15% of the population. They are small and diverse groups which have shown that they can mobilise quite a sizeable number of people for demonstrations. The first big demonstration against the war, which these groups were responsible for, mobilised 20,000 people, which is quite remarkable. We also have a much larger peace movement called 'Peace Now' which is not a movement in the sense of having members, but a small group of militants in an umbrella organisation around which everybody else can congregate into action. If the mood is right, it can organise great masses of people. One week after the demonstration I spoke about it mobilised 100,000, which was a big step forward, and after the massacre they mobilised 400,000. The trouble with 'Peace Now' is that it does not have any clear political programme.

Does it accept Arab members?

They don't have Arab members. They are dependent upon the public moods. If the mood is right, it can mobilise a great mass of people; if the mood is not right it cannot mobilise even a small mass. So that is one problem. The second problem is, because of this, they are dependent to a very great extent upon the Labour Party and Mapam, which gives the latter power over what they are doing. If they withhold their support then the demonstration will become much smaller. I think that they are fulfilling a very important function by just being this kind of umbrella movement with which everybody can operate but there are real limitations.

Do you see this movement developing into something more coherent?

Some of their people do think so, others hope so and others are totally against it. Of course it would immediately create a conflict of interest with the Labour Party and Mapam. It would deprive them of their support and so they avoid it. But, looking for possible future development, they are perhaps the intermediate stage of something new which could perhaps materialise in the future.

Why are these groups so disunited?

There are disagreements about the programme. Those people who say that speaking to the PLO is despicable, that this cannot even be considered, and those who disagree.

And is 'Peace Now' against speaking to the PLO?

Definitely against. Not in the sense that many of their key militants don't believe that it is a good thing. But they say it would create a rift in the movement, it would destroy their function which is to unite as many people as possible on certain issues. Beyond this I would mention the third part in the peace movement, the so-called radical element in the Labour Party and Mapam which have a certain importance. You could include them in the peace camp. After we met Yasser Arafat and there was a debate about it in the Knesset, the Labour Party put forward a speaker who was as bad as the Likud, maybe worse, and 17 members of the 50 including Abba Eban walked out of the hall.

What do you think about the PLO formula of the secular, democratic Palestine? Is it an adequate solution for the problem?

I think it's complete nonsense, total nonsense. It's as imaginary as anything in the world could be. It would mean for people who have been in total war for a hundred years, total hatred between them, overnight developing into good friends and becoming members of the same statehood — absolutely impossible. You're dealing here with two of the most nationalistic nations existing today in the world, you have here two people who for three generations have held total hatred for each other, who cannot even consider sitting at the same negotiating table. There is absolutely no possibility for this in any foreseeable future. Maybe in the very long term it is possible. But our job today is to put an end to the conflict which exists, which is catastrophic and this is a non-solution.

So, what is your reaction to the solution of the two states living alongside each other?

That is what I've been advocating for the last 35 years. I believe that they're not the best, but they are honourable solutions. By a process of elimination it is the only practical thing which is possible as a solution.

Will it solve, the problem of the Palestinians outside the occupied territories?

To a great extent, but not completely. You won't completely solve any problems but it will solve them to a large enough extent to increase the possibilities for the next stage. What will happen after this is anybody's guess.

Regardless of the nature of this Palestinian state? What if it is a Bantustan?

Why should it be a Bantustan?

Would not its inhabitants continue to work in Israel?

Why should they? If they want to, if they have to, but I don't see any reason why a Palestinian state could not be as flourishing as, say, Jordan. Jordan is a totally artificial state yet it has one of the most flourishing economies of the Middle East. Lebanon was a totally artificial state. Some could make a very strong case for claiming that Israel is an artificial state, but Israel flourishes

economically, no one knows how and why but it does. I think it will be viable and have many virtues. First of all, the Palestinians by now are certainly the most advanced Arab people, intellectually, educationally. I think it would be founded by other countries who have an interest in its being there, for self interest; like Saudi Arabia and those who fund Jordan today.

How do you think the two major parties in Israel will view the latest Palestinian National Council formulation, on the principle of confederation between Jordan and the Palestinian state?

Both parties are against it. It makes it easier for the Labour Party to swallow the idea of Palestinian nationhood. It was totally rejected by Likud. Unfortunately the resolutions of the conference were not good enough. A mish-mash of compromises which did not say very much. I can't say I'm satisfied with it. I don't think any Palestinian, any serious Palestinian can be satisfied with this. It was not as big a step forward as we all hoped for and expected. I'm sure it was much less than many Palestinians expected, judging from our conversations two weeks before, but it's another step forward at least: it's part of the development which could be quicker. It's much slower than the interests of the Palestinian people demand, I believe that time is running out. Things are being done on the West Bank which will be very difficult to unmake. I think the people who have been making these compromises in Algeria are not quite conscious of the urgency of the Palestinians' situation on the West Bank and Gaza. One problem of the PLO is that contrary to normal liberation movements they are not really based on the population of the occupied territories. They represent the population of the occupied territories but they are not really based on them. They are based on the Palestinian diaspora and this does create a certain distance from the urgency and feelings of the people under occupation.

Do you think the people of the occupied territories are more moderate?

They have a greater sense of urgency and they know that another option does not exist. It never really did, but now it is obvious, they do want a solution. I think they want a solution quickly. They are moderate because they know the only way to end occupation is to get the deliberation process moving and compel Israel to enter negotiations. There is no way to compel Israel except by influencing Israeli public opinion in Israel proper, and these people know it. They live close to the scene, they've got some understanding of what Israel is about and I think they have a greater understanding than the people who were in Algiers. Otherwise Algiers would have had a different outcome.

So, do you think that it is up to the Palestinians, especially now after Lebanon, to prove to the Israelis their peaceful intentions?

I'm not speaking now in theoretical terms, in terms of justice or not even abstract logic, in abstract logic it should be the other way around, but in actual practice in the same way that the Algerian war for independence was decided in French public opinion, as the Vietnam war was decided in American public opinion, this struggle will be decided in Israeli public opinion.

Not in the American public opinion?

Maybe yes, it could be, but this is much more difficult. If American public opinion could be changed about this, it would probably automatically alter Israeli public opinion too. There is certainly an inter-connection between these things but the great battlefield, to my



mind, is Israeli public opinion. I do think that Arafat and many people in the leadership of the PLO do understand it by now, at least they say they understand it. The trouble is that the Palestinians can only work in a consensus and convincing. 4 million Palestinians in a desperate situation, which is what it is, to make such gestures is rather difficult. I'm fully conscious of the difficulty of it, of the domestic situation. I don't envy Arafat's job but there's no other way I can see.

So what do you think he has to do?

I think that the big obstacle is the demystification of the PLO in Israel. Of putting an end to this demonology that we have in Israel about the Palestinians. I think we have made progress on this. I think our own actions have helped to create a different image. What has to be done is to convince people that peace is a serious proposition. We have here a very good example, whatever we think about Sadat's intentions and the outcome of his initiative there can be no doubt that Sadat, in 24 hours, created very big changes in Israeli public opinion.

What is the analogy? That if Yasser Arafat comes to Jerusalem the Israelis will agree to give Jerusalem to the Palestinians?

They probably would arrest him. But there are different ways of doing things. I mean one of the proposals initially was to invite an Israeli peace delegation to Algiers which would have made a very big change. It would probably have changed what happened in Algiers too. But the problem is that they are unable at this moment to make really big moves in this direction.

But is this not understandable? What is it that the Palestinians are being asked to recognise — that's the problem. It's not the same as for the Egyptians is it?

This is quibbling, semantics. They have to convince the Israelis that if there will be a Palestinian state, there will be peace, that this will be a real peace, not a continuation of the struggle. This has to be made clear, that's all.