

Prospects of West Asia peace deal brighten

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) NOV. 30. Israel's Parliament (the Knesset) has decided to dissolve itself and the major parties are trying to set the date for fresh elections to be held within the next six months. This development has ironically improved the prospects for an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. If such an agreement appears imminent, it could turn the coming vote into a different sort of exercise and could perhaps even induce a desire to reverse the decision to dissolve the House.

In a confusing turn of events on Tuesday, Israel's Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, suddenly announced that he was willing to go along with the Oppositions demand for a dissolution of the Knesset and the holding of fresh elections. If nothing else, the move has won time for Mr. Barak. Dates for elections are set through consultations between the two main parties and though both the ruling One Israel and the Opposition held their meetings on this subject on Tuesday itself it is unlikely that the elections will be held before May. There are a lot of compelling reasons to hold the elections at an earlier date, including the need to pass the budget not too long after January when it is traditionally presented. Howev-

er, political compulsions within the Likud make it unlikely that they will be ready for an election within less than six months.

While Mr. Barak is also likely to face a challenge to the leadership of his party, he has shrewdly moved to advance the date for primaries within Labour. His challengers are not likely to have sufficient time to organise themselves.

Having opted for elections, Mr. Barak knows that his best hopes for re-election lie in his ability to present his electorate with the outlines of a final deal with the Palestinians. It might not be possible for him in the current situation to actually sign a deal but Mr. Barak has vowed that he will continue with the negotiations. An agreement, even if it is not formally signed, which promises an end to the decades-long conflict, will

go down well with an Israeli public over 60 per cent of whom even in these turbulent days — opinion polls show — favour such a final deal.

So far, the Palestinian leadership has come out with pro forma responses to the developments in Israel... "that it is an internal matter" etc. However, the Palestinian leadership is better aware of the realities than anyone else. If the Likud should come to power (voted in because of the short-term consideration that they will be better able to contain the current spate of violence), it would mean the end of the negotiations for another four to five years. The Palestinian Authority President, Mr. Yasser Arafat, is 71 years old and neither he nor his people are going to have the patience to wait out a Likud administration.

The outlines of a deal have been

fairly clear after the Camp David talks and subsequent discussions. The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, will leave office very soon and both Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat have reason to think that on balance their respective interests will be better served through a final agreement than otherwise.

If such an agreement does come through, the election will be of the nature of a referendum. Mr. Barak had, in any case, promised that he would submit any agreement with the Palestinians for the people's approval. If he can come up with a deal that a majority of Israelis are likely to support, the election of a new Parliament will be of secondary importance. It is, therefore, likely that the calls for the formation of a national unity government might continue to be heard from the Likud.

THE HINDU

1 DEC 2000

Barak's clarion call

The Israeli Prime Minister used to be proud he was not a politician. It is a weakness of that country's war heroes who go into politics. Now that he is fighting for his political life, Ehud Barak still has to prove a few points before the voters are convinced, says ERIC SILVER



Ehud Barak: Countdown begins.

another man to whom he tried to dictate. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat knows that a Right-wing Prime Minister will not give him more than the Labour leader. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is trying to make them meet in Cairo soon.

But Mr Barak should not assume that the other proud old warrior will let him write the script for him, any more than he did at the Camp David summit in July.

(The author is The Statesman's Jerusalem-based correspondent)

brought Binyamin Netanyahu he is to reverse opinion polls, to power. Both the Likud leader which show Mr Netanyahu and his Labour successor were (busily preparing a comeback) flattered by a popular mandate, 14 percentage points ahead, he which they thought gave them a will need the cooperation of licence to make their own policies and ignore their political bases.

In the army, you earn your rank, then issue orders which your subordinates had better obey. In politics, ego reigns. Everyone has his own agenda. There is no binding chain of command. And, as Mr Barak may soon discover, you can be unseated not only by the voters, but by your own troops.

Yet he remains a fighter. His pugnacious Knesset speech served notice that he has not given up yet. As in the ill-fated negotiations with the Palestinians and the Syrians, he is going for broke: a peace agreement that will convince a conflict-weary electorate that he is still the best man for the job if

elect Prime Minister by 56 per cent of the nation, it has undermined him. "Mr Barak," wrote a political commentator, Sima Kadmon, in *Yedioth Aharonot*, "paid for his isolation. It was not only votes he was lacking. It was also friends." Her colleague, Nahum Barnea, said: "Mr Barak used to commend himself for not being a politician. Once he was elected, it became clear he was right."

It is a weakness of Israeli war heroes who go into politics. Yitzhak Rabin, another former chief of staff, was equally isolated during his first term as Prime Minister from 1974 to 1977. He, too, despised the devious skills of his new world. Like his assassinated mentor and model, Mr Barak thought he could do it alone. The illusion of invincibility, was compounded by the direct election of prime ministers, introduced before the 1996 campaign that

used to be - and

ap. When he finally to the parliament at 6 pm, he locked away with six of his He neither consulted, and Labour party s. They were as astonished when he and declared: "If you tions, I'm ready."

the kind of arrogance igned the pudgy ex- t, Israel's most deco- soldier, the nickname son." It worked in the Mr Barak was a brave ventive commander. But, ie 18 months since he was

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ent on the price of it is threatening to nd, with the cost of that the company ing pegged around r metric tonne. a power ministry To be viable, they liquefied natural any officials said Authority's LNG could only be

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40-16

WEST ASIA / HEAVY FIGHTING IN BETHLEHEM

5/12

Attempt to take over Rachel's Tomb?

JERUSALEM, DEC. 4. Heavy gunbattles raged overnight in what the Israeli army said was an apparent attempt by Palestinian gunmen to take over a holy shrine in Bethlehem.

Palestinians said the fighting broke out after soldiers and Jewish settlers attacked Muslim worshippers. The confrontation lasted hours and at one point, Israeli helicopters aiming at Palestinian gunmen fired two rockets at the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank, the army said.

Twelve Palestinians were injured, including two who were in serious condition with gunshot wounds, Palestinian hospitals said.

Tensions had risen in the Bethlehem area late Sunday when, according to the army, residents of the village of Hussan near Bethlehem threw firebombs at Israeli motorists driving along a nearby bypass road. An Israeli woman was slightly injured.

Later, Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers entered Hussan and opened fire on Palestinians who were on their way to the Hussan mosque for evening prayers. Palestinian witnesses said. The army said it shot and wounded a Palestinian who had tried to seize a soldier's weapon, but denied attacking worshippers.

Heavy fighting then erupted near Bethlehem's Rachel's Tomb,



DAVID AND GOLIATH: A Palestinian youth uses a slingshot to hurl stones at an Israeli tank during clashes at the Karni Crossing in northern Gaza on Sunday. — AP

where Jewish tradition says the biblical matriarch was buried. An army spokesman, Maj. Yarden Vatikay, said it was one of the most intense gun battles in more than nine weeks of fighting. The

sustained unrest has claimed nearly 300 lives, most of them Palestinian.

"We assume that it was an attempt to take it (Rachel's Tomb). We view this as a very serious in-

cident as this is a holy place for the Jews," Maj. Vatikay said.

On Monday morning, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, 35-year-old Palestinian Iman Al Azza surveyed the blackened rooms of his home's second floor. The rooms caught fire during the spray of Israeli helicopter gunfire. Al Azza's home is near an eight-story building overlooking Rachel's Tomb that is often used by Palestinian gunmen.

In nearby Aida camp, residents displayed bedsheets riddled with bullet holes and showed visitors the gaping holes in their roof tops.

Also on Monday, an Israeli settlement watchdog group said the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, had done nothing to restrict the growth of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Peace Now said that under his rule, the pace of construction was faster than under his hard-line predecessor, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu.

The group called for an immediate settlement freeze and the dismantling of all the settlements in the framework of a final peace treaty.

In Gaza, the army opened a new road to the isolated Jewish settlement of Netzarim. The army said it hoped to increase security for settlers because the previous access road had been a flash point for shootings and roadside bombs. — AP

THE HINDU
5 DEC 2000

IN DEEP COMA

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9/17
Mideast peace in need of revival

THE peace process in the Middle East is still officially on. But it appears in comatose condition, with a full-fledged insurgency having exploded. Palestinians have graduated from the slingshots of the earlier *intifada* to ambushing and shooting at Israeli soldiers and settlers, and Israeli tanks are now lobbing shells and missiles into Palestinian settlements. In the latest flare-up Israeli helicopter gunships fired rockets at a Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem. The camp is said to be harbouring gunmen who shot at Rachel's tomb, a Jewish shrine nearby. But the blame does not lie with them alone, as Jewish settlers have annexed land and expropriated Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, essentially on religious grounds. The breakdown of the Camp David accords, which foundered over the question of Jerusalem, have led to the present situation. What must have finally decided the issue was that Palestinians had expected substantial concessions over Jerusalem to salvage their honour, but these were not forthcoming. Yasser Arafat needs something to show to his people.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians' condition appears to be desperate, stranded as they are on strips of land on the West Bank and in Gaza, the approaches between which are controlled by Israel. The Israelis have not been reticent in exercising the stranglehold they have over the Palestinian economy, in order to exert pressure on Yasser Arafat — the latter has responded in kind by releasing militants held in prison. The situation is combustible and can be expected to lead to a lot more violence by militant groups whom Arafat seems unable or unwilling to control. The political signs are ominous in Israel as well, with Binyamin Netanyahu, who had stonewalled the peace process when in power, gaining in popularity in the run-up to elections to be held in May. A positive sign, however, is that Israel has agreed to cooperate with a US-led international inquiry into the violence which has left 300 dead, mostly Palestinians. Barak ought to follow with more substantive steps to swing a deal with Arafat, which can only redound to his credit during the campaign for re-election due shortly.

THE STATESMAN

9 DEC 2000

Barak to resign, polls expected in Feb.

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak gathered his cabinet on Sunday and planned to formally resign, a move that will plunge Israel into a wide-open election campaign at a time when violence with the Palestinians is raging.



Ehud Barak

Mr Barak, who gave no warning before his bombshell announcement in a Saturday night television address, will remain in office and plans to run for re-election in a ballot expected in early February. His decision to quit was widely seen as a tactical move designed to block his leading rival, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, from running for the post. Opinion polls give Mr Netanyahu a huge lead.

Under the current circumstances, elections for prime minister, but not for parliament, only sitting members of parliament can run for prime minister. "Israel is in a state of emergency," Mr Barak said in his address on Saturday. "Tomorrow I will advise the president of my resignation (and) in 60 days we will go to special elections for prime minister." Mr Barak was to explain his decision to the cabinet in a Sunday

morning session, and was expected to formally tender his resignation to Israel's President, Moshe Katsev.

As his political support dwindled in recent months, Mr Barak had reluctantly agreed to hold new national elections, which were expected in about four or five months. His decision to resign and hold elections in two months appeared to catch almost everyone in Israel off-guard. Meanwhile, Israeli politicians and analysts immediately began debating the possibility of amending the election law to allow anyone to run for prime minister.

Mr Barak said he would support such a proposal, but it was not clear whether such a reform could be passed in the short time left before the planned ballot.

"It will be impossible to change the law in time for 'citizen Netanyahu' to run. So (Barak's) move will succeed," said political analyst Hanan Crystal. The main opposition party, Likud, blasted Mr Barak, saying his move was a transparent ploy to block Mr Netanyahu. "To do all this in order to avoid a direct challenge from someone who is known to have high ratings in the polls is such a dishonorable act by a political leader that it will come back to haunt him," said Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert. "Barak tonight has finally made the last step toward oblivion." (AP)

ISRAEL / SIMULTANEOUS POLLS LIKELY

A referendum on peace talks: Barak

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), DEC. 10. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, today submitted his resignation to the President, Mr. Moshe Katsav.

Under Israel's election law, this resignation necessitates the holding of elections to choose a new Prime Minister within 60 days but by itself does not necessitate a fresh parliamentary poll. However, it appears likely that parliamentary elections will also be held since the Knesset is in the process of dissolving itself.

Mr. Barak has said that he will treat the Prime Ministerial election as a referendum on the negotiating position he has taken with the Palestinians though it is not likely that he will have an agreement before he faces his electorate.

It is difficult to understand the Israeli electoral law. The Prime Minister and Parliament are elected separately. But since the Prime Ministerial candidates have to be members of the Israeli Parliament, or Knesset, they have to be on the ballot for both the polls. However, should a Prime Minister resign then it is not necessary that the Knesset also be simultaneously dissolved. If the Knesset is dissolved, then both parliamentary as well as special Prime Ministerial elections have to be held.

There is a further complication. If a sitting Prime Minister resigns and calls for a special Prime Ministerial election, then only members of the existing Knesset can contest it.

The strongest candidate Mr. Barak could face would have been the former Prime Minister, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu (who has a massive lead over Mr. Barak in the opinion polls).



But Mr. Netanyahu is not a member of the Knesset since he resigned his seat soon after the 1998 elections.

Mr. Barak's most likely competitor would be the current leader of the Likud party, Mr. Ariel Sharon. Though Mr. Sharon currently has a narrow lead over Mr. Barak in the opinion polls, there is very little likelihood of his retaining this lead once the campaign starts.

Almost everyone is convinced that Mr. Barak tendered his resignation, and opted for the special Prime Ministerial election, so as to en-

sure that he would face the weaker of his two potential opponents.

However, Mr. Barak has said that he would have no objections if parliamentary elections are held at the same time as the special Prime Ministerial election. If the elections are held simultaneously, Mr. Netanyahu would be able to take part in the Prime Ministerial contest. The Knesset has already passed a bill calling for fresh parliamentary polls at its first hearing and since most members reportedly still support the dissolution of Parliament it is very likely that the two polls will be held at the same time.

While Mr. Barak may not be able to neutralise Mr. Netanyahu, he has effectively scotched any chance of a challenge from within his own left-wing camp. Other left-wing leaders like the Knesset Speaker, Mr. Avraham Burg, and the Interior Minister, Mr. Haim Ramon, who were considered as possible contenders, are not likely to queer the pitch for Mr. Barak in the two months that he has to meet the challenge from the right-wing.

Mr. Barak has said that he would ask his electorate to consider the vote as a referendum on the manner in which he has conducted, and proposes to conduct, negotiations with the Palestinians.

If Mr. Barak believes that he can go to his people and ask for their approval amid the worst clashes between Israelis and Palestinians that have taken place since 1948 then Israel's most decorated soldier is an even braver man than those who gave him the medals thought he was. But then, Mr. Barak had few other choices.

THE HINDU

11 DEC 2000

Palestinians not to await outcome

By Kesava Menon ^{HP-16}

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), DEC. 11. The Palestinians claim that they do not care who wins the elections that will be held in Israel, probably as early as next February. To an extent they are right when they point out that they have got the same whether the Israeli Prime Minister was Mr. Ehud Barak or Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu. Lots of promises that are hardly ever implemented on the ground. But the Palestinians know that there is a vital difference and it is difficult to see them sitting by idly while Israel sorts out its political mess.

Mr. Barak, like his predecessor, had entered into a number of agreements on the more mechanistic subjects that were dealt with in the interim phase of the Oslo-designed negotiations. Over the combined tenures of the two Prime Ministers, Israel had agreed to transfer a bit more land in the occupied territories to the control of the Palestinian Authority, agreed to open transit corridors between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, open airports and sea-ports and release some prisoners from Israeli jails. But when it came to the implementation of these agreements, Mr. Barak's record is only marginally better, and even what he has actually granted is chimerical. For example, the air and sea ports were opened during Mr. Barak's tenure but as events in the last two months have shown, the Palestinian ports stay open only when the Israelis permit.

Unlike external observers, who can afford to take a more generous view, the Palestinians do not measure the performance of Israeli leaders by the quality of the promises they make. They do so by measuring the quantum of implementation. By this yard-stick, the contrast between Mr. Barak and Mr. Netanyahu is not as stark as it can often appear to external observers. Therefore, from the Palestinian perspective, it does not really matter whether they have to deal with Mr. Barak or Mr. Netanyahu.

However, there is a crucial attitudinal difference. Mr. Netanyahu was plainly insincere, making promises to the Palestinians while simultaneously signalling to his right-wing supporters that he had no intention of doing anything about his promises. Mr. Barak, on the other hand, at least broke new ground and shook off some of the taboos that have constrained Israeli leaders in their dealings with

the Palestinians. For example, in announcing his decision to call a new election, Mr. Barak significantly dropped the traditional reference to Jerusalem as the eternal and unified capital of Israel. The implicit message that he will contemplate the sharing of sovereignty over Jerusalem is in line with previous conceptual breakthroughs such as Mr. Barak's readiness to vacate the Jordan valley and to dismantle some of the Jewish settlements.

Although Mr. Barak has shown far more flexibility than previous



Benjamin Netanyahu

Israeli leaders, his best offer falls far short of the minimum that the Palestinians can accept. While Mr. Barak's new position on Jerusalem is a bold step by Israeli standards, the offer is insignificant from the Palestinian perspective since it is absurd for Israel to lay any claim to Arab East Jerusalem.

Despite their disappointment with Mr. Barak, the Palestinians should be well aware that while they can make some headway in negotiations with him there will be no progress whatsoever if negotiations are to be conducted with Mr. Netanyahu (According to an AP report, Mr. Netanyahu has declared his candidacy for the Prime Minister's post in the ensuing election). The problem, of course, is that the Palestinians have gone beyond the point where they will be satisfied with "some" headway. At the same time, they know that the only chance for Mr. Barak to win the election is if he can go to his electorate with the outlines of an agreement which will put an end to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The conditions are ripe for some really hard bargaining. But the means and methods for conducting such a bargain are extremely difficult at the moment.

THE HINDU

12 DEC 2000

Follow the path George Bush and I trod in search of peace in West Asia

Moscow: It is almost a decade since former President George Bush and I co-sponsored the first West Asia Peace Conference in Madrid in 1991. We were filled with hope then. For the first time the two sides explicitly recognised the rights of the other to exist and vowed to work together towards peace. Now it seems that both sides have forgotten this promise. In my experience, when you take a step forward, your opponent is forced to do the same. Rather than continue with the impossible task of resolving

all the issues in advance, it would be more fruitful for the Israeli leadership to make a firm statement that they accept the right of Palestine to become a viable independent state and then to support the long-awaited declaration of this state.

The two nations of Israel and Palestine could then proceed to discuss the details of borders, and even the question of Jerusalem, on the basis of inter-state negotiations, with the help of international mediators as necessary. It should not be forgotten that once a people have their own state,

violence becomes a threat to security rather than a tool. Nothing less than the creation of their own state will satisfy the people of Palestine enough to put their trust back in the diplomatic process. There is currently a strong opposition on the part of Israel and the US to what is being called Yasser Arafat's desire to "internationalise the conflict" by demanding an international investigation into the violence, and a UN protection force to shield the Palestinians. I would rather call for the internationalisation of the peace process.

BY MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

In the Eighties the US attempted to solve the problem unilaterally. When these attempts proved futile, George Shultz visited me in Moscow to suggest that we work together. This opened the way to the Madrid conference. The discussions in Camp David in July should have been welcomed as the first real talks on Jerusalem. Instead, the diplomatic breakdown, ensuing violence and the US election, have highlighted the fact that the three-party

process is intensely vulnerable to both the pressures of domestic politics and accusations of partiality. We need to involve more players, and adopt a transparent approach less likely to fall hostage to domestic politics. The recent return to arms has also made it painfully clear that peace based only on diplomatic efforts can never last long. There must also be a safety net of economic, infrastructure and other interdependencies to serve as a backbone

for peace. We need a "Marshall Plan" for West Asia to develop the region, reduce the inequalities that are a source of so much frustration. This should, in no way be seen as an exercise in charity, as any success in resolving the conflict in this strategically and economically vital part of the world, and building long-term international cooperation and stability, will remove the cost of the conflict. In this regard, I strongly believe that water could be a natural vehicle for peace in West Asia. Therefore, rather than deter us, this

tragic deterioration of the political process has given new resolve to the work of Green Cross International, the environmental organisation of which I am president. Whatever the political climate, the people of this region need to drink water and to grow their crops.

I was greatly heartened by meetings which I had with Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Mr Arafat and King Abdullah II of Jordan earlier this year, in which all three agreed that solutions to the region wide water scarcity

cannot be arrived at unilaterally. The shared water sources could provide an avenue for mutually-beneficial cooperation in order to meet the essential water and food needs of the people. It also eliminates, or at least alleviates, one of the major security concerns in the region. And it could lead to a united international initiative to build a lasting peace in the region.

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV was the last president of the former Soviet Union
By arrangement with the International Herald Tribune

THE ASIAN AGE
14 DEC 2001

W. Asia peace: U.S. may step in again

12/12 HD-12
JERUSALEM, DEC. 16. After 11 weeks of violence, Israelis and Palestinians are exploring the possibility of resuming peace negotiations, and may again call on the U.S. to play the role of mediator.

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators may meet next week in Washington to discuss the conditions for renewing talks on a political settlement, said the U.S. State Department spokesman, Mr. Richard Boucher.

Seven years of painstaking negotiations were suspended after the fighting broke out at the end of September.

Since then, 325 people have been killed, the majority of them young Palestinian men.

The two sides will have to overcome the mistrust that has been generated by the worst violence since Israelis and Palestinians began regular talks in 1993.

Six Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces yesterday in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Minor stone-throwing clashes took place today in Hebron, on the West Bank, and the Palestinian areas remained tense.

At today's funeral for Noor Abu Safi (22), who was killed a day earlier, women ululated and men chanted, "God is great," as the body was taken from Shifa hospital and through the streets of Gaza city.

The ongoing violence had cut high-level contacts between Israelis and Palestinians over the past month.

However, the Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. Shlomo Ben-ami, met into the early hours yesterday, and more discussions are expected in coming days.

"What we are doing now is making a joint effort to reduce the violence and create the conditions for the resumption of the negotiations," Mr. Ben-ami told Israel television last night.

Mr. Ben-ami outlined to Mr. Arafat the "red lines" Israel cannot cross in a final peace agreement with the Palestinians, the television reported.



A Palestinian boy kisses the hands of Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin during a rally in Gaza City on Friday. More than 25,000 people gathered in a local stadium to mark the 14th anniversary of the founding of the Islamic militant group Hamas. — AP

However, Israel may be willing to grant the Palestinians more land in a final deal, the television said.

The Palestinians held a Cabinet meeting late yesterday, and issued a brief statement saying their demands had not changed.

"Whatever sacrifices were made by our people were made to achieve their rights... and establish the Palestinian independent state with Jerusalem as its capital," the state-

ment said. A pair of looming deadlines appears to have contributed to the renewed talks.

The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, who has been the leading mediator in West Asia peace efforts, leaves office on January 20.

Also, the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, was facing a tough re-election campaign, and would like to work out a peace deal before the February 6 ballot. — AP

THE HINDU

17 DEC 1993

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A poll on peace?

TWO FORMER army Generals and a Captain, all three of them special forces types, appear set to be the chief contenders in the Israeli elections likely to be held in February. It goes without saying that those who have exposed themselves to the greatest physical risk in the conduct of public affairs should be entitled to run for the highest office in the land. But perceptive Israelis point out that their country can never be a normal one so long as a candidate's competence and dedication in security matters outweigh all other considerations in the minds of his electors.

It is not of course merely tradition, which teaches the Jews that they are a nation apart, or a history of being persecuted that hones the Israelis' sensitivity to their security. They are currently living in a tough neighbourhood that might have been getting a little easier but, as events of the past three months have shown, can still be extremely volatile. The force of this racial memory makes them overlook one of the most significant facts of the current Palestinian uprising. Over three months of violent confrontation there have barely been two or three attacks on Israelis inside Israel proper. Most of the Palestinian anger has been directed at Israelis who wander about the Palestinian territories — soldiers and residents of the illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

This one fact seems to amply prove the Palestinian claim that they have made the strategic choice for peace. They recognise Israel's right to exist on 80 per cent of the territory that was British-mandated Palestine till 1948 and are only asking for the right to set up their state on the remaining 20 per cent. The fact that the Palestinians have made this major concession — a far more significant concession than the slices of territory that Israel has conceded to the Palestinians so far — has yet to sink into the Israeli psyche. It also might not ever sink in so long as there are Israeli politicians and writers who keep looking for the slightest evidence that the Arabs have not given up their long-term goal of erasing Israel from the map of West Asia.

Among the new evidence that has been drummed up in support of this thesis is a speech that the Palestinian Authority President, Mr. Yasser Arafat, is reported to have delivered at Cairo University a few months ago. Mr. Arafat is reported to have said that the peace deals that he had made or would be making with the Israelis



THE CONTENDERS: Mr. Ehud Barak and (below) Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu and Mr. Ariel Sharon.



should be viewed as equivalent to the Hudaibiyya agreement made in the early days of Islam. The doctrine underlying the treaty that the early Muslims made at the place called Hudaibiyya was that they were not strong enough to overwhelm their opponents and so must make an interim peace till they had built up the strength to achieve their ambitions.

It is possible that Mr. Arafat might have merely been playing to the gallery at a difficult time and to explain his position to his fel-

low Arabs at a time of transition between confrontation and a possible peace. However, the speech produced the immediate reflexive response from a section of Israeli society that with the Arab objectives being such Israel would be stupid to give up the strategic assets — the high ground in the West Bank, the Jordan valley and the Gaza Strip junctions — that it currently holds. With the uprising of the last three months, especially with its spread to the Israeli Arabs, those propagating this view

have found a more receptive audience.

Yet, opinion polls consistently show that a very definite majority of Israelis are in favour of peace with the Palestinians. This majority opinion holds despite the categorical clarity of the Palestinian position that they will not end their confrontation with Israel unless Israel ends its occupation of all the territory captured in the 1967 war including East Jerusalem. If the Palestinian terms for peace are so clear and yet a majority of Israelis still favour a peace, then the logical conclusion is that a majority of Israelis support the acceptance of the Palestinian terms. Unfortunately politics rarely follows such a logical or linear path.

Neither Captain Benjamin Netanyahu nor General Ariel Sharon, the two right-wing politicians jostling to become the main rival to General Ehud Barak in the elections, will make a peace on the Palestinian terms. Mr. Netanyahu leads Mr. Barak by a sizeable margin in the opinion polls and Mr. Sharon by a slight one. This fact should lead to a conclusion, opposite to the one made above, that a majority of Israelis are not in favour of major land transfers and that they are not, therefore, in a mood to meet the Palestinians terms. But that conclusion too does not seem to be quite on the mark.

From the moves he has made over the past one and a half years, Mr. Barak appears to be inching towards the realisation that a peace can only be made on the Palestinian's terms. He cannot and will not, of course, say so, but he is still prepared to make a deal and realistically-speaking this is the only basis on which a peace can be made. If Mr. Barak still calculates that a peace deal is the only achievement that will ensure his re-election, and if a number of sober and serious Israeli analysts agree with him, then the overall logic of the situation ought to be that a majority of Israelis will accept a deal that is honourable and has enough in it to guarantee their security.

Perhaps the only way in which Israelis can be induced to believe in their long-term security is by making them aware of the other possibilities that are open to them beyond their security concerns. An Israel that can enter into cooperative economic and social relations with its neighbours should logically be one that is more secure. The former commando, Mr. Barak has to now prove that he can develop such a vision and convey it convincingly to his people.

Elections in Israel are likely to be held in February. KESAVA MENON takes a look at the contestants and the prospects for West Asian peace.

The strange silence of Yasser Arafat

BY EDWARD W. SAID

No one really knows whether the Aqsa Intifada temporarily subsided because Yasser Arafat expressed his public disapproval of it on November 17, or whether the lull was only a short-lived one that was generated out of fatigue, or a search for new positions. Despite the enormous cost in lives and property to Palestinians, however, the essential problems remain, and the Israelis continue their blind and stupid assault on Palestinians with the strangulation, economic blockade, and bombings of cities and towns continuing without respite.

Every Arab leader who welcomed Barak's election a year and a half ago should now be asked to repeat his declarations so that their hollowness could be demonstrated again and again. I find official Arab attitudes virtually incomprehensible having spent most of my life trying to decipher them according to the laws of reason and elementary common sense.

Did they seriously believe that Barak was the saviour of the peace process, and if so weren't they aware that to save the peace process was nothing less than to prolong the Palestinian agony? Did they think that he was any different from the great "war hero" who has devoted his entire career to killing Arabs, and if he was why did it take them so long to find out that he wasn't?

Does subservience to the United States require so much subservience, so many acrobatics, such a complicated twisting and turning and so profound a prostration? How long and for what do they cling to a repressive, basically rejectionist status quo with neither the will nor the capacity to wage war nor to live in peace, simply to please a distant and arrogant superpower that has showed them and their people so much contempt, inhumanity and utter, unspeakable cruelty?

Can they not do anything more substantial than what they are doing when Israel is using helicopter gunships to kill Palestinian civilians and destroy their homes, while the United States supplies Israel with the largest ever order of attack helicopters during the past ten years and Israel has added 500 million dollars to its budget for settlements?

Not one word of official protest against US policy that has brought such catastrophe to our people. It is this timorousness that allows US policymakers, of whom the unregretted Dennis Ross — single-handedly the mediocre individual who has done more to advance Israel's interest than anyone — is but one, to say that the Arabs trust the US and its policies and remain close friends and allies of the US. Surely the time has come to speak frankly of a hypocrisy and brutality without parallel, instead of standing silently by cap in hand as more and more Palestinians are killed with arms paid for by US taxpayers.

But the core of the tragedy is what is happening to the victims themselves — the Palestinian people. Here one must speak and think rationally, not letting emotion and the passions of the moment sway the mind too much. My general impression is that the Palestinians everywhere feel the absence of real leadership, a voice or an authority that can speak both of the present and the future with some sense of vision, some articulation of a coherent, inclusive goal beyond the usual platitudes that repeat what is obviously designed to postpone decisions and visions with mere rhetoric.

No one has any doubt that the Palestinians are struggling against military occupation and have been doing so for 33 years. But there are four million



CHAINED TO DEATH: 'How long and for what do they cling to a repressive, basically rejectionist status quo with neither the will nor the capacity to wage war nor to live in peace, simply to please a distant and arrogant superpower that has showed them and their people so much contempt, inhumanity and utter, unspeakable cruelty?'

refugees struggling against exile, in addition to the one million Palestinian citizens of Israel who have been living under a regime of racial and religious discrimination that has too long been hidden under fatuous labels like "Israeli democracy."

One of the many problems with Oslo has been that Palestinian negotiators focused exclusively on the occupation to

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the neglect of the other two dimensions. But it should finally be clear that in all three instances it is Zionism that we fight against, and until we have a leadership that can formulate an integrated strategy on all three fronts, we do not have leadership. The tragedy is that the Intifada goes, lives tragically lost every day, in a political setting or framework that deepens the differences between the Palestinians, instead of bringing them closer together. We need a new vision, a new voice, a new truth.

Isn't it now clear that old slogans like "a Palestinian state" or "Jerusalem our capital" have brought us to this impasse? Shouldn't we expect a real

leader to speak to all Palestinians, honestly, fearlessly, without duplicity or winks at the US and Israel, and to chart a course forward that links together opposition to occupation, to exile, and to racial discrimination?

Why continue to delude people with the empty hope that "struggle," a word which seems to mean that others should do the dying, will get the Arab world generally and the Palestinians particularly what all have so long wanted?

It is nothing short of alarming that after more than half a century of blustering, of expending blood and treasure, of militarisation, or abrogating democracy and the most elementary requirements of citizenship in the Arab world, we find ourselves facing the same enemy, the same defeats, the same tactical shifts and hypocritical about-faces with the same tired arsenal of threats, promises, slogans and clichés, all of which have been proved more or less worthless and have produced the same failures from 1967 to Amman to October 1973 to Beirut to Oslo?

No one can deny that Palestine is an exception to nearly all the colonial issues of the past two hundred years: it is exceptional but not removed from history. Human history is full of similar, if not absolutely the same, instances, and what has surprised me, as someone living at a distance from the West Asia but close to it in all sorts of ways, is how insulated from the rest of the world we keep ourselves. Whereas, I believe, a great deal can be learned from the history of other oppressed peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia and even Europe. Why do we resist comparing ourselves, say, with the South African blacks, or with the American Indians, or with the Vietnamese? By comparing I don't mean mechanically or slavishly, but rather creatively and imaginatively.

The late Egbal Ahmad, who was certainly one of the two or three most brilliant analysts of contemporary history and politics that I ever knew, always drew attention to the fact that successful liberation movements were successful precisely because they employed creative ideas, original ideas, imaginative ideas where in other less successful movements (like ours, alas) there was a pronounced tendency to formulas and an uninspired repetition of past slogans and past patterns of behaviour.

Take as a primary instance the idea of armed struggle. For decades we have relied in our

minds on ideas about guns and killing, ideas that from the Thirties until today, have brought us plentiful martyrs but have had little real effect, not so much on Zionism but on our own ideas about what to do next. In our case, the fighting is done by a small brave number of people pitted against hopeless odds, i.e. stones against helicopter gunships, Merkava tanks, missiles.

Yet a quick look at other

movements — say the Indian nationalist movement, the South African liberation movement, the American civil rights movement — tell us first of all that only a mass movement employing tactics and strategy that maximises the popular element ever made any difference on the occupier and/or oppressor. Second, only a mass movement that has been politicised and imbued with a vision of participating directly in a future of its own making, only such a movement has historical chance of liberating itself from oppression or military occupation

movements — say the Indian nationalist movement, the South African liberation movement, the American civil rights movement — tell us first of all that only a mass movement employing tactics and strategy that maximises the popular element ever made any difference on the occupier and/or oppressor. Second, only a mass movement that has been politicised and imbued with a vision of participating directly in a future of its own making, only such a movement has historical chance of liberating itself from oppression or military occupation. The future, like the past, is built by human beings. They, and not some distant mediator or saviour, provide the agency for

change. It is clear to me, for example, that the immediate task in Palestine is to establish the goal of ridding ourselves of the occupation, using imaginative means of struggle. That would necessarily involve large numbers of Palestinians intervening directly in the settlement process, blocking roads, preventing building materials from entering, in other words, isolating the settlements instead of allowing them, containing a far smaller number of people, to isolate and surround Palestinians, which is what occurs today.

It is still true, for instance, that the labourers who built the Israeli settlements on a daily basis are in fact Palestinians: this should give some fairly simple idea of how deeply misled, misguided, under-mobilised and unpoliticised the Palestinian people are today. After 33 years of building Israeli settlements, Palestinian workers should immediately be provided by the Authority with alternative employment. Can't a few dollars be spared from the millions spent on useless security and unproductive bureaucracy?

This is of course a failing of the leadership, but in the end it is also those individuals who know better — professionals, intellectuals, teachers, doctors and so on — who have the power of expression and the means to do so who have still not put enough pressure on the leadership to make it responsive to the situation.

And there at once is the greatest tragedy of all: a people is giving passionately of itself, losing the flower of its youth and all its energies in a valiant confrontation with a sadistic and implacably cruel enemy who has no compunction about choking the Palestinians to death, and still Mr Arafat is silent. He has not truly and honestly addressed his people since the crisis began, not even a ten-minute broadcast to give it strength, to explain his policies, to tell the people where we are, how we got here, and where, after all this bloodshed and suffering, where we are going. Not one minute of time spent telling the truth to his own people, even as he tours the world from France to China meeting presidents and prime ministers to no avail whatever. Is his heart made of stone, is his conscience completely anaesthetised?

I find this astoundingly incomprehensible, and this after thirty years of leading us from one catastrophe and ill-considered adventure to another, without respite and without even a whispered "thank you for hearing with me and my appalling, bumbling mistakes and miscalculations for so long!" I for one am fed up with his attitude of contempt for his people, and for his stony autocratic imperturbability, his inability either to listen or to take other people seriously, his unending ambiguities, secrecy and blindingly irrational lurches from one patron to another, all the while leaving his long-suffering people to fend for themselves.

The Aqsa Intifada is an Intifada against Oslo and against the people who constructed it, not only Dennis Ross and Barak, but a small, irresponsible coterie of Palestinian officials. These people should now have the decency to stand before their people, admit their mistakes, and ask (if they can get it) for popular support if there is a plan. If there isn't one (as I suspect) they should then have the elementary courtesy at least to say so. Only by doing this can there be anything more than tragedy at the end of the road.

By arrangement with Dawn

The problem of Palestine

By C. V. Narasimhan

40-12
18/12

THE ROOT cause of the problem of Palestine is Israel. Since its genesis, Israel has defied the United Nations and got away with it. Its goal may be summed up in one word — expansionism. Before World War-II, Palestine was a mandated territory administered by the United Kingdom under a League of Nations commission. When the war ended, Palestine had a very large number of Arabs, about two-thirds of the population, while one-third was Jewish. But in spite of all attempts to prevent further infiltration, a very large number of Jews came into the Palestine territory. In November 1947, the General Assembly considered a report of the U.N. Special Committee on Palestine and endorsed a plan for partition of the territory providing for the creation of two separate states — an Arab state and a Jewish state, with Jerusalem having international status.

However, this plan was not accepted by the Palestinian Arabs and by the Arab states generally. On May 14, 1948, the General Assembly appointed the Swedish diplomat, Count Folke Bernadotte, U.N. Mediator for Palestine with a mandate to promote a peaceful situation. However, the same day, the Jewish territory declared itself the state of Israel. The very next day there was fighting between Israel and the Arab states and Israel was able to expand the territory allotted to it under the first demarcation. The fighting was halted after a few weeks through a truce called by the Security Council.

On September 17, 1948, hardly four months after he was appointed, Count Bernadotte was assassinated by a Jewish terrorist group. Dr. Ralph Bunche, a senior official in the Department of Trusteeship who had served as Count Bernadotte's deputy, was appointed acting mediator. Between February and July 1949, he arranged for a series of separate agreements between the individual Arab states concerned and Israel. The Arab states refused to sit at the same table with Israel. So Dr. Bunche had an arrangement by which the Israeli representative would sit in one room and the Jordanian representative in the next room, and he shuttled between the two, one of the earliest examples of "shuttle diplomacy".

Agreements were reached between Egypt and Israel on February 24, between

Israel and Lebanon on March 23, between Jordan and Israel on April 23 and lastly between Israel and Syria on July 20. This was a great personal triumph for Dr. Bunche for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In May 1949, Israel as a state was admitted to the U.N. An international demarcation line was drawn which in effect accepted the expanded area occupied by Israel as *fait accompli*.

In July 1956 Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal Company over diplomatic protests by France and the U.K. whose citizens formed a majority of the shareholders. Every time a ship passed through the canal, it paid heavy dues which went to enrich the shareholders, while a small part was given to the country through which it ran, Egypt. So Egypt decided to nationalise the canal.

On October 13, 1956, the Security Council adopted a resolution setting forth cer-

The root cause of the problem of Palestine is Israel... Its goal may be summed up in one word — expansionism.

tain principles for the operation of the canal. Even as consultation on their implementation was under way, hostilities broke out in the area. On October 29, 1956, Israeli forces launched an attack on Egypt in the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Israel was not in any way involved in the canal crisis. It just took advantage of the situation. A few days later British and French troops occupied the Suez Canal zone. The Security Council discussed the matter on October 31, but no decision could be adopted because both the U.K. and France exercised their veto. Then, under the Uniting for Peace Resolution, the matter was referred to the General Assembly. The Assembly called for a ceasefire and withdrawal of foreign forces from the occupied territories. It also established a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities. This force was in fact the first major peace keeping operation undertaken by the U.N. Following the despatch of the emergency force to that area, the British and French forces left by December, 22, 1956, and the Israeli withdrawal was completed by March 8, 1957. But the UNEF operated only on the Egyptian side of the border between the Sinai

and Israel and on the Gaza strip. Israel refused to allow the UNEF troops on its territory.

The UNEF continued till 1967. In May 1967, President Nasser declared that the U.N. force had served its purpose and should be withdrawn. When this demand came to the then U.N. Secretary-General, U Thant, in May 1967, he convened a meeting of the advisory committee for the UNEF, which consisted of the representatives of the countries which contributed military contingents for the UNEF operation. India was a member of this group. U Thant placed the facts before the committee and none of the members proposed that there should be an emergency special session of the General Assembly; nor did any of them take the initiative to call a meeting of the Security Council. U Thant immediately flew to Cairo to plead with Nasser that he change his request.

but even while he was on his way, Nasser announced that his decision was irrevocable. Even so the Secretary-General proceeded to Cairo, and spent a couple of days there in discussion with Nasser.

When he came back he submitted a report to the Security Council. He stated that the withdrawal of the forces would create a situation of insecurity and there could well be some fighting. For the next two weeks, the Security Council took no action on this report until, on June 6, 1967, Israel launched its blitzkrieg. Egypt's air force was taken by surprise, and its war planes became sitting ducks at the Cairo military airport. Practically the entire air force was destroyed in Cairo at one go. In the next five days, the entire Sinai and the Gaza Strip were occupied by Israel. It was only after the Camp David agreement was negotiated by the then U.S., President, Mr. Jimmy Carter, several years later that Israel withdrew entirely from the Sinai. But it still occupied the Gaza Strip. Israel occupied, ostensibly for strategic reasons, Southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights, in addition to the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. It also occupied the entire West Bank territory.

The Security Council adopted resolution 242 calling on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. For several years now, the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, has pursued the "peace process" with Israel and Palestine, represented by Mr. Yasser Arafat. There has been much talk of Israel exchanging "land for peace". But the land Israel is offering is the territory that was occupied illegally in the first instance. There is now enough land to provide for a Palestine homeland, and to establish a Palestine state with international recognition, beginning with Israel.

In its recent deliberations, the U.N. General Assembly has castigated Israel for its policies towards Palestinians and termed "illegal" its presence in Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. It has adopted a series of six resolutions demanding that Israel withdraw from the Golan Heights and Jerusalem. By a resolution adopted by 149 votes to two (Israel and the U.S.) and three abstentions, the Assembly stressed the need for a commitment to the principle of "land for peace" and implementation of the Security Council resolution 242).

The U.S. joined Israel opposing four resolutions on Palestine and one calling on Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights. But it abstained on the resolution on Jerusalem as it considers it a disputed city whose future has to be determined by negotiation between Israel and Palestine. The resolution on Jerusalem, adopted by 145 votes to one (Israel) and five abstentions, determined that Israel's decision to impose its laws and administration on the city was illegal and, therefore, null and void. The Assembly also expressed support for the West Asian peace process.

How is it possible for Israel to get away with its wholesale flouting of world opinion? The answer, no doubt, is the support extended to it by the U.S. regardless of party affiliation — Democratic or Republican. Such progress as has been made — in the restoration of Sinai to Egypt, portions of the West Bank and Gaza to Palestine and the vacation of South Lebanon during recent months — is due to the efforts of Mr. Carter two decades ago, and the indefatigable and continuing efforts of Mr. Clinton.

(The writer is a former U.N. Under Secretary-General.)

18 DEC 2000

WEST ASIA / VIOLENCE UNABATED

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Peace talks: both sides optimistic

JERUSALEM, DEC. 17. Three Palestinians were killed, including one in an explosion, but Israeli and Palestinian leaders both expressed hope on Sunday that high-level peace talks could resume within days.

The Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, said Palestinian and Israeli delegations could head to Washington soon. A top aide said negotiators would leave on Monday night but declined to give additional details.

Mr. Arafat added that he might even meet the Israeli Prime Minister and his off-and-on peace partner, Mr. Ehud Barak, in the near future.

"If there is a need to, why not?" Mr. Arafat told reporters in the Gaza Strip after meeting a delegation of dovish Israeli lawmakers.

He told the group, "Let's work for peace." The violence, now in its 12th week, shows no signs of abating, but senior officials from the two sides have resumed contacts in recent days that had largely broken down. All told, 328 people have died in the violence, most of them Palestinians.

Mr. Barak, making an election campaign stop at a housing project in Jerusalem, was cautiously optimistic.

"It's too early to predict, and like all of you we are hopeful to have a resumption of negotiations in the appropriate time, based on reduction in the level of violence."

In renewed violence, two Palestinians were killed in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip near the border with Egypt. According to Palestinian officials the two were killed and three others were injured when an Israeli tank fired

towards people as they crossed street.

No comment was immediately available from the army.

Also, Sameh Malabee, a 28-year-old activist in Arafat's Fatah movement, was killed in a blast north of Jerusalem overnight. Details were sketchy, but Palestinians described it as a possible assassination by Israel. The Israeli army said it had no comment on the incident outside of Kalandia Refugee Camp.

Mr. Arafat said the deaths did "not help the peace process." The Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. Shlomo Ben-Ami, said Israel was determined to keep working toward a peace deal and suggested that any new talks could involve the sensitive topic of the Al Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's walled Old City.

Mr. Ben-Ami, Israel's senior negotiator, did not say what concessions, if any, that Israel might offer the Palestinians, who are demanding full control of the site.

Mr. Sharon, who hopes to run against Mr. Barak in a special election for Prime Minister in February, said he would not support a peace deal negotiated by the embattled Mr. Barak.

The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, who is hoping to mediate a peace deal before he leaves office next month, called Mr. Arafat on Saturday to discuss the efforts to resume the negotiations.

Mr. Clinton and Mr. Arafat agreed that Israeli-Palestinian talks should continue, and the Americans would take part in coming days. — AP

THE HINDU

18 DEC 2000

Israelis, Palestinians guarded on peace talks

JERUSALEM, DEC. 18. Israel and the Palestinians were guarded today about the prospects of reviving their troubled peace process ahead of talks in the U.S., as blood-letting continued in the Palestinian territories.

Israel's Foreign Minister, Mr. Shlomo ben Ami, said there were no guarantees that the first major push for peace since the deadly violence erupted almost three months ago would lead to an agreement before the nation goes to the polls. Negotiating teams from the two sides are to hold consultations starting tomorrow with the outgoing U.S. administration of Mr. Bill Clinton, anxious to strike a peace deal before he leaves office next month.

"There is no certainty that we can reach an accord before the election. We can only commit ourselves to making every effort to verify the possibility of reaching such an agreement, which is important for the Israeli Government," said Mr. Ben Ami, who is leading the Israeli delegation for the talks.

The dramatic resignation eight days ago of the Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, has forced a special

leadership election in February.

Despite the tide of Israeli-Palestinian violence that has gripped the region for almost 12 weeks, most opinion polls show the majority of Israelis still in favour of pursuing peace with the Palestinians. Initially, the two sides are to hold separate talks in an as yet undisclosed location, although there is speculation of a summit between Mr. Barak and the Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, who said yesterday he would be ready to meet the embattled Israeli leader.

"I don't know if there is going to be a three-way meeting (but) it is very possible," the Palestinian negotiator, Mr. Saeb Erakat, told Voice of Palestine radio.

The talks are taking place two months after Mr. Barak declared a "time-out" in the seven-year Oslo peace process and despite his previous insistence that the violence must stop before negotiations can resume. Israel's Justice Minister, Mr. Yossi Beilin, an architect of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, said there was a "window of opportunity" that should be seized before Mr. Clinton's term ends on January 20. — AFP

THE HINDU

19 DEC 2000

Palestine: the other side of the coin

By Harold A. Gould

MAJOR cause of the recent eruption of violence in Palestine has been Israel's perpetuation of what can only be called a colonialist model for dealing with the Arab populations who came under its suzerainty after the June War of 1967. Admittedly there were compelling reasons for the conquests that led to this state of affairs. The armies of Syria, Jordan and Egypt had invaded Israel and, in concert with the indigenous Palestinians, would have destroyed it had it not successfully fended them off. The conquered populations are a legacy of those perilous times.

The problem is that this colonialist style of governance, as was the case with British rule in India, and other colonialisms around the world, inevitably bred contempt for the subjugated populations. The longer it continued the deeper the contempt grew. As the British and other colonialists realised, lording it over a powerless people can be an intoxicating boon to one's cultural vanity. And ironically, the Israelis, themselves the victims of mankind's worst manifestation of racial oppression, fell prey to the very mentality that had once enslaved them. For these very reasons it was a situation that could not be indefinitely sustained.

Contemporary history has demonstrated over and over again that populations held in conditions of political and economic servitude, regardless of the circumstances which produced that state of affairs in the first place, eventually just refuse to take it anymore. As resistance mounts, a point is eventually reached where the cost of trying to keep the subalterns in line becomes prohibitive. This point has now been reached in Palestine. Civil disobedience has transcended the capacity of Israel to contain it and has, as well, exceeded the ability of responsible Palestinian leadership to control it. Mr. Yasser Arafat can no longer flip a rhetorical switch and compel his followers to obey him; Mr. Ehud Barak can no longer persuade either the Palestinians or his fellow Jews to accept his bona fides as a peace-maker. Mr. Barak has been compelled to resign as Israel's Prime Minister and seek a fresh mandate, which he is unlikely to obtain.

The situation, in short, has spun out of control. Emeritus Professor Don Peretz of the State University of New York (Bing-

hamton), himself a noted Jewish scholar, recently stated at a Potomac Institute colloquium in Washington that Israel as early as the 1970s should have moved toward complete political separation between the two populations, with Jewish settlers no longer enjoying extraterritorial rights on the Arab side of the designated frontier. That is what should have happened then; that is what should be happening now. Indeed the ferocity and persistence of this second eruption of *intifada* makes it clear that in the end the only practicable option left for Israel will be to facilitate genuine statehood for the Palestinians, on terms far less favourable than would have been possible years ago.

meeting held in Cairo on October 21, called attention to the troubling absence of democracy anywhere in the Middle East. He wondered "why the Arab east is the only region in the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, that is still ruled by dictators, autocrats and kings, without one real democracy".

Israel, by contrast, whatever may be its faults, is a functioning democracy in which a wide range of political interests and ideological convictions are represented. There now exists a vocal, though admittedly beleaguered, opposition to the current return of the hardline policies which got Israel into the pickle it is in in the first place. This diversity of political

transform the entire Middle East region into a democratic wonderland overnight, given the power of radical nationalism and ethno-religious fundamentalism in the Arab world. But the U.S. can play a decisive role in the outcome of a bi-national political settlement for Palestine. If successful, this could set a precedent which in the long run would contribute to greater stability for the entire region.

The U.S. possesses the influence and wherewithal to play such a role here. Politically, it would have to aggressively support separate sovereignty for the Palestinians, while still maintaining its special relationship with Israel. This should be the starting point for a fresh American approach to the region, possibly just the right departure for an incoming Bush administration unencumbered by the ethos of its predecessor. Admittedly, it would not be an easy row to hoe, but by no means an impossible one. Its implementation would be abetted by significant support from Third World countries such as India and from members of the European Union who have long advocated Palestinian statehood.

From this vantage, the U.S. would be free to employ its powers of persuasion to promote democratisation processes in the newly created, sovereign Palestinian state, both through bilateral diplomacy, and through the exercise of its formidable economic power. This formula is already in place as a means of encouraging democratisation and liberalisation in China, Mexico and elsewhere on the grounds that it is in America's strategic interests to strengthen and give voice to moderate elements in all societies. The chances of such policies being successful in Palestine are especially good, in fact, because Palestinians, the racist stereotypes propagated by Israeli hardliners to the contrary notwithstanding, are actually one of the most culturally advanced, entrepreneurially gifted populations in the Middle East. Encouraging their prosperity and corresponding political importance would set in motion the democratisation processes so sorely needed on the Palestinian side of the coin as the guarantor of an equal, constructive political dialogue capable of ending the debilitating colonialist structure now inhibiting the pathway to peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

The insistence that Israel democratise relations with the occupied territories as a prelude to peace has got to be matched by a corresponding democratisation of Palestinian political institutions.

As the inevitable approaches, however, another challenge to the prospects for real peace and rapprochement between Arabs and Jews in Palestine looms on the horizon. This is the Palestinian side of coin.

Fundamental institutional changes are also needed on the West Bank and in Gaza. Children shouting slogans, throwing rocks and hurling Molotov cocktails in the streets just will not do once real Palestinian statehood is conceded and the business of establishing mature relations between two separate states commences in earnest. Statesmanship, not confrontational politics, will have to prevail once this stage is reached. This can be accomplished only when genuine representative Government supercedes the corrupt, authoritarian political leadership that currently holds sway in the Arab territories. Put simply, the insistence that Israel democratise its external relations with the occupied territories as a prelude to peace has got to be matched by a corresponding democratisation of Palestinian domestic political institutions for mature diplomacy to work. Otherwise there is little hope that a stable peace can ever be achieved.

New York Times columnist, Thomas L. Friedman, in a recent article pertaining to the Arab League emergency summit

voices will have a crucial moderating influence on the dialogues that will follow the establishment of Palestinian statehood.

The Palestinian Authority, by contrast, is essentially a political monolith where Mr. Arafat makes all the key decisions largely in response to the whims of radical and extremist elements, both within and outside Fatah, who occupy centre stage. Moderate voices are nowhere to be heard in the present political environment. This absence of countervailing moderation, as Friedman says, pervades the Arab Middle East. Jordan, while admittedly a "moderate" Arab state, is nevertheless a monarchy where King Abdullah is the final voice. Syria, now ruled by the son of the late Hafez al-Asad, remains a totalitarian state with minimal respect for human rights at home, that supports terrorism abroad, and itself perpetrates colonialism in Lebanon. Egypt is a one-party state run by a benevolent dictator. On the periphery, and always factors in Middle East affairs, are Iraq and Saudi Arabia, where democratic institutions are a furtive dream, and Iran, where they are no more than a flickering ember.

This is where the United States comes in. Clearly America lacks the capacity to

THE HINDU

1 9 DEC 2000

Netanyahu opts out, Peres waits in wings

FROM HOWARD GOLLER

Jerusalem, Dec. 19 (Reuters): Right-winger Benjamin Netanyahu dropped out of the race for Prime Minister today, while Nobel peace laureate Shimon Peres weighed making a run, in the latest twists of Israel's tortuous politics.

Netanyahu's withdrawal appeared to leave former general Ariel Sharon, his heir to the Likud party leadership, as the main challenger to Prime Minister Ehud Barak in an election that will set the course of Arab-Israeli peace-making.

But breaking a self-imposed silence on his own political aspirations, the 77-year-old Peres said he was weighing public appeals to pose an independent challenge to both Sharon and Barak, his successor as head of Israel's Labour Party.

The political drama overshadowed a US bid to revive peace moves in Washington, where Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were expected to meet US mediators today — most likely at an air force base used for the West Asia talks in the past. A state depart-



Netanyahu, Peres

ment spokesman said it was possible the talks could ultimately be joined by US President Bill Clinton, whose eight years of West Asia peace mediation are due to end on January 20.

"I'm willing, as always, to do whatever I can, and I will do whatever I can," Clinton said. At the UN, Palestinians suffered a setback when the security council defeated their demands for a UN observer force to calm the bloodiest Arab-Israeli violence in years.

The Palestinian-initiated resolution for military and police observers in the West Bank and Gaza received eight votes, one short of the minimum required for adoption in the 15-member council.

The other seven members, the

US, Russia, Britain, France, Argentina, the Netherlands, and Canada, abstained, saying the measure could jeopardise the fragile Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

At least 330 people, most of them Palestinians, have been killed in clashes mainly between Israeli troops and Palestinians since the start of the violence. Thirteen Arab Israelis and 38 other Israelis have also died.

Barak, having lost his parliamentary majority and under pressure in the face of failed peace moves and the nearly 12-week-old Palestinian uprising, resigned last week, starting the countdown toward a February 6 prime ministerial election.

Netanyahu, the 51-year-old former Likud party Prime Minister, withdrew from the prime ministerial contest after parliament rejected his demand for simultaneous parliamentary elections he said were necessary to end political paralysis.

Parliament dealt what proved to be a fatal blow to Netanyahu's right-wing candidacy early today, rejecting by a vote of 68 to 48 with one abstention a bill calling for the dissolution and a general

THE TELEGRAPH

20 DEC 2000

Arms trade stoked West Asia crisis

THE West Asia crisis erupted anew after Ariel Sharon, ultra-rightist Israeli leader of the Opposition Likud, entered the al Aqsa mosque, the third holiest shrine in Islam, with his retinue on 28 September.

Significantly, in early September, the US stock market index, Dow Jones, began falling with the technology index Nasdaq. This indicated that the contagion was spreading to other stocks.

The local corporate bond market was also affected. By end of the month, Dow Jones dipped by 492.2 points or 4.4 per cent. By mid-October, Nasdaq dropped by 26 per cent and Dow Jones by 10.8 per cent. Dow Jones began to recover from 18 October and on 6 November, a day before the presidential election, it returned to its original level.

Mr Sharon's visit, which was bound to be seen as a direct provocation by the Palestinians, especially, at a time when Jerusalem's future was under active negotiation, sparked protests and demonstrations.

On 19 October, the UN observer for Palestine announced in the UN that despite the bloody Israeli campaign, the Palestinians did not fire during the first three days. He also said that "during the past three weeks, the occupying power has killed more than 90 Palestinians and injured more than 3,000", according to PFI.

The UN General Assembly condemned by an overwhelming majority Israel's "excessive use of force" (tanks, missiles, combat helicopters) against Palestinian civilians and termed as "illegal and an obstacle to peace" the Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem.

It is intriguing why Israel precipitated such a sensitive issue knowing what the repercussions could be.

Apart from the well-known and much-publicised geopolitical and historical issues involved in the conflict, a contributory factor this

Why should Wall Street want to ignite a war? The answer lies in the importance of the arms and ammunition industries in the US economy because of its size and close links with other sectors of the economy. West Asia is the ideal location for pursuing such interests, writes DIPANKAR BOSE

time could be the role played by the financial interests in Wall Street. Dow Jones touched the high 11,313.6 mark on 1 September before it was pulled down by Nasdaq to 10,089.7 on 17 October. Thereafter, Dow Jones recovered, touching 10,995 on 31 October and crossing the 11,000 mark to touch 11,006 on 6 November.

Such fluctuations are not new and Dow Jones had had a steeper fall in October 1987 and 1997 but it recovered quickly.

The picture is changing fast. Nasdaq dropped by 34 per cent between 10 March and 14 April, pulling down Dow Jones as well. By September, both dropped.

Analysts and economists now predict a slowing down of the US economy. *The US Bureau of Economic Affairs* anticipated a decline in economic growth in the USA in its advance GDP growth estimate for the 3rd quarter of 2000, according to its report published in the last week of October. While some economists and analysts predict a certain outcome, others say the opposite.

But as far as Wall Street is concerned, the possibility of danger persists. That is, if the investors believe the gloomy predictions and start selling stocks out of fear because the stock values have already reached dizzy heights. The process can



Members of the US-led commission of inquiry into Israeli-Palestinian violence greet Yasser Arafat in front of a poster of the Dome of the Rock at his office in Gaza City last Monday. -- AP/PTI.

snowball into something serious.

There is another side to the story. In the 1990s, the US economy grew at a high rate because of the unprecedented expansion in household consumption expenditure. This consumption boom was fuelled by a rise in household wealth resulting from the buoyancy of the US stock market in which more than 50 per cent of the US households invested a

large part of their savings directly or through mutual funds and b) the confidence generated in the economy, thanks to successive years of high growth and low unemployment.

So, US household savings as a percentage of disposable income fell from 8.7 per cent in 1992 to 4.8 per cent in 1996 and to 2.2 per cent in 1999. In recent times, it has collapsed to zero.

In such a situation, a decline in the growth rate can break household

confidence in the economy and thereby in the stock market which in turn will reduce household consumption, the principal stimulus to growth.

Consumption spending has been estimated to fuel about two-thirds of the total US economic activity.

It is intriguing that in a sense the timing of the West Asia crisis in fact saved Wall Street and the US presidential election from serious embarrassment, for neither of them could afford a continuous drop in US equity prices at this juncture.

This seems to solve the jigsaw puzzle. With its vast array of business analysts, economists and computers, Wall Street must have been aware of the US economic condition and what it portends for Wall Street. It is also in the interest of Wall Street to find a way of sustaining the aggregate US demand in case Dow Jones continues to fall.

Wall Street also enjoys enormous clout with the US Treasury and the US government. So one may suggest that Wall Street may have helped to ignite and/or sustain the West Asia conflict.

But why should Wall Street want to ignite a war? The answer lies in the importance of the arms and ammunition industries in the US economy because of its size and close links with other sectors of the economy.

According to the US Statistical Abstract, 1999 the total defence purchases in 1996 was \$314.6 billion, which works out to 4.6 per cent of the US GDP (1996).

So a sudden rise in the demand for arms and ammunition can be a boost for the arms industry and other industries with which it is closely linked. This in turn can raise the aggregate demand in the economy and counter the possibility of a recession.

The actual quantity of arms and ammunition used in a conflict or a war is not important. What matters is the creation of conflicts in certain (sensitive) areas so that the threat of war persists and arms trade can flourish. This can also take care of the surplus capacity in US steel and capital goods industries.

West Asia is the ideal location for pursuing such interests. To a great extent, this explains why the USA termed the UN resolution on Palestine "one side and biased" and refused to accept it.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright openly accused Palestinian President Yasser Arafat by saying, "Mr Arafat bears some responsibility. I hope he will exercise more control," without uttering a word about Israel's "excessive use of force" against the Palestinians.

Arms trade data reveals the importance of West Asia for the US arms industry. The total value of world arms transfers for 1994-96 was \$119.6 billion of which USA alone accounted for \$67.2 billion.

And, West Asia was the largest importer of US arms (\$22.5 billion) followed by western Europe (\$20.3 billion) and East Asia (\$15.8 billion).

In the world arms trade, the USA is followed by the UK, Russia, France, Germany and China.

All these major arms exporters are also members of the UN Security Council.

(The author is a freelance writer)

ISRAEL / BILL TO DISSOLVE KNESSET REJECTED

Netanyahu not to contest poll

By Kesava Menon

BEIRUT, DEC. 19. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak's chances of being re-elected in polls likely to be held on February 6 next year has dramatically improved with the withdrawal from the race of his most formidable rival, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu. Since the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) has simultaneously decided not to dissolve itself, the polls will be restricted to the choice for the Prime Minister's post, thus rendering it as pretty meaningless but as a referendum on any peace deal with the Palestinians that may be reached in the interregnum. Ironically, the improvement in Mr. Barak's chances might prove detrimental to the hopes of reaching an agreement.

Yesterday, the orthodox Shas party dealt a blow to Mr. Netanyahu's hopes of standing in the elections when it once again reversed course and decided that it would not support a Bill to dissolve the Knesset. If the Knesset had been dissolved, Mr. Netanyahu, who is currently not a member, could have stood in the general elections. The Bill to dissolve the House had been passed at its first reading days ago but Shas struck it down at the second reading. Under Israeli electoral law, a separate election can be held for the Prime Ministership alone if the sitting Prime Minister resigns and Mr. Barak had already done so.

An effort was made to keep alive Mr. Netanyahu's chances of standing. Under the electoral law as it exists, a person who is not a member of the Knesset cannot contest in a special Prime Ministerial election. But a Bill was introduced and passed, with the support of Shas, that amended the electoral law and opened the way for anyone, whether a member of the Knesset or not, to contest the poll. However, Mr. Netanyahu had already said that he would not contest a special Prime Ministerial poll even if the law was changed in order to allow him to stand. The current Knesset is



so riven by fractious conflict that it is difficult for any Prime Minister to cobble together a coalition.

Since the same Parliament which has given Mr. Barak such a hard time will continue to exist after the Prime Ministerial poll, the special contest in February might not make much of a difference. Mr. Barak was trailing far behind Mr. Netanyahu in the opinion polls. While he also lags behind Mr. Ariel Sharon, who is now likely to be his main rival, the gap is not large and Mr. Barak is expected to cover it once the campaign gets underway. The former Prime Minister, Mr. Shimon Peres might challenge Mr. Barak in the Labour party primaries but he has never won an election on his own steam and with the Labour party having already indicated that it is inclined to give Mr. Barak another chance, Mr. Peres's challenge might not really come about.

With Mr. Barak's chances having improved, the Palestinians do not now have the incentive to strike an early deal with Israel. If Mr. Netanyahu had stood as Mr. Barak's main rival, the Palestinians would have had reason to fear the end of the peace negotiations since Mr. Netanyahu is guaranteed to scuttle it. This fear will not now operate on the Palestinians. However, the outcome of the U.S. Presidential elections weighs on the other side of the balance since the exit of the Clinton-Gore team will also mean the exit of a U.S. administration that was committed to achieving an early peace settlement.

Palestinian demand rejected

Reuters reports from United Nations:

The Security Council defeated Palestinian demands late last night for a U.N. observer force to calm the worst West Asia violence in years, with more than 300 people killed in over two months.

The Palestinian-initiated resolution for military and police observers in the West Bank and Gaza received eight votes, one less than the minimum required for adoption in the 15-member Council. The other seven members, the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Argentina, the Netherlands and Canada, abstained, saying the measure could jeopardise upcoming fragile Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Voting in favour were Namibia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Jamaica, Tunisia, Mali, Ukraine and China. "The draft resolution is not adopted because the required number of votes were not gathered," announced Russia's U.N. Ambassador, Mr. Sergei Lavrov, this month's Council president. The U.S., Israel's closest ally, said it would have vetoed the measure had it gathered more support — a move that could have inflamed further Arab sentiment. But it did not have to because of the low vote and instead abstained.

THE HINDU

20 DEC 2000

No hope for early peace in West Asia

By Qamar Agha

110-12
2/1/12

IN SPITE of the Sharm el-Shaikh agreement between Israel and Palestinians to end bloodshed, violence is continuing in the occupied Arab territories in which at least 285 persons have lost their lives and more than 6,000 have been injured. The ongoing violence has created deep bitterness on both sides and a major setback to the peace process. The Palestinians are also of the opinion that the United States is now biased towards Israel and therefore unfit to broker a deal. They are demanding the inclusion of Russia, the European Union and the United Nations as mediators in the peace talks and the deployment of an international protection force — a notion Israel has rejected.

The violence was triggered more than two months ago, after the killings of several Palestinians protesting against the visit of the Likud Party leader, Mr. Ariel Sharon, to Al-Aqsa or Temple Mount in East Jerusalem. His visit was convened to reiterate Israel's claim over the "undivided" Jerusalem which it claims to be the "eternal" capital of the Jewish state. Mr. Sharon is also opposed to the "land-for-peace" deal with the Palestinians. The minority government of the Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, resorted to an "iron-fist" policy to suppress the Palestinian protesters and win the support of the right-wing Likud Party to forge a National Unity government. But he has failed to form a unity government and opted for elections to the office of Prime Minister.

In the fast moving developments, there is not much hope for early revival of the peace talks. Most of the political parties in Israel are not prepared to grant any major concession to the Palestinians, nor are they ready for withdrawal from the remaining occupied Palestinian territories including East Jerusalem which it captured in the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. There is even the suggestion of a unilateral withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority as well as a move towards annexing the remaining 60 per cent territory. The Palestinian Authority, which has full or partial control of 40 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza, will have no option but to merge with the neighbouring Jor-

dan — an old notion rejected by the PLO long ago.

Israel never thought that the Cold War would end and that one day it would be asked to part with 40 per cent part of the West Bank and Gaza territory to the PLO — "a terrorist organisation committed to destroying the Jewish state". This happened under pressure exerted by the Western nations and, in addition, Israel was facing difficulty in maintaining its

lapse of the peace talks called by its President, Mr. Bill Clinton, himself. The blunt Saudi charge against the U.S. reflects a deep frustration among the Arab leaders. Crown Prince Abdullah, heir apparent to the Saudi Kingdom, is the most pragmatic leader in the Arab world. There is a growing feeling in the Arab world that the U.S. too has a role in whatever is happening in the Palestinian territories.

Mr. Clinton's recent pronouncements

If Israel is not restrained from taking a belligerent attitude towards the Palestinians, then the chances are that peace will not return to the West Asian region.

hold over the territories in the wake of a previous *intifada* (uprising). Now, Israel is in a much better position and has neutralised the Western nations' pressure by carving out a new role for itself in the containment of Islamic militancy. Israel has been emphasising for quite some time that there is need to forge a grand alliance of Western nations to defeat Islamic militancy which is posing a "serious threat" to their interests. It is propagating that Islamic militancy has become as big a threat as was international communism led by the Soviet Union in the Cold War era.

However, anti-West sentiments have been rising in the Arab world for quite some time because of the Western countries' unwavering support to Israel and their refusal to see the Arab point of view on Palestine. It is generating a sort of unity among nationalist as well as religious outfits in the Arab world. Both are demanding tough measures such as freezing the Arab nations' ties with Israel, which is also posing problems to regimes in Egypt and Jordan which are maintaining closer ties with the Western nations. In these countries, powerful anti-West movements led by Islamic jihad also exist. As a result, Egypt has recalled its envoy from Tel Aviv and Jordan is refusing to send its new Ambassador. Qatar has already snapped its ties with the Jewish state.

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah has criticised the U.S. for allowing the col-

were seen as yet another proof of America's "partiality" towards Israel. He blamed the PLO leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, for the collapse of the Camp David Summit and announced his willingness to endorse the Congress proposal for moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The Clinton administration was also considering a move to further improve its strategic relationship with and enhance military sales to Israel. Mr. Clinton made all these announcements soon after Israel refused to withdraw from East Jerusalem and decided not to dismantle the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, where more than two lakh Jews are residing. It is also not allowing the return of four million Palestinian refugees.

These developments suggest that now there is a marked shift in Mr. Clinton's handling of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Earlier, he played an "honest broker" and even pressured Israel to stick to an agreed timetable for withdrawal from the Palestinian territories. He was also not prepared to give the Jewish state any role in the containment of Islamic militancy in the region. At that time, he was mainly relying on Pakistan and the U.S. allies in the Arab world. There was a perceptible change in Washington's attitude to the West Asia peace process following Pakistan's failure to deal with the problem, especially in the aftermath of the bomb blasts in the U.S. embassies in East Africa. Besides, the U.S. Presidential as well as Senate elections — Ms. Hillary Clinton

could not have won the Senate elections from New York without the support of the Jewish people — must have influenced Mr. Clinton to rely on Israel.

So, Israel is placed in a much better position than before. The peace process has proved more beneficial to Israel than to the Palestinians. It has helped in ending Israel's isolation in the international community. Several Arab and many member-countries of the Non-Aligned Movement including India (which were earlier reluctant to have diplomatic ties with Israel) have now developed closer ties with the Jewish state. The militant Islamic movement backed by the conservative Islamic regimes is also forcing India, Russia and even some of the newly-independent Muslim countries of Central Asia to seek Israel's help in dealing with Islamic militancy in their countries.

Besides, the Arab states in the post-Cold War era do not have much to offer; their bargaining capacity is at the lowest ebb. Their monopoly over oil is also not going to last longer, thanks to the discovery of massive oil and gas reserves in Central Asia and other parts of the world. The recent rise in oil price and the failure of oil producing countries to contain it would seriously damage the economies of the developing nations. Because of this, some of the nations which were traditional champions of the Arab cause have now developed an indifferent attitude towards the Arabs. In such a situation, Israel thinks it can get away with its "iron-fist" policy towards the Palestinians.

However, it is still early to say how the developments in West Asia will take shape. But one thing is certain: if Israel is not restrained from taking a belligerent attitude towards the Palestinians, then the chances are that peace will not return to the region. There is also every possibility of *intifada* spreading to some of the pro-West Arab countries. The absence of democracy in the Arab world is fuelling Islamic militancy in the region which, in turn, gives Israel an excuse for retaining its hold over the territories and fish in the troubled waters.

(The writer is a specialist in West Asia affairs.)

THE HINDU

21 DEC 2000

HD-16 WEST ASIA / ARAFAT IN BETHLEHEM

Shadow of violence on festivities

BETHLEHEM (WEST BANK), DEC. 24. With a cold drizzle falling from an ashen sky, the Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, returned to the West Bank for the first time in almost three months on Sunday to take part in muted Christmas Eve celebrations in Jesus' birthplace of Bethlehem.

Festivities were dramatically scaled back this year in light of the violence in West Asia, which has included regular fighting in and around Bethlehem, a Palestinian-controlled town in the hills just south of Jerusalem. There were no colorful street lights and the traditional festivals and concerts were cancelled.

Tourism to the region has plunged since the violence began in late September and Bethlehem's Manger Square was all but absent of pilgrims from across the globe who in past years joined with Palestinian Christians to ring in the holiday.

The biblical hamlet has become a flashpoint for rock-throwing clashes and gunbattles between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers.

A subdued, mostly Palestinian crowd gathered on Sunday on Manger Square, the plaza that abuts the Church of the Nativity, built atop the site where tradition holds that Jesus was born.

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah, wearing a fuchsia robe and flanked by other members of the clergy, led the traditional procession across the square to the church.

The procession was low-key compared to previous years, when the march was accompanied by marching bands. Some Christians sang as they marched in the procession, but there were no bands.



An armed Palestinian policeman guards the entrance of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem as devotees come out. Christmas-eve celebrations in the town were dramatically scaled down this year in the light of the violence in West Asia. — AP

Mr. Arafat, meanwhile, was scheduled to attend the midnight Mass at the Church of the Nativity, along with a host of other dignitaries.

Mr. Arafat left the West Bank in the days after the Palestinian uprising began at the end of September, and had not been back until Sunday, when he arrived in Bethlehem on a military helicopter from neighbouring Jordan.

Mr. Arafat has spent most of the last three months in the Gaza Strip, with periodic trips abroad.

Saying he was trying to get into the holiday spirit, 17-year-old Palestinian Majid Koklay decided to wear red pants and a red Santa Claus-style cap.

"I thought I would try to have a little fun but it's still sad. I have

friends and classmates who have been hurt or lost their homes," said Koklay as joined the crowd of several hundred in Manger Square.

A group of Palestinian school children danced on a sprawling stage built for this year's millennium celebrations — a marked contrast to the international collection of choirs who gathered at the same site in past Christmases.

Mr. Peter Musgrave (34), of Edinburgh, Scotland was one of the few foreign visitors Sunday. "Back home we have a Christian country and we see all the lights and Christmas decorations, but there's very, very little of that to see here," he said. — AP

THE HINDU

25 DEC 2000

Israelis divided over concessions

ERIC SILVER
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

JERUSALEM, Dec. 25. — The Israelis, it seems, are not ready for a compromise on Jerusalem and the West Bank settlements.

A poll published in today's *Yediot Aharonot* suggests that 60 per cent of Israelis agree to shift Jerusalem's Arab neighbourhoods to Palestinian control while 39 per cent disagree and 1 per cent was undecided.

But when asked specifically about the disputed Temple Mount, 57 per cent of the people opposed transferring it to Palestinian control, even if Israel kept the Wailing Wall down below.

Israelis were equally selective about other concessions dis-

ussed in last week's Israeli-Palestinian talks that now form the core of Mr Bill Clinton's bridging proposals.

A clear majority (51 per cent to 46) support Palestinian rule on 95 per cent of the West Bank, with Israel retaining blocks of settlements close to the old Green Line border. But 72 per cent respondents rejected the return to their homes in Israel of even a token number of refugees who fled in 1948.

Asked if they would support a peace agreement including the entire package, 48 per cent said 'no', 43 per cent said 'yes' and 9 per cent were undecided.

Israelis may have come to terms with the de facto division of Jerusalem. But yielding the Temple Mount is harder 'to

swallow.

The Right-wing Likud challenger, Mr Ariel Sharon, is already drawing support from influential figures who back the peace process and would rather see Mr Barak than Mr Sharon as Prime Minister.

The camp includes at least one minister in Barak's government, Mr Roni Milo.

The Likud mayor of Jerusalem, Mr Ehud Olmert, said: "The initiative to divide Jerusalem is not the fruit of US pressure, but that of Mr Barak's own capitulation." He may be seizing on the issue to rehabilitate himself with his own constituency.

Rabbis insistent: Leading rabbis, not all of them hawks, have rallied to the Temple Mount cause.

The Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, said no Jew has the right to make concessions on the Mount. "We've come here, not by the merits of our strength, but by the strength of our merits, the first of which is the Temple Mount."

Meimad, the Dovish branch of Zionism, is wavering too. Its founder, Rabbi Yehuda Amitai, criticised the Temple Mount concession and Mr Barak's revived "secular revolution".

Mr Yasser Arafat now demands sovereignty over the Temple Mount. If Mr Barak is to sell a deal, he will have to fudge that issue, making a distinction between de facto and de jure control.

Israelis may buy that, but would the Palestinians?

THE STATESMAN

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Barak says yes to deal, Arafat unsure

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM, Dec. 25. — Mr Yasser Arafat and Mr Ehud Barak, two days away from a White House deadline, weighed their willingness today to hold a summit and sign a peace treaty. Mr Arafat expressed reservations; Mr Barak said it was the time to make a deal.

"We still have to thoroughly review the American suggestions," the Palestinian leader told reporters in the Gaza Strip after he and two members of his negotiating team travelled to Egypt to confer with President Hosni Mubarak. "There are a lot of obstacles."

Mr Barak, meanwhile, likened the peace bid to clearing a minefield. "Now we are at the point that the last mines must be dismantled," he told *Yediot Ahronot* newspaper in an interview published in today's edition.

"And this cannot be done without incurring both personal and political risks."

Earlier, a senior Palestinian official said that Mr Clinton's peace plan falls short of Palestinian demands, adds AFP. The official was doubtful if a deal could be hammered out in a short time.

"The ideas presented by the US President do not respond to the minimum Palestinian demands," Palestinian legislative council Speaker, Mr Ahmed Qorei told Voice of Palestine radio.

Describing the plan as an attempt to "compromise" on international legitimacy, Mr Qorei said: "I do not know how it will be possible to achieve an agreement in this short time."



Mr Yasser Arafat discusses the US plan with the Egyptian President, Mr Hosni Mubarak (not in the picture), in Cairo on Monday — AP/PTI

"There are still differences over key issues like Jerusalem, Haram al-Sharif, land and settlements and the issue of Palestinian refugees, and even security."

Fence: Israel is putting up an electric fence along 70 km of the June 1967 war ceasefire line with the West Bank to prevent "terrorist infiltrations", deputy defence minister Mr Ephraim Sneh said.

Pope devotes prayer to West Asia peace

VATICAN CITY, Dec. 25. — Pope John Paul II prayed at Christmas Eve mass on Saint Peter's Square for peace in West Asia, telling Christian communities there the Church shared their anxiety over the region's destiny.

"I think with concern of the holy places, and specially of the town of Bethlehem where sadly, because of the troubled political situation, the evocative rites of Christmas cannot be celebrated with their usual solemnity," the pontiff said at the midnight mass.

"Tonight I would like the Christian communities in those places to feel that the whole church is very close to them," he added. "We share your anxiety for the destiny of the entire region of West Asia."

At the same time, in Bethlehem — where Christ is believed to have been born 2000 years ago — another mass was celebrated by the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, of Palestinian origin.

Mr Yasser Arafat attended the service in St Catherine's church, as he has every year since the Palestinian Authority assumed control of Bethlehem in 1995.

— AFP

THE STATESMAN

26 DEC 2000

Unforgiving Hard State

War Cries Don't Win Peace

By RAHUL SAGAR

WARs that are not scripted, directed and produced by America rarely become international bestsellers. However, recent reporting on a non-American war may have brought international viewers uniquely close to the actual subjectivities and causes of conflict. The Gulf War had marked a watershed attempt to bring reality to our doorstep with large chunks of air time devoted to missiles streaking across the night sky and the surgical precision of laser-guided missiles.

Infrastructure was the most notable casualty of that war and statistics thus formed the basis of reportage. Soon enough, these abstractions were replaced by happier reds, whites and blues, and a voice-over intoned that a war had been initiated, fought and won before our confounded senses. Technology was crowned kingmaker and death seemed to have become a side-effect rather than the brutal centrality of war. A victory was achieved, as Jean Baudrillard argued, for the principle of rational deterrence and little else.

Compare this to an older war now showing on a television screen near you. The actors seem similarly equipped, one efficient and technologically savvy, the other factious and under-equipped. Yet the outcome has been markedly different as death has reoccupied centre-stage and deterrence seems to have failed. Moreover, though Israel may be winning the battle for Jerusalem, it seems to be losing the larger fight for peace. War reporting now truly at the frontline, has provided a fresh reminder of why this has been the case by depicting the smaller, sub-state battles that show how the use of force wins wars but not peace.

On September 30, the world witnessed a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Muhammad al-Durrah, being shot dead by the Israeli army. The incredible footage was promptly beamed around the world to an audience that included President Bill Clinton. Faced with a public relations disaster, the Israeli establishment chose to respond to accusations of brutality by criticising the Palestinians for making cynical use of children in clashes. This response deserves closer inspection.

Military strategists derive their fundamental tenets from the rational choice theory which assumes that individuals make rational choices through a process of reasoning and careful calculation. The hard state reputation that the Israelis have cultivated for them-

selves flows from such reasoning. It hopes, in effect, to make every terrorist think twice when calculating the odds of Israeli response to their actions. The Israeli efforts to eliminate the Black September terrorists was a classic example of credibility or reputation-building — it sent out a clear warning to those that confronted the interests of Israel by promising to counter violence with more violence. The message was clear: the hard state is always unforgiving.

Given the careful construction of a hard reputation by the Israeli state, the gruesome footage of the past months has been valuable precisely because the cameras showed the violence that resulted from and despite the Israeli attempts at deterrence. Yet, rather than exhibiting cynicism, the Palestinians have sacrificed lives and loved ones for the greater good of Palestine making their actions seem altruistic.

IN BRIEF

- Israel has built up a reputation as a hard state which counters violence with greater violence
- Palestinians have been taking on Israel, defying the fatalities logic that goes against them
- Perhaps they are doing so because they have so little to live for
- A hard state can win wars, but not peace

How can we explain this? Glorious martyrdom may have motivated some deaths, but despair probably motivated the majority. The protesting Palestinians, commentators have noted, continue to risk death daily because there seems to be so little to live for otherwise. Consequently, by denying the Palestinians any hope of dignity in the future, the Israelis are generating newer forms of discontent.

This belief is strengthened because the violence itself was initiated by angry mobs (rather than terrorists) who were responding to a visit by Israeli leader Ariel Sharon to the disputed and sacred shrine of Haram-Al-Sharif. Though cynical terrorists may, in fact, be deterred by the precise calculations of success-failure ratios in encountering the Israeli state, the angry mobs were spurred by precisely the opposite motivation — a desire for rough and ready justice. The statistics should deter any rational Palestinian; over 1,000 injured and over 200 dead at the last count. Yet,

in scattered bunches, Palestinians throw rocks and fire AK-47s at armoured vehicles, displaying how rationality is made dispensable.

Political scientists often struggle to reconcile the broad-based assumption of individual rationality with the irrationality of mass social or political movements. The free rider problem, it is argued, should render individual participation irrational, i.e. each should, in effect, seek cynically to benefit from the sacrifices of others. Collectively then none should protest. But the willingness of Palestinian society collectively to risk death is both rare and dangerous; it is a sign of exhaustion with the vicissitudes of life.

Terrorist organisations prosper in such environments as they are supplied with individuals made irrational by the seemingly rational actions of others. Soon mutual irrationality becomes the norm and makes the apportioning of blame an impossible exercise. A truer war is then depicted in uglier pictures. War is no longer information. Its story lies before us in technicolour replete with good and bad guys that frequently switch places. Unlike American wars, the frontlines and conclusions of such wars are not determined by opinion polls and press conferences. Quite evidently, victory in this war does not mean peace and defeat does not mean surrender. The absence of war no longer means peace.

Philosopher Herodotus wrote: In peace sons bury fathers, but war violates the order of nature, and fathers bury sons. On the long and tortuous path to an Arab-Israeli peace, the death of young Muhammad al-Durrah is barely a side-step for the juggernaut of history. Nevertheless, televised episodes of the resulting violence have challenged the 'peace through strength' assumptions of the rational deterrence theory. Myra Max Ferre once criticised rational choice theory for divorcing reason from emotion. Today, the illegitimacy of this dichotomy has been uniquely captured by television in the confrontation between a state that focuses upon deterrence and a people that refuse to cower any longer. The unforgiving hard state it appears may win wars but it will not win peace. The question now is: Will the Israeli candidates and more durably the Israeli people keep this in mind during the coming election?

(The author is a Michael von Clem fellow-elect at Harvard University.)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

27 DEC 2000

579
27/12

Refugee row still blocks W Asia peace

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM, Dec. 26. — The longtime Palestinian demand that millions of refugees be allowed to return to Israel loomed as a potential stumbling block as the two sides prepared on Tuesday to respond to the latest US peace proposals.

The Palestinians said they would reject a deal that does not resolve the fate of several million Palestinian refugees who fled or were driven from their homes during West Asia wars.

"As a matter of principle, an agreement with Israel must include the right of return for the Palestinians," said Hussein Asheik, a leader in Palestinian leader Mr Yasser

Arafat's Fatah faction. "It is the right of every Palestinian to say if they want to return or not."

But Israeli lawmaker Mr Yossi Sarid, who heads the Meretz Party and has been involved in recent peace efforts, said the Palestinians would have to make concessions on the issue.

Israel says it cannot accept so many Palestinian refugees,

which would dramatically change the demography of the Jewish state.

"Dreams are hard to fulfil. You have to wake up at some point. Furthermore we don't have the ability to fulfil this dream in reality. The right of return is a well-known issue, but the Palestinians know it can't happen inside Israel's borders," Mr Sarid told Israel's Army radio.

Both sides have suggested submitting alterations to the ideas, but Mr Clinton has informed them that only slight changes would be accepted, Israel Radio reported.

Meanwhile Mr Arafat planned to convene a meeting of his negotiators on Tuesday to discuss the proposals.

Fresh violence: In the West Bank town of Nablus there was an exchange of fire early Tuesday between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli soldiers in a nearby outpost.

The Islamic militant group Hamas, which opposes peace with Israel, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on Friday in which three Israelis were injured.



Mr Yasser Arafat

THE STATESMAN

27 DEC 2000

WEST ASIA / U.S. DEADLINE EXPIRES TODAY

HD-18 27/12

Israel ready to accept Clinton plan

JERUSALEM, DEC. 26. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, has told the country in a nationally televised programme that he was inclined to accept the proposals put forth by the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, for bringing about lasting peace to West Asia, if the Palestinians did so.

"I believe that if the other side sees its way to accepting them as they are, we too will have to accept them. However, I am not sure that that is the situation. At this moment, I do not know what the answers of the two sides will be," Mr. Barak told Israel's Channel 2 television on Monday night. His announcement came as the Israelis and Palestinians debated the U.S. proposals on the future of a Jerusalem holy site and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

Mr. Clinton wants Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reply by Wednesday to his most recent proposals, which include a trade-off on two of the most emotionally loaded points of contention. Israel would be required to relinquish sovereignty claims over holy sites in east Jerusalem and the Palestinians would have to substantially scale back their demand on a "right of return" for the refugees, according to media



An Orthodox Jew walks past the Dome of the Rock in the Old City of Jerusalem on Tuesday. Control over the holy sites in the Old City is one of the most contentious issues in the ongoing peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. — Reuters

reports. The Palestinians have said they would reject a deal that does not resolve the fate of several million Palestinian refugees who fled or were driven from their homes during West Asia wars.

"As a matter of principle, an agreement with Israel must include the right of return for the Palestinians," said Mr. Hussein Asheik, a leader in the Palestinian

leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction. "It is the right of every Palestinian to say if they want to return or not." But the Israeli lawmaker, Mr. Yossi Sarid, who heads the dovish Meretz party and has been involved in recent peace efforts, said the Palestinians would have to make concessions on the issue. Israel says it cannot accept so many Palestinian refugees,

who would dramatically change the demographics of the Jewish state.

"Dreams are hard to fulfill. You have to wake up at some point. Furthermore, we don't have the ability to fulfill this dream in reality. The right of return is a well-known issue, but the Palestinians know it can't happen inside Israel's borders," Mr. Sarid said.

Both sides have suggested submitting alterations to the ideas, but Mr. Clinton has informed them that only slight changes would be accepted, Israel radio reported.

Mr. Arafat planned to convene a meeting of his negotiators to discuss the proposals. "At this stage I don't think anyone can say 'yes' or 'no' to the American ideas," said the senior Palestinian negotiator, Mr. Saeb Erekat. "There are so many points that need to be clarified, there are so many questions that need to be asked and there are so many details needed in order to lead to an answer at this stage."

Meanwhile, the Israeli Cabinet Minister, Mr. Shimon Peres, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in West Asia peace-making, said Israel must seize the opportunity to make a final deal. — AP

THE HINDU

27 DEC 2000

HD-16 28/12

Barak, Arafat to meet today

JERUSALEM, DEC. 27. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, and the Palestinian President, Mr. Yasser Arafat, are to meet in Egypt on Thursday on the U.S. peace proposals that have drawn reservations from both the warring sides.

Mr. Barak convened his Security Cabinet today to formulate a response to the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton's ideas on a framework for an elusive final peace agreement. Mr. Arafat was to consult with the PLO's Executive Committee later in the day.

"Arafat is going to Sharm el-Sheikh tomorrow," a senior Palestinian official said.

An Israeli official had said on Tuesday that Mr. Arafat and Mr. Barak would meet at the Egyptian Red Sea resort but Palestinian officials had spoken only of the possibility of a summit.

As both sides pondered Mr. Clinton's last-ditch bid to cap his presidency with a peace deal, Palestinians and Israeli soldiers exchanged fire overnight in the West Bank.

No deaths have been reported over the last three days — a rarity in a three-month-old Palestinian uprising in which at least 343 people, mainly Palestinians, have been killed. The dead include 52 Israelis, 13 of whom were Arabs.

"My main mission is keep to a minimum the number of military cemeteries", Israel Radio quoted Mr. Barak as telling the Cabinet.

Mr. Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israel's Foreign Minister and chief peace negotiator, said the Security Cabinet meeting was likely to be lengthy.

"I estimate these deliberations will continue into the night — we will have recess — and in the wake of this discussion, we will decide what Israel's answer will



Yasser Arafat



Ehud Barak

be," he told Army Radio.

Mr. Clinton's proposals for a final peace deal, both sides said, tackled issues at the heart of the 52-year-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict such as the future of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements and final borders.

Acceptance by both sides of Mr. Clinton's proposals, raised after five days of Israeli-Palestinian talks in Washington last week, was likely to bring Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat to the U.S. capital for an intensive push towards a final deal.

"We also have many reservations. They (the Palestinians) will present reservations, we will present reservations and on this basis, the President will decide if there is a platform for a summit," Mr. Ben-Ami said.

"My assessment is both sides will answer, 'yes but.'"

Mr. Arafat said the four-day Eid al-Fitr holiday that began on Wednesday would be a decisive time.

"This Eid is a decisive Eid. God willing, it will represent a strong start in which a Palestinian boy or girl will raise the flag of Palestine

the official said, referring to a failed U.S.-hosted summit with Israel in July.

The Palestinian official said Mr. Clinton's proposals effectively meant that Israel keep would nine per cent of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, captured along with Arab East Jerusalem in the 1967 war.

He said the proposals called for the Israeli annexation of five per cent of the land, a long-term lease by Israel of three per cent and "one per cent annexation of Jewish settlements", in Jerusalem. Israel, he said, also wanted a leasing arrangement so it could hold onto the settlement of Kiryat Arba, adjacent to the divided West Bank town of Hebron, and for Jewish settlers to remain in areas inside Hebron.

The official said the U.S. ideas also did not differ from the Camp David proposals on the Jerusalem holy site revered by Muslims as Al-Haram Al-Sharif and by Jews as Temple Mount.

Palestinians, he said, would be offered sovereignty on top of the compound, the site of the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques, while Israel would control the area underneath, including Judaism's Western Wall.

In his comments, the official made no reference to possible compromise over the issue of the right to return of refugees that fled or were forced to abandon their homes in 1948 when Israel was established on their lands in historical Palestine.

U.N. figures put the number of refugees and their descendants born in exile at around 3.5 million, scattered throughout Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. — Reuters

THE HINDU

28 DEC 2000

West Asia foes call off summit

PTI & AFP

WASHINGTON, Dec. 28. — Dealing a blow to President Bill Clinton's optimistic proclamation that Palestinians and Israelis are "closer than they have ever been before", the two sides have cancelled the summit scheduled at Sharm el-Sheik today.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, yesterday expressed his country's readiness to accept the Clinton peace proposal mooted during the recent talks in Washington. But officials in Cairo today said he had decided not to attend the summit in Egypt that was to be presided over by President Hosni Mubarak.

Mr Yasser Arafat has sent a message to White House announcing his intention to stay away as well.

A Palestinian official said he had rejected the peace deal as it did not fulfil the UN resolutions.

The Clinton proposal did not include "right to return" of Arab refugees to West Bank and handing over of territory by Israel which Palestine lost in the 1967 war, conditions steadfastly stressed by Palestine and rejected by Israel.

US officials, however, said Mr Arafat's communication was neither acceptance nor rejection,



Mr Ehud Barak

VIOLENCE AGAIN

JERUSALEM, Dec. 28. — A bus bomb exploded in Tel Aviv business district today, and a second blast ripped a junction at the edge of the Gaza Strip. Two Israelis were killed and at least 16 hurt, officials said.

The violence erupted as both Israel and the Palestinians balked at crucial provisions of American peace proposals they were handed last week. — AP

tion, but a plea for more time.

President Mubarak had earlier said Mr Arafat wouldn't get a better West Asia peace deal than the Clinton plan, short of war.

"By war, maybe, but through peaceful methods, no," officials quoted Mr Mubarak as saying,

a report in The Times, London, said.

Mr Barak has been facing mounting opposition at home against the compromise proposed at Washington to relinquish to Palestinians the sovereignty over Jerusalem and Al-aqsa mosque.

Jerusalem's mayor Mr Ehud Olmert accused Mr Barak of "tearing Jerusalem into pieces".

It was fiercely opposed by right-wing leader Mr Ariel Sharon. The offer was also rejected by the Palestinians who saw in it a "a trap".

Today, Mr Barak's security adviser, Mr Danny Yatom, said Mr Barak wouldn't sign any deal transferring the sovereignty over the Al-aqsa compound to the Palestinians.

Mr Barak's Cabinet issued a statement after an overnight meeting, saying it considered the US ideas as "a basis for discussion" as long they were also acceptable to the Palestinians but that it was seeking a "number of clarifications concerning matters of essential interest to Israel".

Al-aqsa is the third holiest shrine in the Muslim world and the holiest to Jews as it sits atop the site of ancient Jewish temples.

It lies in the city of East Jerusalem which Israel captured and annexed in 1967.

Israel to erect fence that could be border

ROSS DUNN
THE TIMES, LONDON

JERUSALEM, Dec. 28. — Israel is to erect a security fence along 46 miles of West Bank in what could be the first step to defining the future borders of a Palestinian state.

Mr Ephraim Sneh, the deputy defence minister, said the fence would consist of cement walls, iron rails and concrete blocks. "It is a barrier to hinder anyone who wants to bring a vehicle into Israel, whether for a terrorist act or other purposes."

He said: "We have to give security to the Israelis living here. How do we do that? By creating a sort of buffer with obstacles between the Green Line (the borders of Israel before 1967) and the West Bank."

During the 1967 Middle East war, Israel captured West Bank from Jordan. It is proposing to hand most of the territory to the Palestinians as part of a peace settlement.

Mr Sneh denied that the fence, which will cost Israel 16.8 million pounds, amounted to a political border. It was simply to boost security, stopping Palestinians from transporting 'bombs' from West Bank and thieves from stealing cars and farm equipment and smuggling them back.

"It is not certain that in essence we will be returning to the 1967 borders," he said. "Then, there was a hostile and aggressive Arab army and Jordanian artillery batteries (along the border). After the agreement is signed, there will be no Arab army west of the Jordan River."

Members of the Opposition Likud dismissed the plan as nothing more than an "election gimmick" for Mr Ehud Barak, who is going to the polls on February 6.

"This is going to cost the taxpayers a lot of money, but that's about all the effect it's going to have," said Mr Moshe Arens, former defence minister.

THE STATESMAN

2009 DEC 29 2000

29 DEC 2000

29 DEC 2000

Israel suspends talks on Phalcon deal with India

W.K. 13
- 29/12
Jerusalem, December 28

ADVANCED NEGOTIATIONS between India and Israel on the sale of Phalcon airborne radar system to New Delhi have been put on hold pending change of guard in the US, Israeli defence ministry sources said.

Discussions on the deal were suspended as Tel Aviv was uncertain about the stance of the new American administration on supply of two sophisticated Phalcon Awacs planes to India, Israeli English daily Ha'aretz quoted the sources as saying.

The US is reported to have opposed the deal fearing it could escalate tension in south Asia and upset the fragile balance of power between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Earlier, media reports quoting sources in Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office said India had expressed doubts about Israel's ability to supply the spy planes.

Indian officials had also expressed concern on the deal during talks with Israeli defence ministry director general Amos Yaron who visited New Delhi in September.

Though New Delhi and Tel Aviv have not reached final terms on the Phalcon deal, contacts for it are believed to be underway. (PTI)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

29 DEC 2000

Barak cancels meeting with Arafat

CAIRO, DEC. 28. The Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, huddled with the Egyptian President, Mr. Hosni Mubarak, today as he contemplated U.S. suggestions on how to make peace with Israel — ideas that have drawn angry opposition from some of his fellow Arabs.

Mr. Arafat's meeting with Mr. Mubarak, a key regional mediator, came a day after the Palestinian decision-making body effectively rejected the U.S. proposals. Israeli leaders had said the proposals could form the basis for talks. Given the Palestinian response, the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, called off his trip to Egypt today for what could have been his first meeting with Mr. Arafat in two months.

Mr. Arafat, accompanied by several top aides, made no comment as he went into meetings at a presidential guest house in Cairo. Egypt is a moderate voice in the region whose leaders have repeatedly said the peace process is the only way for the Israelis and Palestinians to work out their differences. But Egyptian officials were so far silent on whether they were encouraging Mr. Arafat to look at the U.S. proposals as a vehicle for making progress.

In an editorial today in the leading Egyptian newspaper *Al Gomhuria*, the Chief Editor and Mubarak confidant, Mr. Samir Ragab, said Arabs "unanimously



The Egyptian President, Mr. Hosni Mubarak (right), with the visiting Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, in Cairo on Thursday. — AP

rejected" the U.S. proposals, which he said were presented to the Palestinians as "take it or leave it." "This offer does not meet Arab and Palestinian interests and there is nothing which will force us to accept it," Mr. Ragab said.

Arabs were especially critical of the proposal that the Palestinians to drop their decades-old demand that their descendants who fled or were driven from homes in Israel during and after the country's war of independence five decades ago must have the right to return to their original homes.

About 4 million Palestinians,

most now living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, would be affected. Jordanian officials maintained a careful silence today, refusing even to confirm or deny reports that the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, called Jordan's King Abdullah yesterday seeking his support.

Jordan and Egypt, the only Arab states with peace treaties with Israel, have been important go-betweens in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. Jordan, though, is in a sensitive position with regard to the refugee question.

In Lebanon, a Foreign Ministry official, speaking on condition of

anonymity, repeated his country's rejection of "any agreement between Palestinians and Israelis that may be related to the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon without Lebanon being party to the agreement because Lebanon is directly concerned in the matter and must participate in any decision that affects the fate of refugees on its territory."

Blasts in Tel Aviv

At least two explosions blew up a bus in Israel's Tel Aviv today, wounding at least 13 people, hospital officials said.

Police said the explosions rocked the inter-city bus around midday on a main street, and that the damage appeared to be limited. One police official described it as a "terrorist attack" and a fire department official said rescue workers were checking for other bombs.

A medical official said at least 13 people had been hurt. A fire department official said it seemed most of the people had been only slightly injured.

Two car bombs have blown up inside Israel since Palestinians Israeli security forces began fighting three months ago. At least 343 people, all Palestinian except for 39 Israelis and 13 Israeli Arabs, have been killed in the violence. Four people were killed in the car bomb attacks inside Israel. — AP, Reuters

THE HINDU

29 DEC 2000

WEST ASIA / CLINTON FEELS FRUSTRATED

Blasts further dampen peace efforts

JERUSALEM, DEC. 29. Israel closed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Friday in response to bomb attacks that killed two Israeli soldiers, wounded 16 people and further hampered efforts to forge a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Israel had just begun relaxing a closure that was imposed on the Palestinian territories shortly after violence erupted three months ago, allowing 16,000 Palestinian workers to travel to their jobs in Israel. Now those permits had been cancelled, the military said.

Also, Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza were not permitted to attend Friday services at the Al Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem. During the just-completed Muslim holy month of Ramzan, Israel allowed a few busloads of Palestinians from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for Friday prayers.

Overnight, Israeli special forces in the West Bank arrested eight Palestinians suspected of hostile activities, the army said.

In Tel Aviv, two small bombs exploded in the back of a city bus on a main street, injuring 14 people, two seriously. Hours later, two Israeli soldiers died and two others were hurt in a bomb blast in the Gaza Strip.

The latest outbreak of violence came as both Israel and the Palestinians balked at crucial provisions of American peace



Israeli border police arrest a Jew who the police said tried to skirt security and get onto the Temple Mount to pray, forbidden under arrangements with Islamic authorities, at the site of the ancient Biblical Jewish temples and current site of the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, in Jerusalem's Old City on Thursday. — AP

proposals they were handed last week. That drew a frustrated response from the President, Mr. Bill Clinton, whose hopes of brokering a peace deal before he leaves office January 20 were fast fading.

"There is no point in our talking further unless both sides accept the parameters I have laid out," Mr. Clinton said in Wash-

ington. Mr. Clinton had suggested giving the Palestinians a state in 95 per cent of the West Bank and all of Gaza as well as sovereignty over Arab neighbourhoods and a disputed holy site in Jerusalem. In exchange for Israeli concessions in Jerusalem, the Palestinians would curtail demands for nearly 4 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants to be allowed

to return to their original homes in Israel.

After initially indicating they might go along with the plan, Israeli officials expressed reservations on Thursday, reflecting opposition among Israelis to handing key parts of Jerusalem over to the Palestinians.

Israel television reported that the army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, told Israel's Cabinet that the plan would leave Jewish neighbourhoods in Jerusalem isolated and vulnerable to attack; and the military less able to defend civilian populations.

Mr. Barak pledged that Israel would hunt down the perpetrators, but he would not be deterred from seeking peace.

Mr. Barak faces elections February 6 and trails his opponent, Mr. Ariel Sharon, in the polls. Experts say Mr. Barak needs a peace agreement if he is to have a chance of re-election.

Israel's Cabinet said the proposals were a basis for further negotiations, if the Palestinians also accepted them. But the Palestinians gave the U.S. a letter reiterating their traditional stand, demanding sovereignty over all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem and insisting that all refugees be allowed to return to Israel. Egypt cancelled a summit meeting with Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat after the Palestinian response. — AP

THE HINDU

30 DEC 2000

Israel, Palestine peace agreement well underway

BY JONATHAN WRIGHT

Washington, April 8: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began a week of talks at secluded Bolling Air Force Base in Washington on Friday as the target date approached for a framework agreement on borders, Jerusalem and refugees.

But the middle-level negotiating teams, led by Oded Eran for Israel and Yasser Abed Rabbo for the Palestinians, are unlikely to reach an agreement without more talks between their leaders, diplomats said on Friday.

"No single round of talks can be expected to solve all the complex core issues between Israelis and Palestinians," added Israeli Embassy spokesman Mark Regev.

"This round must be seen as another link in a process towards reaching a framework agreement by May," he said.

The framework agreement is meant as a step toward a comprehensive agreement by Sept. 13 covering all the so-called final status issues such as the size and status of the Palestinian territories, Jerusalem, water rights, the fate of Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

The same negotiators met at Bolling for one week last month without any evidence of either progress or deadlock. (Reuters)

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Talks waste
of time, says
Yasser Arafat

Ramallah (West Bank), April 8: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has said that peace negotiations with Israel are a waste of time and called for deeper US intervention to pressure Tel Aviv to make concessions.

But a state department spokesman said no American proposals were expected at this point.

Negotiators opened a new round on Friday in Washington in the talks they hope will bring a final peace agreement by September 13. But the sides have been unable to achieve concrete results on the most contentious issues.

Mr. Arafat told on Friday, his cabinet in a meeting in the West Bank City of Ramallah that Israel had not budged in the talks.

"It's necessary that the American side ... Participate effectively because of the intransigent Israeli position, which is wasting time," Mr. Arafat said, according to official minutes of the meeting.

Israel "has made the negotiations revolve in empty circle without achieving any progress," Mr. Arafat said. (AP)

THE ASIAN AGE

- 9 APR 2000

Address refugees issue, Lebanon tells U.N.

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) APRIL 8. Lebanon's President, Mr. Emile Lahoud, has asked the United Nations to clarify how it will deal with the Palestinian refugees living in his country if they try to exercise their right to return to Israel and resort to violence in the process.

His raising of an issue that had been overshadowed for a long time might be characterised as an attempt to derail Israel's plan to pull its troops out of Lebanon even without a formal agreement between the two Governments. However, the question raised by Mr. Lahoud is very pertinent and Israel and the United States might not be able to just turn away from it as they are currently inclined to do.

Israel has declared that it will withdraw troops from a zone they occupy in southern Lebanon by July 7 this year irrespective of

whether or not they have reached agreement on this and other issues with the Government in Beirut. Since the Syria-Israeli truce of the West Asian negotiations are currently stalled and since any talks between Israel and Lebanon will only start when the Syria-Israel deadlock is broken, it is more likely that Israel will withdraw without an agreement rather than with one.

Since Israel believes that the Lebanese military will be unable or unwilling to police the border, and stop militants from striking into Israeli territory, they have approached the U.N. with the request that the multi-national force already located in Lebanon be augmented and moved up to the borders to patrol it. This is the context in which Mr. Lahoud set out on Wednesday a "Presidential Memorandum" addressed to the U.N. Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan.

Among the issues raised in the

three-page document, the most important was of how the peace-keeping force UNIFIL (U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon) would deal with Palestinian militants. The various Palestinian parties owe the allegiance of armed militants among the 350,000 of their people who live in Lebanon in or outside the 12 refugee camps. "If certain Palestinian groups tried to carry out operations across the border in the context of their right of return and in the absence of any solution for their future, do you think the international force will be able to carry out daily small-scale military operations at the border?", Mr. Lahoud asked in his memorandum. He pointed out that Israel had invaded Lebanon in 1978 in response to "provocation" by Palestinian militants and wondered whether Mr. Annan should not, in Lebanon's interest, direct UNIFIL to disarm the militants.

It is very unlikely that the coun-

tries that have contributed troops to UNIFIL, including India, will agree that their troops should enter into the potentially hazardous task of entering crowded refugee camps to disarm the militants. These militant groups have been relatively quiescent for years now. It had generally been assumed that the only security concern arising out of an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied zone was about the future behaviour of the militias, Hizbollah and Shia Amal, which have been fighting the Israeli occupation force all this time.

Hizbollah, which has carried out most of the attacks, have refused to give any guarantee that they will refrain from attacking Israel once all of Lebanon is liberated. But the gut assessment of most analysts is that Hizbollah will most probably refrain. In any case, an augmented UNIFIL closer to the border was expected to at least partially tackle this prob-

lem if it did arise. In alluding to the possibility that the Palestinian groups might resort to cross-border military activity, Mr. Lahoud did have the relevant point that security assessments must be broader in scope. But, Israel's argument is that Mr. Lahoud is merely raising a bogey since the Palestinian groups within his country have not resorted to such activity for a long time now.

The Israelis believe that Syria, which has great influence over Lebanon, does not want Israel to go through with a unilateral pull-out. By being constantly engaged by the Hizbollah, which Syria can contain, Israel is under pressure to make concessions to Syria.

The Israeli argument is a persuasive one. But that does not negate Mr. Lahoud's reminder that there will be in Lebanon, even after an Israeli withdrawal, people with legitimate grievances against Israel.

APR 10 1982

Arafat blasts Barak for 'refusing peace'

GAZA CITY: Palestinian leader



Yasser Arafat

Yasser Arafat has delivered a scathing attack on Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, saying new hopes in the peace process had "evaporated."

He was speaking after returning from talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Sunday in Cairo, where he warned that relations with the Israelis were at an all-time low.

Talks in Washington between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to try to hammer out an accord were getting nowhere, he said. Mr Arafat told reporters on his return to Gaza City that there had still been "no full response from the Israeli side regarding the implementation of what has been agreed on so far."

And earlier, at a news conference with Egyptian reporters, he denounced Mr Barak as the "leader of hardliners and settlers," Egypt's Mena news agency reported.

Mr Arafat predicted that Mr Barak, elected last year on a platform of peace with the Arab world, would fall from power just like his right-wing predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu "if he continues to refuse peace." Peace talks with Israel, which resumed in Washington last week, "have not moved forward and haven't even touched on the fundamental issues," Mena re-

ported.

He accused Mr Barak of turning his back on the roots of the Labour Party, saying he had instead "formed his own presidential party—in fact he does not consult anyone but himself," Mena reported.

Mr Barak has, meanwhile, told his cabinet that Israel plans to annex Jewish areas around Jerusalem and in exchange transfer Palestinian villages to the Palestinian authority, Israel's Channel Two television said. "We intend to annex Maale Adumim, Gilo, Ramot and Pisgat Zeev to Jerusalem, and in exchange we will transfer Anata and Abu Dis to Palestinian rule," Mr Barak was quoted as saying to the cabinet in its weekly meeting on Sunday.

"We will transfer Abu Dis and Anata to Palestinian rule, we don't want to annex 50,000 Palestinians to Jerusalem."

According to the television, the annexation and transfer of these areas was to take place within the framework of the final status agreement which was scheduled to be concluded by September 13.

Abu Dis and Anata are two villages around Jerusalem which are inhabited by Palestinians. Mr Barak had intended to transfer Anata to full Palestinian rule during the last land transfer under the Sahrn El-Sheikh agreement signed in September, but following pressure from within his own government he changed the withdrawal map. (Agencies)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

11 APR 2003

Barak in USA for talks

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

WASHINGTON, April 11. — Spurred by setbacks on all fronts in West Asia talks, the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, flew in here for talks today with the chief peace process sponsor, President Bill Clinton.

"It's a good moment to move the process forward. There is a lot of hard work that needs to be done," the White House spokesman, Mr Mike Hammer said, pointing to fast approaching deadlines for ending the 50-year conflict.

Topping the agenda of the evening talks will be the Israeli-Palestinian framework accord that missed its March timetable and now is slated for May and must pave the way for a final peace deal in September.

W. Asia (10) SF-9 12/4

The whirlwind trip, which includes talks with the US envoy, Mr Dennis Ross, Secretary of State, Ms Madeleine Albright, and National Security Advisor, Mr Sandy Berger, was initiated by Israel, a US administration official said.

Mr Barak will deliver his final offer to Mr Clinton, according to his spokesman, who said on Israeli television yesterday that the Prime Minister will spell out where "exactly the red lines are that Israel will not go beyond".

But the Palestinian leader, Mr Yasser Arafat, who follows Mr Barak to the White House on 20 April, is attacking Mr Barak as the "leader of hardliners and settlers" and accusing him of foot-dragging in negotiations.

Mr Barak recently announced

the annexation of three Israeli settlements, throwing fuel on the hottest fire in the dispute: the future of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the status of Jerusalem.

But the White House spokesman, Mr Joe Lockhart, chided Mr Arafat for the remarks, which he said, do "not positively contribute to an ultimate solution here".

Despite the differences, however, the Israeli-Palestinian track is where United States officials may hope to make the most headway, as the Syrian track is frozen and the process with Lebanon has not yet begun.

High-level Palestinian-Israeli talks are continuing at Bolling Air Base just outside Washington. US officials insist — if somewhat defensively — that progress is being made

there.

"It is not our assessment that they are a waste of time," State Department spokesman, Mr James Rubin, said in response to Mr Arafat's suggestion that the negotiations were futile.

Mr Barak will also discuss the shattered peace talks with Syria and plans for pulling his troops out of Lebanon.

Reuters adds from Damascus: A Syrian official today said chances for peace between Syria and Israel were fading and greater efforts by the USA were needed to rescue the peace process.

Mr Fouad Mardoud, editor of the government's English-language daily *Syria Times*, said Washington should exert pressure on the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, to accept full withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

THE TELEGRAPH

12 APR 2000

No new light after Clinton meets Barak

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

WASHINGTON, April 12. — The US President, Mr Bill Clinton, and Israel's Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, agreed to speed up deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian talks in the face of looming deadlines but had no breakthroughs to announce, officials said.

The two stretched a planned one-hour meeting into four at the White House today for an exhaustive review of all the troubled West Asia peace tracks in which Mr Clinton is actively mediating.

"The President feels coming out of this very encouraged, there is an intensification, a renewed energy on the Palestinian track and he looks forward to building on that momentum," a US official said on condition of anonymity.

Mr Barak, who left Washington for Jerusalem at midnight yesterday after a 21-hour visit, made no official statement after the meeting, but an Israeli official travelling with him revealed some details of the discussions.

"Barak and Clinton agreed to accelerate the Palestinian track," said the Israeli official on condition of anonymity.

The Palestinian leader, Mr Yasser Arafat, has accused Mr Barak of foot-dragging on a framework agreement due in May that is to produce a final accord in September and the US official acknowledged that "there are gaps to be overcome."

Mr Arafat was due here for talks on 20 April and the official said that the meeting combined with the ongoing talks between Palestinian and Israeli negotiators at the Bolling Air Base in Washington "will give us a good sense of where we are".

The bulk of the talks here were on the Palestinian track, the official said. But, Mr Clinton also briefed Mr Barak on the responses Syria's President Hafez al-Assad gave him at their meeting in Geneva last month.

THE STATESMAN

1 APR 2000

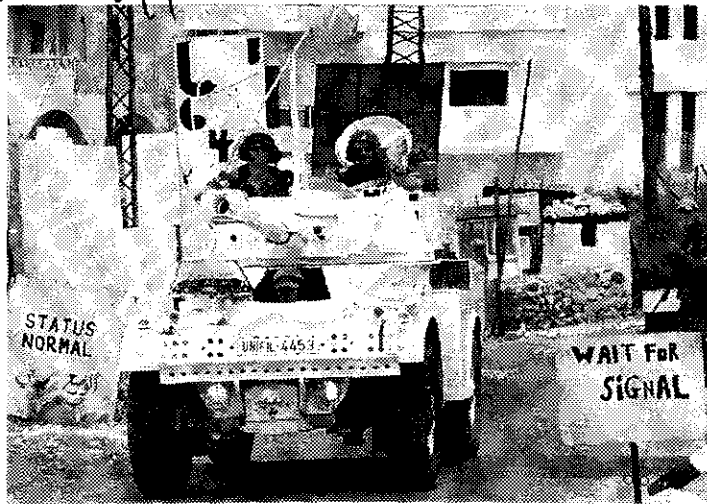
Israeli move leaves many issues unresolved

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), APRIL 19. Israel has formally notified the U.N. Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, of its intention to withdraw from the zone it occupies in southern Lebanon by the first week of July. With time being so short, it is almost certain that such a withdrawal will be a unilateral move by Israel and not one to be carried out under the terms of an agreement with Lebanon. But Lebanon and Syria, which has great influence over its western neighbour, have misgivings about a unilateral Israeli withdrawal. But they will probably have to face the inevitable and address the serious issues which will be thrown up by the pull-out.

So long as the prospect for talks between Israel and Syria are fair, there is a chance that negotiations between Israel and Lebanon too could follow in quick order. Since negotiations on the Syria-Israel tracks are frozen and since there is very little chance that Lebanon will break ranks with its Arab partner, there is now very little chance that Israel could pull its troops out of Lebanon under the terms of an agreement with Beirut.

Sans an agreement with Israel, Lebanon believes that Israel's se-



An armoured personnel carrier of the U.N. peace-keepers doing a routine patrol at the southern Lebanese village of Tebnine on Tuesday. — AP

curity is none of its concern. They want the UNIFIL to concentrate on its original mandate and the multinational force will probably have its task cut out in fulfilling this role alone.

Depending on the mode and time-frame of the Israeli withdrawal, southern Lebanon could turn into a zone of unrestricted combat between the pro and anti-Israel militias operating there. Israel also told the U.N. that it

would take in between 3000 and 4000 members of the South Lebanon Army the militia which has been assisting it in its occupation of the southern zone.

From earlier published accounts of the SLA's strength, the figure would appear to account for nearly the whole of the militia. However, some of the SLA leaders have said that they would not leave their homes in their native Lebanon. Hezbollah, the main

militia fighting the Israeli occupation has warned that the SLA members will have to submit to the Lebanese laws and court rulings under which they have either already been, or will be, tried and convicted (to death in the case of SLA senior officers) on charges of treason and collaborating with the enemy.

If the SLA responds to the Israeli offer, it will save the Lebanese Government from facing a serious problem. The fragile truce between Lebanon's ethnic groups is beginning to show signs of strain with the Maronite Christian leadership calling for an amnesty to the SLA's fighters and the Shia groups, especially the Hezbollah, determined to bring them to justice. Friction on this issue could unravel the bonds which are being slowly built between Lebanon's ethnic groups.

Lebanese released

AFP reports from Ayalon prison, Israel: Israel has released all but two of 15 Lebanese detainees held as bargaining chips for missing Israeli servicemen, after bowing to a Supreme Court ruling, officials said. However, the two most important detainees, Sheikh Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani were not released. — AFP

20 APR 2000

Arafat, Clinton to meet to speed up talks with Israel

JERUSALEM: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is due to meet U.S. President Bill Clinton on Thursday in a bid to speed up peace talks with Israel as the mid-May deadline looms for the next stage of the Palestinian peace track. ²⁰⁰⁴ (AP)

A third round of talks ⁰¹⁻¹⁶ kicks off April 24 in Washington but little progress has been visible so far. The chief Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo said last Thursday that the second round of talks ended with an exchange of texts on a structure for a framework accord.

Mr Arafat's White House meeting comes nine days after Mr Clinton held talks in Washington with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. At the end of that meeting, the two leaders made a commitment to re-launch Israeli-Palestinian talks, but did not offer any new proposals.

The two sides are increasingly pessimistic both about the chances of reaching a framework accord on the final status agreement by the middle of May, and also about finalising details of the definitive agreement by September 13, as they have pledged to do. (AFP)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

20 APR 2000

Syrian presence in Lebanon to continue?

By Kesava Menon *U.A. 11*

110-16
MANAMA (BAHRAIN), APRIL 21. The Lebanese President, Mr. Emile Lahoud is about to wind up an extensive tour of the Gulf States and other West Asian countries. Official communiqués issued during the tour have been of the usual bland nature merely stating that the Lebanese President discussed with the leaders of the host countries issues which have received prominent coverage in the media during recent times. None of the communiqués mentioned whether Mr. Lahoud talked about the role Syria will play vis-a-vis his country after Israel withdraws from Lebanese territory. But this question must have weighed on the minds of Mr. Lahoud's interlocutors even if they chose not to air it.

In the expressed views of the Lebanese President, there can be no equation between the presence of an Israeli occupation force in the south of his country and the presence of about 35,000 Syrian troops elsewhere. Syria posted its troops in Lebanon in 1976 a year after civil war broke out in the country. Mr. Lahoud insists that Syria did so on the request of the then Lebanese Government. Behind Mr. Lahoud's assertion is the perception that the continued Syrian military presence insures the longevity of the peace between Lebanon's ethnic groups and thereby the stability of his own regime. There seems to be little likelihood that the Lebanese Government will formally request Damascus to withdraw its troops after Israel ends its occupation of southern Lebanon.

Indeed, the post-Israeli withdrawal situa-

tion might even provide the grounds for a continued Syrian presence in Lebanon. On Monday, Israel formally informed the U.N. Secretary-General that it would pull out its troops in a single phase operation by July 7 of this year. From the stance taken by two permanent members, France and the U.S., it appears likely that this withdrawal will take place behind the screen of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Some Arab countries, notably Egypt, have joined Western governments in calling upon forces in Lebanon to allow the Israeli army to withdraw peacefully. Syria and Lebanon have welcomed the Israeli decision (though not without expressing suspicions about Israel's intent) while making clear that the situation post-withdrawal will not be tantamount to peace.

With the West and Egypt apparently supporting the view that UNIFIL should cover the troop withdrawal, Israeli fears that Lebanese militant groups will attack their retreating troops appear misplaced at the moment. The Syrian troops in Lebanon are not to play a direct role in facilitating the Israeli retreat nor in the re-assertion of Lebanese sovereignty in the south after Israel withdraws. Both tasks would be fulfilled by UNIFIL. However, Syria's presence in Lebanon would be a relevant factor in managing the political developments that are bound to follow the Israeli withdrawal. These developments would provide fresh grounds to justify the continued presence of the Syrian military in Lebanon.

The image and appeal of the Hizbollah, the Shia militia which has been in the forefront of the resistance against Israel, is bound to get a

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tremendous boost once Israel withdraws. They will claim to be saviours and liberators of their country. Moreover, freed as they would be from the pre-occupation of the military struggle against Israel, Hizbollah would be able to devote full attention to its already formidable political and socio-economic programmes. The Shias are the fastest growing segment of Lebanon's population and Hizbollah is bound to demand rewards commensurate with its prestige and numerical strength. That in turn could set off a backlash from the Maronite Christian community which once dominated Lebanese State and society but feels increasingly beleaguered in present times.

However, influential Maronite leaders in exile (such as the former President, Mr. Amin Gemayel and the former Prime Minister, Mr. Michel Aoun) and some opinion-makers in the country have strongly indicated that they do not view the Syrian military in Lebanon as any kind of a stabilising force in the situation that will emerge in the near future. No one argues that the secular Syrian Government has any sectarian agenda to promote. But a powerful section of the Maronites believe that Syria's military presence, its great influence on the Lebanese Government and the presence of about a million Syrian workers in the midst of three million native Lebanese retards their country's political, civic and economic development. Unfortunately for the Syrians, sections of the Maronites are not alone in wishing that the Syrian military will do what the Israelis have promised they will do.

22 APR 2000

Vote stipulates majority of Jews must back Golan withdrawal

Syria pact hits Israeli block

153 213 W.A. (11)

Jerusalem, March 1 (AP): In a preliminary but highly symbolic vote, Israel's Parliament backed a bill today that would make it very difficult, if not impossible, to get an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty approved in a referendum.

The vote, 60-53 with one abstention, marked the worst political setback for Prime Minister Ehud Barak since he formed his broad coalition last July.

The bill stipulates that an absolute majority of eligible voters must approve a peace treaty in a referendum. This would mean that even if about 80 per cent of the voters participate in the referendum, more than 60 per cent of those casting a ballot would have to say "yes" to get a peace treaty approved.

Recent polls have suggested that Israelis are evenly divided over whether to hand back the Golan Heights in return for peace with Syria, though Barak says that support will grow once he presents a complete peace package.

The bill's sponsor, Silvan Shalom of the Opposition Likud Party, acknowledged that he was trying to block a withdrawal from all of the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau Israel captured in the 1967 West Asia war.

"A majority of the people opposes a withdrawal from the Golan," Shalom said.

Shalom was heckled by angry Arab legislators who accused him of raising the threshold in the referendum to neutralise Arab voters expected to overwhelmingly back a peace treaty.

Justice minister Yossi Beilin called the bill racist. "Apparently, there are no limits to this theatre of the absurd," he told Parliament.



I'M STILL IN CHARGE: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak gestures at the Knesset on Wednesday. (AFP)

"This is the bill of those who have no majority."

The bill was approved in a preliminary reading, and still faces three more readings. Beilin said the government was determined not to let the legislation pass.

A peace treaty with Syria would have to pass through three stages: approval by the Cabinet; approval by Parliament with a majority of 61 of 120 legislators; and approval in a referendum.

Beilin said the treaty might

pass the first two stages and be rejected in the referendum — even if millions voted for it. "Those of you who have God in their hearts, won't do this," Beilin said.

Hezbollah attack

Guerrillas killed five Israeli-allyed militiamen and a civilian today in attacks inside southern Lebanon, escalating tensions on the last active Arab-Israeli war-front. The militiamen were killed when a roadside bomb exploded near a patrol of the South Lebanon Army, a 2,500-strong militia sponsored by Israel.

THE TELEGRAPH
- 2 MAR 2000

W Asia peace process at critical stage: Annan

Hanoi, March 1

THE WEST Asian peace process is at a critical stage and there is an urgent need to find a just solution for the Palestinians, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in remarks made at a conference today.

"Realities on the ground demonstrate the urgent need for a just solution to the question of Palestine," Mr Annan said in a speech read out in Hanoi by Adrianus Mooy, Executive Secretary of the UN.

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Mr Mooy delivered Mr Annan's remarks at the start of a three-day conference called the "United Nations Asian meeting on the question of Palestine", which has attracted a variety of speakers.

Conference organisers said such meetings were usually held once a year in different parts of the world to raise awareness of the issues facing the Palestinian people.

"The continued construction and expansion of (Israeli) settlements and roads will have a serious impact on the outcome of permanent status negotiations," Mr Annan said. "I appeal to the par-

ties to exercise restraint and to build, instead, on the achievements of the peace process, Mr Annan said."

Both sides have traded accusations recently over responsibility for a crisis in the peace talks, with Palestinians accusing Israel of a "savage campaign of settlements".

US President Bill Clinton's West Asia envoy, Dennis Ross, said on Monday he had failed to end a month-long deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace moves.

Talks have floundered over Israeli rejection of Palestinian demands over the interim handover of an additional 6.1 per cent of the West Bank to Palestinian rule. The transfer was to have taken place in January.

The two sides missed a February 13 deadline for a framework accord on a final peace deal, meant to be sealed by September.

In the speech Mr Annan said a viable peace agreement would require an improvement in the social and economic situation of the Palestinian people.

The Hanoi conference will issue a communique at the end of the meeting on Friday, officials said. Vietnam has long supported the Palestinian cause. (Reuters)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES
- 2 MAR 2000

Israel Bill on deal with Syria in focus

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) MARCH 2. A Bill to ensure that the approval of a special majority will be required in a referendum to be held in Israel on any deal that may possibly be made in respect of the Golan Heights, easily passed the preliminary hearing yesterday. This Bill, once passed after further hearings, will make it very difficult for the Government of Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, to make a deal with Syria stick and its introduction in the Israeli Knesset comes amidst a number of signs that a resumption of the stalled talks between Israel and Syria could have occurred soon.

The Bill, introduced by an Opposition Likud member of Parliament and former Minister, Mr. Silvan Shalom, provides that a majority of all registered voters would have to approve any deal that the Government may make with Syria before it becomes enforceable. It hence marks a departure from normal laws under which a simple majority of those voting is sufficient, as for example the vote to decide who becomes Prime Minister. This Basic Law for the Golan Heights Referendum has been introduced by the right wing in Israel to ensure that the vote of the Israeli Arabs will have no bearing on the outcome of the referendum. It won support in the Knesset not only from the right wing parliamentarians but also members of parties in Mr. Barak's coalition.

Mr. Barak, who took office publicly committed to making peace with the Arabs, had promised during his election campaign that the settlements he arrived at would be presented to the people for their approval and would be implemented only if they voted in favour. There was always the danger that the right wing would try to make such approval problematic by inserting the requirement that the approval must be by a special majority. Through the Bill introduced yesterday, its sponsors have tried to ensure that the approval, or otherwise, of a peace deal with Syria will be a matter for the Jewish voters alone to decide. Israeli

leftists have voiced their criticism of this virtual "disenfranchisement" of the Israeli Arabs but it is unclear whether this denial of a basic right to the minority community can be challenged in court.

According to current opinion poll data, the Government would have found it difficult to get a Syrian deal approved even in a referendum in which a simple majority was sufficient. From this perspective, it is not at all certain that Mr. Barak will be able to swing public opinion around so much that a Syria deal will be passed by a special majority. Glimmers of hope are, however, not absent since a deal with Syria will have a direct connection to peace on the Lebanon front, and an end to the killing of Israeli soldiers in the zone they occupy in Lebanon. Since public support for a withdrawal from Lebanon is very high, it is not impossible that Israeli citizens could swing heavily in favour of the peace deals if they come as a composite package.

The introduction of the Bill does, ironically enough, strengthen Mr. Barak's hands in the negotiations with the Syrians once they resume. He could tell the Syrians, and the U.S. mediators, of course, that he cannot make too many concessions since that would make it all the more difficult to win approval. How he will use this leverage remains to be seen since Mr. Barak, over the past few days, has given several signals that he is preparing to meet Syrian demands on the Golan Heights at least in a broad sense. There have been several hints that Mr. Barak is preparing to give back all the territory beyond the June 4, 1967 lines.

Two days ago, Mr. Barak told his Cabinet that four of his predecessors had agreed in principle that the June 4, 1967 line should be taken as the base for determining the final border between Israel and Syria. A day later, Mr. Danny Yatom, who is a key advisor to Mr. Barak currently, and who played a major negotiating role during Mr. Yitzhak Rabin's tenure as Prime Minister, said Mr. Rabin had indeed given such a commitment.

Verbal duel in W Asia as talks freeze

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM, March 3. — An Israeli Cabinet minister, responding to a Palestinian leader's threat to use force to take over disputed land, today warned that his country would win any confrontation in the West Bank.

Mr Ahmed Qureia, Speaker of the Palestinian parliament, said yesterday that Israel must turn over 93 per cent of the West Bank under interim peace accords. He charged that Israel is trying to evade its obligations.

"We will deliver it (the land) to ourselves and we will put our Palestinian police there if the delays continue," he said. This was the first time a Palestinian official hinted at violent confrontation with Israel.

Responding today, Mr Ben-Ami, the Israeli police minister, said the Palestinians should not "add a war of words to the existing political disagreements."

He said the Palestinians "understand very well that in unilateral steps, Israel is stronger".

The disputed territory Qureia referred to is now under Palestinian civilian control, but Israel is in charge of security. A unilateral move by uniformed Palestinian forces to secure the territory would probably spark an Israeli response.

The verbal escalation came a day after Israeli security forces

destroyed a Hamas weapons cache and killed three suspected Hamas gunmen who, officials say, had plotted to carry out large-scale bombing attacks in Israel.

The hideout, an apartment in the Arab town of Taibeh in northern Israel, was seized and destroyed after a day-long clash. Despite the breakdown in talks, Israeli and Palestinian security forces have continued to cooperate on preventing terror attacks, as this raid shows. Israeli forces had surrounded the

RAID IN S LEBANON

RASHAYA, March 3. — Israeli warplanes today raided the outskirts of three villages in southern Lebanon from which Hezbollah guerrillas were suspected of launching attacks, security sources and witnesses said. They said the planes fired six rockets in three sorties over villages on the fringes of Israel's South Lebanon occupation zone.

— Reuters

raided the Taibeh apartment early yesterday, acting on tips from Palestinian intelligence. One man inside surrendered, but two others opened fire. Police fired back, blowing up suitcase full of explosives one of the gunmen was carrying, killing both men.

Hours later, as a police bulldozer was knocking the structure down, police opened fire again after a sniper said he spotted another man inside. Police clearing the rubble today found the third body but no more explosives.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak said the operation prevented a large-scale terror attack against Israelis.

Israel says it has succeeded in thwarting a number of or attacks in recent weeks with the help of Palestinian security forces, but Israel's police minister warned that Palestinian militants are not giving up. Frustration has been running high in the Palestinian areas over a freeze in peace talks.

THE STATESMAN

- 4 MAR 2 000

United States may hand over secret codes for planes to Israel

JERUSALEM: To avoid the cancellation of lucrative defence deals, the US may soon hand over to Israel the secret software codes for Apache gunships and F-16 warplane radars, which Washington fears could be transferred to India and China, media report said here quoting a senior Israeli military official.

"In my view, the codes will be handed over. We have an understanding about this," the official was quoted as saying in Washington by the English daily *Jerusalem Post* on Friday.

Over half-a-billion dollars-worth Israeli purchase of advanced U.S.-made AH-64 Apache attack "Longbow" helicopters and \$2.5 billion worth 50 Lockheed Martin-built F-16s warplane radars could be affected due to the denial of codes, the official said, adding, "Israel had the right to pull out of the helicopter deal if the codes could not be transferred."

The US fears Israel could pass the codes to India and China, the two countries that Israel is believed to be continuously selling arms despite US disapproval. A Pentagon spokesman had last week said Israeli arms sale to China could jeopardise certain kinds of Israel-US defence ties while a senior US defence official earlier this week said Washington would continue to press Israel on its military cooperation with India, the daily said.

"Israel understood that weapons transfer to China and India could destabilise their regions and that is not in Israel's interest," the senior defence official was quoted by the paper as saying.

The US criticism of Israel for its sale to China of an advanced airborne radar system would subside

once the internal US debate over whether to welcome China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was resolved. *The Post* said quoting an Israeli official.

Earlier this week Israel's deputy defence minister Ephraim Sneh said in Washington that he had assured the Congressmen that his country would take American objections into account if China asked for more sophisticated radar equipment as part of the signed \$250 million Israel-China agreement, forged three years ago.

If Israel does not resolve its China dealings in a manner satisfactory to the US, the country's requests for larger American aid packages could be jeopardised, a media report earlier quoted pro-Israeli officials as warning.

They said that the leadership in Jerusalem was unaware of the "acute sensitivity" in Washington regarding the issue. Analysts believe that the American objections are based on the contention that the installation of radar equipment to China's Russian-supplied planes will provide Beijing with a decisive military edge in any stand-off with Taiwan.

China's recent postures and threats against Taiwan have come up prominently in the current presidential primaries, with the two Republican candidates issuing denunciations of Beijing's policies.

Israel, believed to be China's second largest arms supplier after Russia, is the fifth largest exporter of weapons in the world followed by the US, Russia, China, and France. (PTI)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

- 6 MAR 2009

Lebanon guarded in its approval

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), MARCH 6. Israel's decision to withdraw its army from Lebanon by July this year is now final barring, of course, some unexpected developments. The Israeli Cabinet yesterday unanimously decided that it would end its occupation of a zone in southern Lebanon by the given date, irrespective of whether agreement had been reached with the Governments of Lebanon and Syria in the meantime. With this decision, the ball is back in the Syrian court.

In a statement issued after a two-hour debate, the Israeli Cabinet said, "The Israeli Defence Forces will deploy on the border with Lebanon by July 2000 and from there will ensure the safety of the northern towns and villages. The Government will act to ensure that this deployment will be carried out in the framework of an agreement." This part of the statement suggested that Israel had endorsed the Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak's position that he would prefer that a troop withdrawal took place pursuant to an agreement but the Cabinet also went on to endorse Mr. Barak's secondary position that he would pull out troops whether or not an agreement had been struck by the given date.

"In the event that conditions will not be conducive to IDF re-deployment in the framework of an agreement, the Government will convene at an appropriate time to discuss the method of implementation of the above-mentioned decision." In other words, the Israeli Cabinet will re-convene to discuss this issue only to the extent of deciding the ways in which a re-deployment should take place, if there is no prospect of agreement by the given date. In an interview to Israel's Channel Two television, Mr. Barak further re-confirmed the finality of the decision when he said, in reply to a question whether any Israeli soldier will remain in Lebanon beyond the said date, "By July we will be deployed along the border."

The Lebanese Prime Minister, Mr. Salim Hoss, very swiftly issued a statement welcoming the Israeli decision. "Whether the decision



don't advise anyone to test our reaction, we will defend ourselves from the international border," he said in his interview. Israelis fear that there is a possibility that the Shia militia Hizbollah will launch rocket attacks into Israel from southern Lebanon once the troop withdrawal takes place. However, from the phrasing of Mr. Barak's warning it would appear that Lebanon alone would not be the target of a retaliatory strike. Syria is the main force that backs the Hizbollah and Israel believes that the Government in Damascus has a major role in directing Hizbollah's operations.

Whatever be the degree of Syria's control over the Hizbollah, the militia's operations have helped Syria to pressure Israel. The Hizbollah's attacks on Israeli military posts in the occupied zone and the resultant deaths of soldiers have been a bleeding wound for Israel. Syria, which can choke off Hizbollah's military supplies and thereby reduce the efficacy of its operations, has refused to do anything of the sort. The Syrian Government could be induced to do so only if Israel agrees to its demand that the Golan Heights be returned. By unilaterally deciding to remove its troops from the dangerous Lebanon situation, Israel would negate the justification for the Hizbollah attacks and wipe out Syria's bargaining advantage.

There are strong hints that Syria and Israel could resume negotiations soon. Mr. Barak sent clear signals last week that he was prepared, at least in broad principle, to meet the Syrian demand that Israel withdraw from the Golan Heights up to the June 4, 1967 lines. Syria has so far stuck to its position that Mr. Barak must give such a commitment in writing. But there have also been reports that Syria will spell out what it will give Israel in terms of normalisation and security arrangements if such a written commitment is forthcoming. Israeli newspapers have also speculated that the U.S. could prepare a working draft which would set out the compromises made by either side. The Israeli Cabinet's decision might just about break the logjam.

of the Israeli Cabinet is a ploy or not, our position has always been favourable to an Israeli withdrawal in accordance with Resolution 425 of the U.N. Security Council which stipulates an unconditional withdrawal. Nevertheless, we prefer that this withdrawal takes place as part of a deal because we do not trust Israel's intentions if it happens without a deal. Lebanon has really no other demands of Israel other than that it end its occupation and refrain from blasting Lebanon's infrastructure off and on. But an Israeli withdrawal will not automatically lead to a peace agreement since Lebanon will only sign such a deal along with Syria.

The Israeli decision now leaves Syria faced with a big question. While the Israeli decision is final, Mr. Barak has also warned that any attack on Israel will invite strong retaliation. "I

Cabinet consensus on withdrawal

Israel raids border zone in Lebanon

DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR and ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT & JERUSALEM, March 6. — Israeli warplanes today raided Majdel al Selim, on the edge of the border zone in southern Lebanon, a day after a rare consensus in the Israeli Cabinet to withdraw its troops from south Lebanon by July.

"It's an end to the tragedy, an end to the bloodshed," Mr Ehud Barak said, "we are bringing the boys home."

The vote may be aimed at pressuring Syria to return to suspended peace talks while it can still use the low-level war to pressure Israel into concessions.

A withdrawal from the border zone Israel occupies in south Lebanon would take away that leverage.

Behind the decision, however, is a jelling public opinion that Israel's 18-year presence in Lebanon is no longer, if it ever was, the right way to protect its northern towns from cross-border attacks.

The USA, meanwhile, has welcomed the Israeli Cabinet's endorsement of plans to end the occupation of south Lebanon, backing the move as part of a broader negotiated settlement, AFP adds from Prague. "Israel has made it clear for some time that it is committed to withdrawing its forces from south Lebanon by the middle of the year," state department spokesman, Mr Philip Trecker, said yesterday. "The Cabinet vote reaffirms that commitment and makes it clear that Israel would prefer to withdraw as part of a negotiated settlement with Lebanon

and Syria."

"Finally, society is saying enough," said Ms Linda Ben Zvi, a founder of the grass-roots, pro-withdrawal group Four Mothers that was criticised for being anti-patriotic when first formed three years ago.

Since then, rising troop casualties and promises of regional peace have turned public opinion towards a withdrawal which, if implemented without an agreement with Syria, would be risky.

It would leave Israel's northern border vulnerable to attacks from Iranian-backed Hezbollah rebels — a prospect that could lead to more deaths than the estimated 600 soldiers who have died patrolling the border zone since it was set up in 1985, Israeli army chief Lt Gen Shaul Mofaz, said yesterday.

The decision to withdraw would leave Kiryat Shemona living in fear of the kind of cross-border attacks it suffered before the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Mr Sami Malul, acting mayor of the frontier town, said.

"The decision is a populist one that gambles on the backs of border town residents," Mr Malul said, "it gives the pretext for the next war along the northern border." But most Opposition politicians agree that Israel cannot win the guerrilla war and should leave — if only to raise the stakes in the event of a post-withdrawal attack on Israel. "I don't advise anyone to test our reaction when we are deployed on the international border and defending Israel from there," Mr Barak said yesterday.

THE STATESMAN
- 7 MAR 2 000

PUSH FOR PEACE IN WEST ASIA

149.12
AFTER HALF A century of bitter and unforgiving conflict, the time for peace appears to be arriving in West Asia where a group of aging leaders and former revolutionaries may see their dreams for their people begin to come true. Hope must be entertained notwithstanding the scepticism that has greeted Israel's decision to withdraw its forces occupying southern Lebanon. Similar pessimism had greeted the historic Oslo agreement which heralded the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. The events of the last five years may appear to justify that lack of optimism in the process launched in the Norwegian capital. But the peace dividends from that accord are undeniable despite the roadblocks erected on the way to harmony between the Israelis and Mr. Yasser Arafat's Palestinians. All the steps away from war that the region has seen must be traceable to the bold initiative taken then.

The latest Israeli decision, not thoroughly unexpected, is set to end two decades of a policy of unacceptable occupation of neighbouring territory in the name of fighting terrorism. The ugly face of Israeli aggression was in full visibility even as late as a fortnight ago when Israel plunged the Lebanese capital, Beirut, in darkness by targeting its power lines in retaliation for guerilla attacks on the Israeli troops in occupation of southern Lebanon. Unrestrained aggression has characterised Israeli policy since its forces invaded Lebanon in 1982 to drive out freedom fighters of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, in the process reducing that country to ruin by provoking a violent civil war. Israel's decision to end its occupation of southern Lebanese territory is viewed by some as a ploy to induce Syria to return to the peace talks, which had begun on a note of high hope three months ago but have since floundered, a period that has seen a sharp rise in attacks by the Syria-backed

Hezbollah fighters. Damascus, under Mr. Hafez al-Assad, has been the main prop for the fighters challenging the Israeli troops in southern Lebanon and has been reluctant to accept the Israeli decision. By delinking withdrawal from Lebanon and the Golan Heights, Israel is accused of attempting to drive a wedge between the two allies. The Israeli decision does not mean that the pace of peace-making will quicken immediately. That will happen only when Syria and Israel return to the negotiating table. For enduring peace in the region, Israel must pull out of the Golan Heights which it has occupied since the 1966 six-day war. A majority of Israelis support the withdrawal under the land-for-peace policy in return for security guarantees. For Mr. Assad, securing the return of the Golan is a question of national honour.

The nations in the region realise that an imperfect agreement is better than no agreement. West Asia, much like South Asia, has had to endure half a century of war and war-mongering because of a failure to recognise that enduring peace can be ensured not by a distant power, however mighty, but by a policy of goodneighbourliness and reconciliation. Israel's refusal to recognise the central role of Syria in a framework of lasting peace is the root cause of the continuing crisis. The victory of Mr. Ehud Barak in the Israeli elections last year helped reverse a hawkish trend. A former army chief, Mr. Barak has never lacked for confidence and must push for peace with Damascus even as the momentum on the Israel-Palestine track is maintained and Mr. Arafat's fears of being sidelined are allayed. Lebanon and Syria are the last of Israel's neighbours to remain technically at war with the Jewish State and Mr. Barak must seize the opportunity for a final multilateral settlement. The region and beyond are already reaping the dividends of peace, even the tenuous peace that now exists.

THE HINDU

- 9 MAR 2000

West Asian talks head for breakthrough

RAMALLAH (WEST BANK), MARCH 8. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, and the Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat, met today for a second time in less than 24 hours and a diplomat said they would announce that peace talks are to resume in Washington.

Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat arrived at a hotel in the Palestinian-ruled town of Ramallah in the West Bank for further talks on restarting negotiations frozen since February. The U.S. peace envoy, Mr. Dennis Ross, was also expected to participate in the meeting.

"We are apparently on the way to a breakthrough with the Palestinians," Mr. Barak told reporters in Jerusalem before leaving for the summit.

"The leaders are going to announce the resumption of talks in Washington," a western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said before the Ramallah summit.

The diplomat did not give a starting date for the negotiations, deadlocked over differences on transferring 6.1 per cent more West Bank land to Palestinian self-rule.

A Palestinian official said Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat would hold talks on Thursday with the Egyptian President, Mr. Hosni Mubarak, in Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh, where an interim Israeli-Palestinian peace deal was signed in September.

Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat held a surprise summit in central Israel late yesterday hours after the Palestinian leader voiced his strongest commitment yet to declare a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip this year, with or without a peace deal. "Whoever doesn't like it can drink the water of the Dead Sea," Mr. Arafat said in a speech to Palestinian lawmakers.

A statement issued by Mr. Barak's office after yesterday's two-hour summit said, "It was a constructive meeting and during the meeting some of the problems were solved. It was agreed to make an effort to try to solve the other problems."

Earlier, an Israeli diplomatic source said Mr. Barak would present a "confidence-building package" to Mr. Arafat in an effort to revive negotiations severed by the PLO after their previous meeting on February 3 in a dispute over land transfers.

— Reuters

THE HINDU

- 9 MAR 2000

Israelis, Palestinians resume talks, offer major concessions

Jerusalem, March 9

PALESTINIANS AND Israelis broke the logjam in peace talks with major concessions. Israelis agreed to deeper US involvement in resolving the dispute and Palestinians said a yes -- for now -- to a territory not bordering Jerusalem.

It was President Bill Clinton's top envoy, Dennis Ross, who announced the resumption of talks on Wednesday, flanked by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Ross, who announced that the peace talks would resume in Washington after the four-day Muslim Id Al-adha holiday beginning March 16, said the sides are committed to "work in the spirit of partnership and mutual confidence".

The accelerated pace -- aiming for the outline of a permanent agreement by May and for a full-

fledged deal by September 13 -- was nonetheless fraught with issues that could still sideline an agreement.

The sides are still wide apart on the status of Jerusalem, the future of Jewish settlements and the status of Palestinian refugees. Still, the seriousness each side attached to renewing the talks was underscored by their major reversals.

Arafat had suspended the talks early last month over a relatively minor interim Israeli troop withdrawal from 6.1 per cent of the West Bank. The Palestinians wanted the withdrawal to include three West Bank suburbs that bordered Jerusalem, a pullback that would enhance his stake in the disputed city.

Israel resisted, offering the Palestinians unpopulated patches of land. Arafat said if he could not trust the Israelis on relatively less important issues, there was no way he could work with them on the

major issues.

Under US pressure, Arafat backed down. Palestinian officials said Barak has handed Arafat a map featuring 10 per cent of the West Bank, out of which Arafat could choose the 6.1 per cent he wanted. The new map includes populous areas near, but not adjoining, Jerusalem.

Foreign Minister David Levy said the withdrawal would be "soon." Barak's concession is a deeper US involvement that has in the past forced Israel-friendly administrations into a more neutral role.

Levy insisted there was no concession but acknowledged that the negotiations would alternate between Washington and the Middle East. Palestinian officials, who have favoured deeper US involvement ever since it led to Clinton's virtual endorsement of Palestinian statehood in December 1998, said Ross would attend every meeting. (AP)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

10 MAR 2000

Challenges in West Asia

NO COUNTRY can feel at ease if its destiny is to be shaped by powerful neighbours. Lebanon, one of the worst victims of Arab-Israel hostilities, still finds itself in such an unenviable situation. Despite being occupied by Israeli and Syrian forces for nearly two decades and its once robust economy ravaged by a civil war, the occupation of Lebanon did not find a place in the West Asia peace agenda. It has only succeeded in halting Israeli shellings. Thus, Lebanon has ended up existing with the help of short-term solutions. Things, however, appear to be changing now with the Israeli cabinet approving a plan to withdraw from the occupied border zone in south Lebanon by July 2000. It is ironic that at a time when the Knesset is all set to block Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and a peace treaty with Syria, the Ehud Barak Government has taken such a bold decision. The question is whether Tel Aviv has finally realised the futility of waging a guerrilla war, or pragmatism in the form of buying peace with Syria — which enjoys immense clout in Lebanon — will yield results.

When Prime Minister Barak assumed office eight months ago, he enjoyed a stronger support in Parliament than any of his recent predecessors. There was also a broad consensus among supporting parties about the need to advance comprehensive peace in the region. Today, some of his coalition partners are acting tough and Mr Barak is saddled with the delicate task of keeping the disparate groups together. The Israeli-Palestinian peace track has made considerable progress even though the establishment of an independent state of Palestine appears to be as distant as ever.

Israel and Syria have held two rounds of talks which remain deadlocked over the issue of Israeli refusal to vacate the Golan Heights. The Israeli pull-out from southern Lebanon, however, will strengthen Syria's bargaining position with Tel Aviv. At the same time, it will shore up Israel's credentials. The road to peace in West Asia is still full of hurdles. Ending 50 years of distrust in the region is a formidable task. Past experience shows how even a minor incident can harden respective positions. The challenges before all sides are quite formidable. What is encouraging is their willingness to take them up.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES
11 MAR 2000

Barak's Burden

Israel has never been known to back off from a fight and so it must have come as a surprise to many that it has decided unilaterally to withdraw from southern Lebanon. In doing this, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has displayed considerable pragmatism. He knows that this is one war Israel cannot win. There is increasing public opposition to sending young soldiers to southern Lebanon where the mighty Israeli army has been singularly unsuccessful in tackling the Hezbollah's highly motivated and trained guerrillas. In the past, Israel has been able effectively to target some of the Hezbollah's leaders. In one incident, Israel assassinated not only the leader of the Hezbollah, Abbas Musavi, but also his young family which was travelling with him. Musavi, a moderate, was the singular hope for entering into some form of dialogue with the Hezbollah and after his death, guerrillas have been unrelenting in their attacks on Israel. Since 1995, 131 Israeli soldiers have been killed by them. In effecting this strategic withdrawal, Barak is also posing a challenge to Syria which has used Israeli occupation to justify its support to the Hezbollah. In recent days, peace talks between Tel Aviv and Damascus have been getting nowhere despite high profile visits to the region by US envoy Dennis Ross. Mr Barak now probably realises that he had framed far too ambitious an agenda. Instead of solving one problem at a time, he had opened up different tracks of the peace talks, focusing primarily on the intransigent Syrians.

The Syrians have always maintained that for them its all or nothing — President Hafez Assad has never climbed down from his position that Israel vacate in full the occupied Golan Heights with no preconditions. The Golan, which is also a major water source for Israel, has never been put on the table so far, though Mr Barak has indicated that he may be less rigid on this issue than his predecessors. However, his task has been made all the more difficult by his own parliament, which has voted in favour of difficult rules for a referendum that will be required in any peace deal with Damascus. The vote was supported by three members of Mr Barak's ruling coalition — the Sephardic religious party, the Shas, the National Religious Party and the Russian immigrant party, the Baaliya. The Israeli Prime Minister now has to reason with them in order to prevent this tricky vote becoming legislation. The Palestinians have been up in arms accusing Mr Barak of neglect of the Israel-Palestine track of the talks; indeed tensions have risen in recent times with Palestinian youth taking to the streets in scenes reminiscent of the intifada. Mr Barak is now engaged in damage containment on this front and the talks have restarted. The main focus is on the 6.1 per cent of occupied territory in the West Bank which is to be handed over to the Palestinians, though the latter's insistence on including villages around Jerusalem is proving a sticking point. The US is back in action, pushing the two sides along. Mr Clinton has pulled out all the stops to notch up a foreign policy success in the region. His personal interest could well be the catalyst that the peace process needs today.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

11 MAR 2000

Israelis favour giving up Golan for peace

JERUSALEM: The majority of Israelis favour giving up the much-contested Golan Heights for full peace with Syria and a withdrawal from Lebanon, reflecting a deep yearning to give peace in the West Asia a chance, according to a new poll.

With political negotiations showing positive signs and Israeli cabinet deciding to end the long occupation of southern Lebanon by July, six out of 10 Jewish Israelis would prefer giving up the Golan Heights and accepting evacuation of all Jewish settlements there in return for full peace with neighbouring Syria, the poll by the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University has revealed.

The findings, considered remarkable because in the past Golan Heights had been considered non-negotiable property by most respondents, also reveal that

nine out of 10 Jewish Israelis feel that a referendum for a peace treaty would be accepted by a majority of the Jews.

In the mid-1980s over 80 per cent opposed giving up the Golan for peace and ten years later, during the previous round of peace negotiations, half rejected the idea of returning any of the Golan, English daily *Jerusalem Post* said.

Political analysts say security issues appear to be more important for people than other matters and that in the past two years the opinion to returning the Golan Heights has considerably diminished in the Jewish state.

They said the public was fed of

conflicts and has been yearning for peace and felt that there was a historic opportunity to give peace a chance.

The poll, part of the annual public opinion survey on security issues shows that 31 per cent respondents are against returning any part of the Golan and evacuating settle-

ments. The poll also questioned the readiness to support a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon and found that 61 per cent support it, compared to 55 per cent in 1999 and only 44 per cent in 1998.

Meanwhile, top Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met for the first time in over a month to dis-

miss overdue aspects of the peace process as Israel beefed up security for fear of terror attacks aimed to derail the negotiations.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat officially resumed the peace talks this week with three meetings including a summit with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Thursday.

Arafat and Barak agreed that Israel will in the coming days implement overdue aspects of interim agreements including a withdrawal from 6.1 per cent of the West Bank, which had been slated for January 20.

In addition, Israel will release Palestinian prisoners accused of anti-Israeli activity and open a route for Palestinians to travel between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said. (Agencies)



Ehud Barak



Yasser Arafat

Israel to hand over Jerusalem suburbs

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANATA (West Bank), March 14. — Israel will hand three West Bank suburbs of Jerusalem, including one bordering the disputed city, to full Palestinian rule as part of an upcoming troop withdrawal, two Cabinet ministers confirmed today.

The decision sparked an outcry from the hardline opposition. Jerusalem mayor, Mr Ehud Olmert, a leader of the Rightwing Likud party, alleged that handing over the suburbs of Anata, Beituniya and Ubeidiya was a first step toward dividing Jerusalem.

Residents of Jewish neighbourhoods adjacent to the three Palestinian suburbs said they feared for their safety because the areas being handed over could become a safe haven for Palestinian militants.

Opposition leaders in recent weeks have begun accusing Prime Minister Ehud Barak of

LEBANON RAIDS

NABATIYEH (Lebanon), March 14. — Israeli warplanes today attacked the outskirts of a South Lebanon village, witnesses said, keeping up pressure on Syrian-backed fighters with no sign of renewed peace talks with Damascus. There were no immediate reports of casualties. — Reuters

secretly planning to make major concessions to the Palestinians in negotiations over the final status of the city. The future of Jerusalem is one of four major issues to be addressed in a final peace treaty that is to be concluded on 13 September.

The Palestinians hope to establish their capital in east Jerusalem, the sector Israel captured from Jordan in the 1967 war and annexed to its capital. Israel has said it would

never relinquish sovereignty over all of the city.

Cabinet minister, Mr Haim Ramon, who is close to Mr Barak, denied today that Israel would give up parts of the city. "The municipal boundaries of Jerusalem will not change," Mr Ramon told Israel army radio. "We are safeguarding a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty."

Israeli media first reported Monday night that the three Jerusalem suburbs would be part of an upcoming Israeli troop withdrawal from 6.1 per cent of the West Bank. Mr Barak is to present the withdrawal map to his security Cabinet on Wednesday and to his full Cabinet on Sunday, Israel radio said. The pullback is expected to take place next week.

The three towns to be handed over are already under Palestinian civil rule, with Israel retaining control over security.

THE STATESMAN

15 MAR 2000

Arafat nod for pull-out map

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

GAZA CITY, March 15. — The Palestinian leader, Mr Yasser Arafat, approved today maps for an Israeli withdrawal from 6.1 per cent of the occupied West Bank, senior Palestinian negotiator, Mr Saeb Erakat, said.

"The President saw the maps and expressed his approval," Mr Erakat told reporters.

"We hope that it will be carried out as soon as possible according to the agreement."

Mr Erakat met Mr Arafat in the West Bank town of Ramallah after the Israeli Security Cabinet approved maps for the withdrawal, which was due to have taken place in January under the terms of a peace accord signed in Sharm el-Sheikh in September.

Five Israeli ministers in the

which starts tomorrow.

The pullout was delayed because of a dispute over the areas to be transferred, leading to a bitter month-long stalemate in peace talks and causing the two sides to miss a deadline for a framework peace accord.

The pullout covers villages on the outskirts of Jerusalem already under Palestinian civilian rule — Beitunia near Ramallah to the north and Ubaydiyah to the southeast near Bethlehem.

But Mr Barak, apparently bowing to strong pressure from Right-wing parties, decided yesterday not to transfer the village of Anata, which would have become the closest Palestinian village to Jerusalem.

Talks: A fresh round of talks between Israel and the Palestinians will kick off in Washin-



Mr Yasser Arafat

Cabinet voted for the maps and three against, while one abstained. The Cabinet also decided that several dozen Palestinian prisoners should be released by Israel to mark the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha



Mr Ehud Barak

gton on 20 March and last for 10 days, a senior Palestinian official said today in Jerusalem. The Palestinian leader, Mr Yasser Arafat's close aide, Mr Mahmud Abbas said they would discuss so-called final

status issues as well as a framework accord due to be finalised by May.

"We hope to achieve progress on the issues in light of the promises and statements which were made in Sharm al-Sheikh in presence of Egypt and the United States," he told Voice of Palestine Radio.

Mr Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, agreed earlier this month to resume talks in Washington after weeks of acrimonious deadlock over a long-delayed handover of 6.1 per cent of West Bank land.

A Palestinian official told AFP at the time that the two sides agreed to restart negotiations after setting a new may deadline for a framework peace deal and set dates for further Israeli troop withdrawals from the West Bank, accompanied by US guarantees.

Israel nod for W Bank handover

REUTERS

JERUSALEM, March 19. — The Israeli Cabinet today gave the green light to a handover of 6.1 per cent of the West Bank to full Palestinian control, paving the way for renewal of US-brokered peace talks on Tuesday.

"The Cabinet today endorsed the further withdrawal from 6.1 per cent of territory in Judea and Samaria," said a statement from Mr Barak's office, using Biblical names for the West Bank.

It said 16 ministers voted in favour and six were against the handover, scheduled to take place on Tuesday. One minister abstained.

The handover will bring land under full or partial Palestinian control to 39.8 per cent of the West Bank, said the Deputy Defence Minister, Mr Ephraim Sneh. Palestinian officials had said last week the total would be 42.9 after the transfer.

The step was originally scheduled for 20 January under interim peace deals but was delayed in wrangling over the areas to be transferred.

One per cent of the territory to be transferred will be land which has been under full Israeli control. The remaining 5.1 per cent will be land which has been under Israeli security control with the Palestinians overseeing civil matters.

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators are to meet at Bolling Air Force base in Washington on Tuesday to renew talks aimed at sealing a permanent peace treaty between the sides by September.

A dispute over the handover map had held up talks on all facets of a treaty, meant to address such cardinal issues as the fate of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements.

Explosives found: Palestinian forces said they had found 32 kg of explosives intended for an attack against Israel in a stash hidden by Hamas militants in a kindergarten in the Gaza Strip.

Mr Jabril al-Rajoub, the Palestinian preventive security chief in the West Bank, said yesterday that Palestinian forces made the discovery on Friday after one of the Hamas cell arrested in the West Bank town of Nablus last week alerted them to the explosives.

"One of the men we arrested in Nablus confessed that they have explosives hidden in a kindergarten in Al-shati (refugee) camp in Gaza. We found in that hideout 32 kg of explosives in the kindergarten yesterday. It belongs to Hamas," Mr Rajoub said.

THE STATESMAN
20 MAR 2000

WEST ASIA / CHANCES OF BREAKTHROUGH

Clinton to meet Assad in Geneva

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), MARCH 20. The news that the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, will meet his Syrian counterpart, Mr. Hafez al Assad, in Geneva while returning from the Indian sub-continent has raised the chances of a real breakthrough in the Syria-Israel track of the West Asian negotiations. Since the two Presidents could hardly have decided to meet, substantial ground had already been covered by officials. A perusal of the working paper drawn up by U.S. officials at the end of the last round of Syria-Israel talks in January also indicates that the differences between the two sides are not so wide as their rhetoric since then would suggest.

Mr. Clinton announced in Dhaka today that he would meet Mr. Assad in Geneva. Other details from his press conference were not available, but there is no item of greater importance in the plate of discussions between the U.S. and Syria than the revival of the West Asia negotiations. Talks between Syria and Israel got off to a promising start last December after a gap of over three years but came to a standstill after the second round in January. Syria had refused to get back to the negotiat-

ing table unless Israel ^{firmly} agreed to return the Golan Heights in its entirety. Israel insisted that Syria must clearly set out what it was prepared to give in terms of security and normalisation before the territorial issue could be worked out.

At the end of the last round of talks the U.S., playing its mediator's role, had drawn up a document in the form of a draft treaty. This document recorded the positions taken by Syria and Israel on various details of the differences between them.

From the document, it was possible to discern where the two sides were in agreement or close to it and where their differences were still considerably wide. It appeared from the document that Syria was willing to meet Israel's demands on normalisation and water issues almost in their entirety and was also flexible on the security issues. For its part, Israel appeared to have dropped a mention of its hardest position on the territorial (i.e. Golan Heights) issue but without going very far towards meeting the Syrian demand that the border in this sector should be along the lines it was on June 4, 1967.

The leakage of the document in the Israeli paper *Haareiz* preceded a sudden hardening

of the Syrian position on the negotiations as a whole. They insisted that they would not return to the negotiating table unless Israel gave them a written promise to withdraw to the 1967 lines or at least deposited such a promise with the U.S. Israel has not given such a promise as yet but its Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, has given several indications that a return to the 1967 lines is not absent from his mind. He has declared that four of his predecessors were prepared to return the Golan in its entirety and indicated that his mentor, Yitzhak Rabin, had indeed deposited such a promise with the U.S.

The news about the Clinton-Assad meeting could indicate that the U.S. has been able to nudge Mr. Barak a little further towards a public acceptance of the 1967 line. Just yesterday, the Syrian Defence Minister, Mr. Mustafa Has, went out of his way to praise the huge and sustained effort that the U.S. had put in to get some movement on the Syria-Israel talks. In the invitation for a meeting with Mr. Clinton, the Syrian President has also got some cover for the embarrassment caused by the leakage of the working document in which Syria appeared to have made more concessions than Israel.

THE HINDU
21 MAR 2000

THE Israeli police having codenamed security for Pope John Paul II's Holy Land pilgrimage, which began on Tuesday, "Operation Old Friend", the 79-year-old, Polish-born Pontiff has done his best to prove them right. "This Pope," rejoiced Father Michael McGarry, the Catholic rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, "has done more for Catholic-Jewish relations in 30 years than the Church had done in the previous 2,000 years."

The week-long visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories is essentially a spiritual journey. John Paul comes as a pilgrim to the places where Jesus lived, ministered and was crucified. Yet no one, Catholic, Jew or Muslim, underestimates its political significance. As David Rosen, a rabbi who helped negotiate diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican, put it: "The Pope is coming as head of state to heads of state." Note the plural, Israel and Palestine. The impact will be felt most notably in Jerusalem, the holy city which both nations claim as their capital.

From Israel's point of view, the contrast with the last Papal visit could not be more marked. In 1964, Pope Paul VI entered Israel near Megiddo, north-east of Tel-Aviv, from the West Bank, which was then under Jordanian rule. He came to conduct mass in Nazareth, which happens to be in Israel. Grudingly, he addressed Zoltan Shazar as "Your Excellency," not "Mr President".

He was careful never to mention Israel by name. From Galilee, he drove discreetly to the Jewish side of Jerusalem, visited the room of the Last Supper on Mount Zion, then

Israelis, Palestinians and John Paul too

The Pope comes as a pilgrim to the places where Jesus lived, ministered and was crucified. Yet no one, Catholic, Jew or Muslim, underestimates its political significance, writes ERIC SILVER

Abu Dis, which straddles the Jerusalem-Jericho highway and from which you can see the golden Dome of the Rock, barely 700 yards to the west. They could call it "Al Quds", the Arabic name for Jerusalem.

Something along these lines was sketched by Shimon Peres' protege, Yossi Belim (now justice minister), and Mr Arafat's deputy, Abu-Mazen, after the 1993 Oslo accords brought the Palestinian leadership back to Palestine. The idea was never formally endorsed by their respective leaders, but it is no coincidence that the Palestinian Authority began erecting a parliament house in Abu Dis — and that no Israeli administration, Likud or Labour, tried to stop it. The building is now almost finished.

It is not, however, the only thing that has changed on the ground of the holy city. Whatever Israel contends, Jerusalem is de facto divided. Mr Arafat's minions have clandestinely taken control over education, welfare, religious affairs and informal policing for the 200,000 Arab residents, most of whom remain nominally Jordanian citizens.

At the same time, the Palestinians have taken a leaf out of the Zionist book and are "creating facts" by constructing thousands of apartments on the eastern side of town. Khatem

Jerusalem is "the eternal, indivisible capital of the Jewish people, full stop".

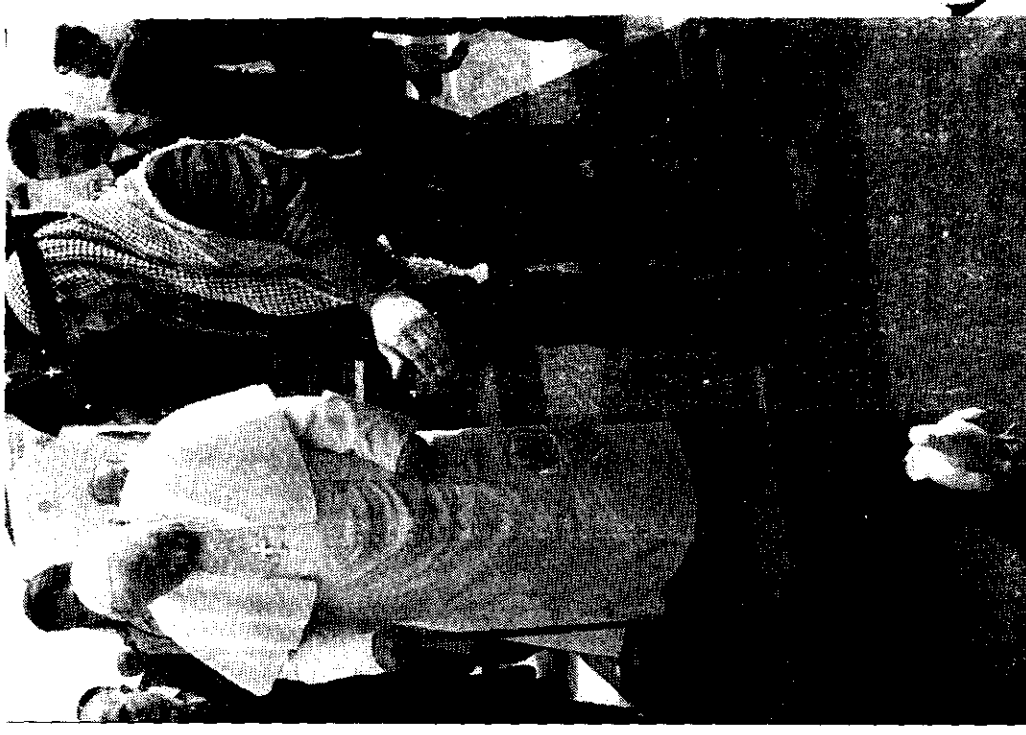
That, however, remains Israel's position, across almost the entire political spectrum. Jerusalem is on the agenda for the final status talks, but neither Labour nor Likud leaders are contemplating any concessions on sovereignty. Jerusalem, unlike the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was annexed to Israel within weeks of the 1967 war. Despite right-wing opposition jibes that "Barak will divide Jerusalem", the government says it will not go back on that, though it is prepared to grant special status to Muslim and Christian holy places.

Yasser Arafat, for his part, says at every opportunity that he is determined to establish a Palestinian state this year, "with Jerusalem as its capital". The Palestinian leader does not covet the whole city, east and west, old and new. But under his interpretation of the 1967

United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which emphasised "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war", East Jerusalem belongs to the Arabs. It remains occupied territory. Other Palestinian spokesmen have also spoken of compensation (at the very least) for Arab property abandoned in West Jerusalem during the 1948 war.

Neither Jews nor Arabs want to put back the barbed wire and sniper walls that disfigured the city before 1967, but there is no sign of flexibility on sovereignty. Israel wants to go on ruling all of Jerusalem, the Palestinians want to rule the eastern neighbourhoods where their people live.

The best hope of fudging the issue lies in proposals, already mooted, for expanding the city limits. Jewish suburbs and Arab villages would be incorporated in Jerusalem. The Palestinians could then establish their capital in the village of



Pope John Paul II and Jordan's King Abdullah II (right) walk behind a dove upon the Pontiff's arrival in Amman on Monday. — APTI

Eid, a Jerusalem representative in the Palestinian legislature, estimates that 6,000 to 7,000 such structures have been put up over the past four years. Most of them without planning permission. The Likud mayor, Ehud Olmert, seems powerless to stop them.

For all Mr Barak's bluster, Mr Arafat is hardly likely to leave it

(The author is the Jerusalem-based correspondent of The Statesman.)

Israel, Syria ready to sign peace deal: Mubarak

Washington, March 22: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Syria and Israel have come close to a peace accord through indirect discussions that have continued unannounced in the weeks since their formal US brokered negotiations broke down in January, the *Washington Post* reported on Wednesday.

In an interview, Mr Mubarak told the *Washington Post* that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Shara have maintained the contacts throughout the two-month formal lull by using what he called "special envoys" as well as official American and British go-betweens.

President Bill Clinton is due to meet with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva on Sunday. Mr Mubarak said that if formal talks resumed after Sunday's meeting, the issues left to decide "will be not so complicated," the *Washington Post* reported.

Mr Mubarak's assessment that an agreement is near marked the most authoritative statement in a crescendo of recent reports that despite the formal stall, Syria and Israel continue to exchange views and have neared an accord on Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for normal relations and unspecified security guarantees.

Mr Clinton said on Tuesday said he was "hopeful" about his meeting with Mr Assad, but declined to say whether a deal was imminent.

Mr Assad's willingness to make a rare trip outside Syria to meet with Mr Clinton in Switzerland, Mr Mubarak said, was a sign the leader sees a good chance for a resumption of talks on a peace treaty between Israel and Syria. Mr Mubarak said that Mr Assad, seemed preoccupied during state functions. (*Reuters*)

THE ASIAN AGE

23 MAR 2000

West Asia talks reopen

Washington, March 22 (AP): Israel and the Palestinians reopened West Asia talks at a screened-off US Air Force base, and a senior Israeli official said they could begin drafting the outline of an accord by week's end.

But there was little expectation of quick agreement to settle their decades-long dispute.

Even as the negotiators began grappling with Palestinian demands for a state and for a capital in Jerusalem, Israel withdrew from another 6.1 per cent of the West Bank. It gave Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat a larger foundation for a state and some land close to Jerusalem.

The Palestinians entered the talks at Bolling Air Force Base hopeful not only to make headway on terms of a final settlement but also to ensure that an expected Israeli West Bank pullback in June is a generous one.

"We are hopeful that the Israeli side will be serious and committed to the requirements of achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace," Hassan Abdel Rahman, the chief PLO representative in Washington said, as the delegations assembled.

Concerning the Palestinians' desires for a state with part of Jerusalem as its capital, the Israeli Cabinet signalled on Sunday it was in a conciliatory mood by approving the surrender of another 6.1 per cent of the West Bank, with two key provisions.

For the first time, a Jewish settlement effectively will be subject to Palestinian security for access by its residents; and the Palestinians will get control of land on Jerusalem's outskirts.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the talks are part of a step-by-step process of coming to terms with the Palestinians. The official said one aim this week was to find, with help from US mediators, "bridging proposals" on tough problems so that the two sides could begin drafting a potential accord at the conclusion of the week-long talks.

Israel also is pursuing reopened negotiations with Syria, which were broken off in mid-January.

US President Bill Clinton is due to meet on Sunday in Geneva with Syrian President Hafez Assad. Their first meeting in six years is likely to result in resumption of negotiations, but that would not mean the two sides are ready to strike a deal, the Israeli official said.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, however, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Syria and Israel have come close to a peace agreement through indirect talks that have continued unannounced since US-brokered negotiations broke down in January.

THE TELEGRAPH

23 MAR 2000

Pope issues call for Palestinian homeland

AP-14 2813

Bethlehem, West Bank, March 22

POPE JOHN PAUL today made an impassioned plea for a Palestinian homeland at the start of a historic visit to the West Bank town of Bethlehem, revered as the birthplace of Jesus.

"No one can ignore how much the Palestinian people have had to suffer in recent decades. Your torment is before the eyes of the world. And it has gone on too long," the Pope said in a speech at a welcoming ceremony with Palestinian president Yasser Arafat.

The Pope, on a weeks pilgrimage to the holy land, said the Vatican had always recognised that the Palestinian people "have natural right to a homeland, and the right to be able to live in peace and tranquillity with the other peoples of this area".

"In the international forum, my predecessors and I have repeatedly proclaimed that there would be

Asian peace and appealing for greater religious dialogue.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, ministers and religious figures received the Pope on his arrival at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport.

The 81-year-old Pope arrived aboard the Royal Jordanian 320 airbus, accompanied by cardinals, patriarchs and members of his delegation. Tight security measures were taken during the visit.

Earlier in Jordan yesterday, the Pope celebrated mass for 30,000 worshippers at a sports stadium and blessed the water at Wadi al Kharrar, one of disputed sites of Christ's baptism.

The Pope said, "In this year of the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, it has been my strong personal desire to come here and to pray in the most important places which, from ancient times, have seen god's interventions. ~~the west~~ ^{done} (Agencies)



Pope John Paul II touching a bowl of soil, brought by youngsters from different religions, on arrival in Tel Aviv. Photo: AP

no end to the sad conflict in the holy land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declara-

tions," he said at Arafat's Presidential palace. Pope John Paul arrived in Israel last night on the first Papal visit to the Jewish nation in 36 years, stressing the urgent need for West

Arafat makes most of Pope visit

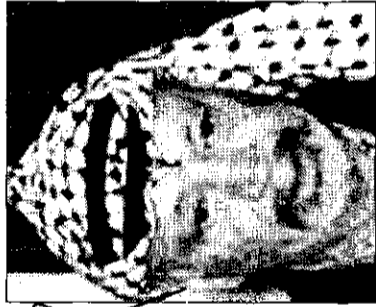
ERIC SILVER
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

BETHLEHEM, March 22. — Pope John Paul II's millennium pilgrimage to the Holy Land climaxed on its first full day when the Pope celebrated Mass today in Bethlehem's refurbished Manger Square.

To repeated applause from thousands of local Christians and foreign pilgrims, the Pope said: "Bethlehem is the heart of my jubilee pilgrimage... Every day is Christmas in Bethlehem, every day is Christmas in the hearts of Christians... We celebrate one newborn child, but we embrace all men everywhere."

In a message of solidarity with the Holy Land's dwindling Christian minority, John Paul cited Jesus's words after he rose from the dead: "Peace be with you, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to preserve your heritage in the very place where the Saviour was born."

The muezzin waited until the Pope had concluded his homily before calling Bethlehem's



Arafat: politics & hospitality

Muslim citizens to noon prayers in the mosque overlooking Manger Square.

As every Vatican spokesman constantly reiterated, the pilgrimage was a spiritual journey for a Holy Father in his eightieth year. Yet, in the setting of the still not quite resolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he could not ignore the political rapids. The best he could hope for was to pick his way over the stepping stones and make sure he didn't fall in.

The Palestinian leader, Mr

Yasser Arafat, received him in Bethlehem as a head of state had done when he landed in Israel the night before, the Pope kissed a bowl of national soil. The red, black, green and white Palestinian flag flew alongside the yellow and white of the Vatican. John Paul bowed when Mr Arafat welcomed him on behalf of the Palestinian people and "its eternal capital, Jerusalem".

The Jewish mayor of Jerusalem, Mr Ehud Olmert, had used the same phrase on Israel's behalf the night before. John Paul did not endorse a Palestinian state as such, but at the Bethlehem welcoming ceremony he said in firm, Polish-accented English: "No one can ignore how much the Palestinian people have had to suffer in recent decades. The Holy See has always recognised that the Palestinian people have the natural right to a homeland and the right to be able to live in peace and tran-

quility with the other peoples of this area."

The Pope was deliberately emphasizing the continuity of Vatican policy. He was saying nothing new, but he was saying it for the first time on Palestinian soil, in a Christian holy city under Palestinian rule. He offered no specific solutions, but implicitly warned Israel (or anyone else) against dictating terms.

Mr Arafat made the most of the visit, which ended with a tour of Dehaisheh refugee camp, where 18,000 Palestinians whose families fled or were driven from their homes in Israel's War of Independence now live in crumbling squalor.

"Your presence today as a pilgrim to our Holy Land," he told the Pope, "is an historical event that will be recorded in Palestinian history for its political, religious and cultural dimension and significance."

To underline the political dimension, Mr Arafat added: "Your presence in Bethlehem,



Pope: pilgrimage & political pitfalls

in occupied Jerusalem, in Jericho and at the Dehaisheh refugee camp, which is inhabited by displaced Palestinian refugees, is an act that gives witness to the oneness of God, showing that there is no difference between one human being and another as long as they are obedient to the Almighty. The Palestinian people value highly your principled position in support of their cause and their rightful presence in their homeland as a sovereign and independent people."

West Asia talks looking positive: US

Washington, March 24: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators had "intensive and serious" talks at a US Air Force base in Washington on Thursday, the third day of meetings on the most difficult disputes in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"The talks are continuing, intensive and serious. There's a good atmosphere," said a state department official. US officials will meet the two delegations separately at secluded Bolling Air Force Base on Thursday for an update on progress, added the official, who asked not to be identified.

All sides say they do not expect dramatic breakthroughs at the talks, which are at the level of chief negotiators.

Breakthroughs must await meetings of the leaders, they say.

The delegations, led by Oded Eran for Israel and Yasser Arafat for the Palestinians, have given the US West Asia special envoy, Dennis Ross,

a pledge of silence, on the theory that secrecy is conducive to progress.

The blackout has largely held — an indication that neither party feels the need to vent frustrations in public.

"They are playing by Dennis' rules," said a West Asian diplomat close to the talks. "The fact that no one is talking is a good sign," he added. The talks are mainly on "final status" issues, such as borders, Jerusalem, the status of the Palestinian territories and the fate of Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements.

The aim is to reach a framework agreement on those disputes by May and a final agreement by Sept. 13.

The talks opened on Tuesday and are expected to last about one week.

The US official said the negotiators had not yet decided when to go home. (Reuters)

Israelis doubt peace accord with Syrians

Jerusalem, March 24: Israelis overwhelmingly doubt a US-Syrian summit on Sunday will bear fruit for West Asia peace, according to an opinion poll published on Friday. Sixty-three per cent of 503 Israelis surveyed told a Dahan Institute poll for the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* they expected that US President Bill Clinton's meeting in Geneva with their Syrian arch-foe, President Hafez al-Assad, would lead nowhere.

Only 27 per cent expected it to lead to a deal while the rest had no opinion. The poll had a 4.5 per cent margin of error. Israeli officials believe the summit will concentrate on mapping out a future Israeli-Syrian border and the possibility of Israel opening talks with neighbouring Lebanon, where Syria is the dominant power.

Foreign minister David Levy said the summit — being watched closely in Israel — might end with an announcement that Syria would resume peace talks with Israel that broke down in January. But he wasn't holding his breath. "Israel is not some sort of country that goes crawling on its belly to a peace at any price," Mr Levy told Israel Radio. (Reuters)

Clinton to re-energise talks

BY STEVE HOLLAND

Jaipur, March 24: The meeting between US President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad next Sunday may not lead to an immediate deal for Damascus to resume peace talks with Israel, Mr Clinton's national security adviser said on Thursday.

"The best case I would say is that we have a sense after the meeting that there is enough common ground, they're close enough, that if we actually resume negotiations that you could envision them ending in success," Mr Berger told reporters covering Clinton's week-

long South Asia tour. The trip ends on Sunday when Mr Clinton stops in Geneva on the way home to meet Mr Assad two months after Israeli-Syrian peace talks that began with high hopes in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, broke off.

There had been some hopes that the fact Mr Assad agreed to a meeting signalled he was ready to resume talks with Israel over the fate of the strategic Golan Heights, seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Syrian-Israeli talks broke off in January after Israel refused to commit itself in advance to full

withdrawal from the Golan Heights before discussing security and other elements of a peace deal.

US officials who have watched the ebb and flow of the West Asia peace process over the years were reluctant to put too much importance on the Clinton-Assad meeting.

"The President is not going to walk out and say 'I'm happy to announce that the parties are going to resume their negotiations,'" said one official, speaking on condition of anonymity. He said that "Assad will go back to Damascus, the President will talk to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and we will have a much better idea." (Reuters)

Israel and Syria blame each other for talks failure

Geneva summit breaks no ice

AP, DPA & PTI

SC 11

DAMASCUS, March 27 — The US President, Mr Bill Clinton, and his Syrian counterpart, Mr Hafez Assad, failed during three hours of talks in Geneva yesterday to nail down an agreement to restart negotiations between Syria and Israel for a landmark peace treaty.

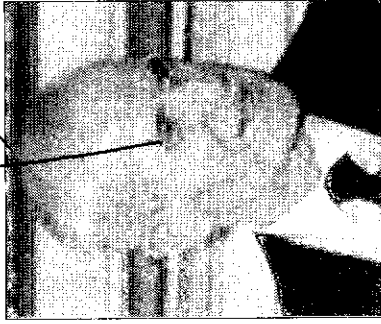
Israel and Syria have blamed each other for the failure of talks.

Israel has showed no surprise over the Geneva summit's failure, its foreign minister saying in Jerusalem yesterday that Mr Assad showed he lacked the readiness to make peace. On the other hand, Syria's state-run media blamed Israel for the failure of talks.

"The US President had nothing new to offer," Syria's foreign minister said in comments published today.

"We were surprised that the US President was not carrying anything new from the Israeli side, but was asking from Syria what might help Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in his difficult position, which we think is of his own making," the minister, Mr Farouk al-Sharara, was quoted as saying by the Lebanese daily *As-Safir*.

In Washington, US officials said Mr Bill Clinton in his talks with the Syrian leader has found the gap between Israel and Syria too wide to



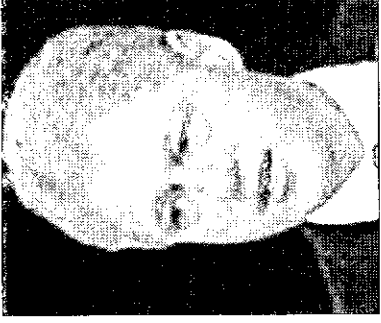
Mr Hafez Assad

convene a fresh round of talks.

The presidential press secretary, Mr Joe Lockhart, said after the failed talks in Geneva yesterday: "I think it is impossible to predict when these talks might resume. There are significant differences and, from the position of the United States, we don't believe it would be productive for those to resume now."

A senior administration official briefing reporters listed withdrawal of Israel from Golan, the issues linked with it and measures to be taken by Syria for a real peace in the region as the issues to be settled by the two countries.

Mr Lockhart in a statement said: "Since we hosted the talks in Shepherdstown, we have been engaged in an effort to try to clarify the needs and posi-



Mr Bill Clinton

tions of Israelis and Syrians. President Clinton feels that it was important to meet with President Assad face to face in order to further that process, since the President had met Israeli premier Barak a number of times.

"Throughout the process, the parties have differed on a number of issues. While we have a better understanding of the Syrian position differences between the Syrian and Israeli positions remain," he said.

The Israeli foreign minister, Mr David Levy, said: "Assad relies on Israeli concessions. We thought that after the meetings in Shepherdstown, West Virginia (in December), Assad understood the construction of peace as far as Israel is concerned."

"That peace," he said, "must



Mr Ehud Barak

be built on strong foundations of security, early warning, the solution of the question of water, secure borders, and the exchange of ambassadors.

"A war-like situation cannot exist side by side with peace. I can only state with sorrow that the Syrian President has not accepted this rule which everybody understands but him. Israel will in no way abandon its security."

Mr Al-Sharara, who attended the Assad-Clinton Geneva meeting and led the Syrian delegation to the US-brokered peace talks with Israel, said the summit was neither a failure nor a success.

"The Geneva summit is part of American efforts that will continue with the aim of achieving a just peace," he told the Lebanese daily.

peace talks in December after a nearly four-year hiatus.

The talks were suspended in January when Syria insisted that Israel must commit itself to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, captured by the Jewish state in 1967, before they can resume talks.

But Israel says it cannot decide the extent of its withdrawal before first knowing what security arrangements and level of normalisation in relations Syria is willing to offer.

The Lebanese Prime Minister, Mr Salim Hoss, meanwhile, said today that it appeared from the Geneva talks that "Israel is not ready for a settlement and does not consider peace with the Arabs to be a strategic choice."

In a statement issued by his office in Beirut, Mr Hoss said Israel "is fully responsible" for the results of the summit. "He who wants peace does not reject withdrawal from territory occupied by force."

Mr Al-Sharara, who attended the Assad-Clinton Geneva meeting and led the Syrian delegation to the US-brokered peace talks with Israel, said the summit was neither a failure nor a success.

"The Geneva summit is part of American efforts that will continue with the aim of achieving a just peace," he told the Lebanese daily.

THE STATESMAN
28 MAR 2000

Syria, Israel soften stand ahead of Clinton's meet

Dubai, March 26

ON THE eve of much-awaited meeting between President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad, Israeli Army radio today claimed that the Jewish nation and Syria have thrashed out controversial matters and narrowed down differences.

A Kuna report monitored in Amman quoted the radio as claiming that Damascus and Tel Aviv, in behind-the-curtain talks, agreed to keep major Israeli industrial projects on the Golan heights following the Israeli pullout from the plateau and allow Israeli nationals to pursue working in the projects.

It was agreed upon that Turkey would allow Syria to pump in a

larger amount of water from the Euphrates river provided Damascus refrained from utilising tributaries of the Jordan river.

Turkey has built several dams on the Euphrates, cutting volume of water flowing to Syria. The radio said Tel Aviv expressed readiness to withdraw military forces from the Golan in exchange for full normalisation of ties.

The Israeli sources predicted a breakthrough in the stalemated negotiations between Israel and Syria.

Meanwhile, Mr Clinton is scheduled to meet the Syrian President Assad in Geneva in what is seen as an attempt by the US administration to bring Syria and Israel back to the negotiating table. (UNI)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

28 MAR 2000

AD-16

Israel halts peace talks

JERUSALEM, FEB. 1. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, suspended peace talks with Syria on Monday night, saying it was impossible to talk to Damascus while Hizbollah guerillas were attacking Israeli troops in Lebanon.

Mr. Barak's tough response followed a Hizbollah ambush in Southern Lebanon in which three members of an Israeli elite unit were killed and four wounded, one of them critically.

On Sunday, guerillas killed Col. Akel Hashem, the deputy commander of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army militia, with a booby-trap bomb. The death was deeply mourned by the Israeli military, who saw him as a key ally in the lawless border area.

The suspension of talks marked a setback for Mr. Barak, whose twin goals are making peace with Syria and withdrawing Israeli troops from Lebanon. As Sy-

ria controls Lebanese affairs, the two issues are linked. — © Telegraph Group Limited, London, 2000.

Fresh talks in Moscow

MOSCOW, FEB. 1. A new round of multilateral peace talks over the future of West Asia opened in Moscow today, following a nearly four-year-long hiatus, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

The U.S. Secretary of State, Ms. Madeleine Albright, whose government co-chairs the forum with Russia, was in Moscow for the meeting, which was being held in one of the capital's major hotels.

The Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. David Levy and senior officials from four West Asian states — Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia — were also due to attend. The regional representatives met yesterday to coordinate their positions.

Other participants include Canada, Japan, Norway, and the Palestinian authority. — AFP

THE HINDU
- 2 FEB 2000

Israel approves West Bank pullout

REUTERS

JERUSALEM, Feb. 2. — Israel's security Cabinet today approved the delayed handover of a further 6.1 per cent of the West Bank to Palestinian control.

It took the decision as the USA's West Asia envoy, Mr Dennis Ross, arrived in the region to try and help Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation boost their troubled peace negotiations.

"The security Cabinet approved the defence establishment's suggestion regarding the areas where there will be a redeployment of 6.1 per cent," a government statement said.

Israel Radio said the transfer would take place by 10 February.

The pullback, expected to go to the full Cabinet for final approval, was to have taken place on 20 January under the terms of an interim peace deal struck by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Yasser Arafat last September.

Mr Barak put the handover on hold amid differences over the territory involved. The Palestinians said they were still pushing for the transfer to include land around Jerusalem.

A senior aide to Mr Arafat said the Palestinian leader would discuss the issue at a summit with Mr Barak tomorrow called to determine whether the parties can still reach a framework accord on a final peace deal by a 13 February target date.

"We have still not seen the withdrawal maps. This issue will be discussed between Mr Arafat and Mr Barak when they meet tomorrow," the President's aide, Mr Tayeb Abdel-Rahim, said.

Mr Barak and Mr Arafat were also due to hold separate talks with Mr Ross later today.

The latest handover will increase full or partial Palestinian control to around 40 per cent of the West Bank, captured by Israel in the 1967 war. Palestinians also have interim self-rule in most of the Gaza strip.

That is well short of the total control Mr Arafat is seeking in his push for Palestinian independence in the West Bank and Gaza in negotiations with Israel on a final peace settlement. Mr Barak ruled out giving up all of the West Bank.

Mr Arafat has repeatedly said he will declare an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza strip this year, regardless of the course of negotiations.

The PLO mini-Parliament convened in Gaza today to discuss the timing of such a declaration.

THE STATESMAN

- 3 FEB 2000

Arafat, Barak discuss borders

HO-1 412 ✓ W. B. S. in (u)
JERUSALEM, FEB. 3. The Palestinian leader, Mr. Yasser Arafat and the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak today met at the Erez crossing on the Gaza border, in a bid to bridge the gap between them and reach a framework agreement on final status issues.

A Palestinian official told DPA that there was still a wide rift between the two sides over the final particulars of the Palestinian borders. He said that Mr. Barak would discuss the final maps with Mr. Arafat to persuade him to accept them. The official said that Mr. Barak had brought maps of an Israeli pullback of 6.1 per cent in the West Bank for Mr. Arafat's approval. — DPA

Telegraph reports:

The proposed move would give the Palestinians control of more than 40 per cent of the total occupied West Bank. The handover, expected to take place next week, complies with Israel's September promise to make three interim withdrawals from territory it occupied in the Six Day War of 1967.

Mr. Arafat, as leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, is unlikely to be satisfied with the territory being offered. He has been pressing for control of land next to Jerusalem, where he could set up the capital of a Palestinian state, which would be a major coup for the Islamic world.

Israeli officials, however, said the army would vacate mainly military areas, not population centres as Arafat has been demanding. That land is primarily in the Hebron hills and around the towns of Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin.

The handover should have taken place on Jan. 20, but was delayed by a row over territory. The two sides are supposed to reach a "framework agreement" on a final peace deal by Feb. 13, but the deadline seems impossible. So-called intensive talks which began on Sunday have shown no signs of a breakthrough, and only a high-profile summit meeting is likely to result in real progress.

In addition to the six per cent of the West Bank he will receive next week, Mr. Arafat is looking for another major withdrawal in the final status talks, which would give him control of the vast majority of the West Bank.

Mr. Arafat has promised to declare the statehood of an independent Palestine this year, regardless of how much territory he controls.

At the moment, however, the areas under full or partial Palestinian control on the West Bank are only scattered patches of land, cut through and divided by Jewish settlements and their respective access roads.

THE HINDU
4 FEB 2000

PALESTINE state by Sept.

GAZA, FEB. 4. The Palestine Liberation Organisation's mini-Parliament insisted that an independent Palestinian state would be declared in 2000 even if negotiations with Israel on a final peace deal fail to meet a September deadline.

The declaration by the 120-member Palestinian Central Council (PCC) yesterday was contained in a statement at the end of a two-day meeting. "The Palestinian Central Council reaffirms the necessity to declare the materialisation of the sovereignty of the Palestinian state within this year and to take all necessary steps and proper international contacts to achieve this."

It did not, as was widely expected, link the declaration to the mid-September deadline that both Israel and the Palestinians have agreed on as a target date for a final status peace deal. But Mr. Ahmed Korei, the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council who is also known as Abu Ala, said the declaration would be made by September. "I think the utmost deadline will be September 13," he said after the PCC meeting concluded in Gaza. The Palestinian President, Mr. Yasser Arafat, has repeatedly said he will declare independence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip this year, irrespective of the progress of the peace talks.

Talks between the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, and Mr. Arafat ended in deadlock earlier in the day after they were unable to agree on a land handover and a February 13 deadline for a framework peace deal.

Officials on both sides said the main sticking point was a difference of opinion over what areas Israel would give Palestinians in the handover of a further 6.1 per cent of the West Bank that had originally been scheduled for January 20. — Reuters

THE HINDU
- 5 FEB 2000

Israel withdraws envoy from Austria

New coalition Cabinet sworn in □ Klestil seeks written pledge from Haider

By RICHARD MURPHY
Vienna, Feb. 4: Austria swore in a new government including the far-right party of Joerg Haider on Friday despite an international uproar that saw Israel withdraw its ambassador from Vienna.

In Vienna's Hofburg Palace, President Thomas Klestil inducted a Cabinet led by conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel as several thousand angry opponents of Mr Haider's Freedom Party scuffled with the police outside.

Mr Klestil's icy demeanour and icy language at the ceremony displayed his deep disapproval of the whole business.

He barely looked at Mr Schuessel as he pronounced the formal words laid down by the Constitution, kept eye contact with each minister to a minimum, never smiled and gave the briefest of handshakes as he handed them their credentials.

It was only the second time in recent history that a far-right party had entered a European government. Rightists were in a coalition

in Italy in the mid-1990s. But Mr Haider's ascent stirred more fear because of controversial past remarks playing down the crimes of the Nazis. Mr Klestil swore in 12 ministers and four state secretaries — half from Mr Schuessel's People's Party and half from the Freedom Party, which will hold down the vice-chancellorship and the finance, defence, justice and social affairs portfolios. However, Mr Klestil, wary of international alarm, did not approve the new government before extracting a

written pledge from Mr Schuessel and Mr Haider to uphold democratic values and take a "self-critical" look at Austria's 1938-45 Nazi era.

Despite assurances from Mr Haider that he had apologised for past praise of Hitler's labour policy and Waffen SS war veterans, and that his party was not xenophobic, Israel struck the first diplomatic blow against Vienna on Friday.

Hours before the government was inaugurated, the Israeli embassy said Ambassador Nathan Meron was being withdrawn.

An embassy spokeswoman said Mr Meron, also responsible for Slovakia, had flown home to accompany Slovak President Rudolf Schuster on a visit to Israel but there were no plans for him to return. "Israel cannot remain silent in the face of the rise of extremist right-wing parties, in particular in those countries which played a role in the events which brought about the eradication of a third of the Jewish people in the (Nazi) Holocaust," an Israeli foreign ministry statement said. (Reuters)

Negotiations on to resolve deadlock in W. Asia peace talks

JERUSALEM: U.S. envoy Dennis Ross on Sunday met senior Palestinian and Israeli negotiators in an effort to resolve what the Palestinian authority called an unprecedented crisis in the peace process.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat and his Israeli counterpart Oded Eran joined Mr Ross for a late-night session at the residence of United States ambassador Martin Indyk, a U.S. official said.

"The coming 24 hours will be decisive in knowing the fate of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations," Nabil Abu Rdeina, a senior adviser to Palestinian president Yasser Arafat, said earlier on Sunday. The Palestinians have threatened to freeze the troubled talks with Israel.

A source close to the negotiations said the meeting at the ambassador's home was likely to focus on the delayed transfer — initially scheduled for January 20 — of an additional 6.1 per cent of West Bank land to the Palestinians under an interim peace deal. On Wednesday, Israel's security cabinet approved the areas from which Israel would withdraw but excluded villages around Jerusalem which Mr Arafat insists should be given over.

Palestinian officials and western diplomats said Mr Ross, who arrived on Wednesday to assess how the U.S. could help put the peace process back on track, had been getting mixed signals on the problems delaying progress.

Diplomats said Mr Ross wanted Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to spell out their positions at the meeting, a follow-up to talks he held with Mr Arafat late on Friday.

At his meeting with Mr Arafat, which spilled over into the early hours of Saturday, Mr Ross tried "to find a way out of the crisis, especially after the Palestinians threatened to freeze talks with the Israelis."

Israel last week said it would hand over the land by February 10, three weeks later than the January 20 deadline laid down in the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement. But Palestinians are furious that Israel failed to consult them over the maps detailing the withdrawal.

Meanwhile, in Cairo, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat entered talks on Sunday with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the crisis in peace negotiations with Israel.

The two leaders were to discuss a delayed Israeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank and the outcome of a summit meeting between Mr Arafat and Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak on Thursday that failed to secure any progress, Egyptian and Palestinian officials said.

"President Arafat will inform President Mubarak about the crisis caused by Israel's refusal to implement signed agreements," Arafat aide Nabil Abu Rdeina said in Gaza city shortly before Mr Arafat left for Cairo. (Agencies)

Israeli attacks, a message to Syria?

By Kesava Menon 9/2

BEIRUT, FEB. 8. It was about 2.30 a.m. or 3 a.m. when a sharp double-beat of anti-aircraft fire broke the night's silence in the city. For a few minutes after that, the sound of fast flying aircraft rumbled overhead. Electricity was abruptly cut off till, in the hotel at least, generators sprang to life.

Last night, Israeli war planes struck three power plants in Lebanon. That was what the sound and light or rather non-light, show was all about. It is perhaps a reflection on the trauma that this country has suffered over many years, and the resilience that it has consequently developed, that the rhythm of life was hardly disturbed. There was no mass rush of people onto the streets, the late night traffic moved just as desultorily as ever and besides the brief anti-aircraft burst there was hardly a sign that Lebanese forces were engaged in combat. This morning, it is almost business as usual but for the problem with power supply.

The Israeli air raid last night was reportedly in retaliation for the killing of their soldiers in escalated fighting in southern Lebanon over the past week. Three Israeli soldiers were killed at the beginning of the week when a landmine blew up their armoured vehicle inside the zone in southern Lebanon which Israel has occupied. Hizbollah commandos had also ambushed and killed the deputy commander of the Lebanese Christian militia which has allied itself with Israel inside the zone. Another Israeli soldier was killed at the end of the week and Israeli leaders and

warned that they would strike back.

The view from here is, of course, directly the opposite. Lebanese commentators note that Hizbollah had launched its attacks on Israeli occupation forces within the zone only because it had been provoked by Israeli shelling which has caused civilian casualties within Lebanese territory. They stress that the basic cause for tension is Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory and that their Government cannot be expected to restrain Hizbollah "freedom fighters" under these circumstances. This country has been bracing for an Israeli raid because that is the now established pattern but the mood is one of the defiance, perhaps even disdain.

If there is an element of surprise it was that last night's raid on the civilian infrastructure was not what was really expected. The expectation here was that Israel would intensify its artillery assaults on Hizbollah enclaves in the south of the country. Israel had hit Lebanon's civilian infrastructure last year in connection with escalated fighting in the south. But that was before negotiations on the Syria-Israel track resumed in December brightening the prospects for a comprehensive West Asian peace. These talks have, of course, stalled and the swiftness with which talk of peace can be followed by signs of war only highlights the fragility of the situation. Syria exerts considerable influence over Lebanon and has the wherewithal to cut off Hizbollah's arms supplies. Therefore, last night's raid was probably intended as a message from Israel to Syria that its allies and clients would be hurt if Damas-

cus did not show more flexibility. Israel believes that Syria uses the Hizbollah as an instrument to pressure Israel into a more conciliatory line in the negotiations, and hence the message.

Syrian commentators note that their Government can control Hizbollah only to the same extent as the U.S. administration can restrain Israel. Like the Lebanese, they point out that the primary issue is Israel's occupation of Lebanese territory and its aggressive attitude to civilians living in the vicinity. Although no deaths have been reported in last night's attacks, the episodic destruction of Lebanese infrastructure causes much hardship to a civilian population that is striving to rebuild a war-shattered economy.

While Hizbollah has attacked Israeli soldiers and armed allies within the occupied zone, Israel has chosen to hit targets further afield. This Israel action is in violation of a three-year-old agreement whereby Israel and the Hizbollah promised to refrain from targeting civilians on the other side. To an extent, the Israeli Government might have been pressured by the hawkish trend in their society which has demanded a harsh response to Hizbollah's attacks of last week. But reports from Israel suggest that there is an equally powerful sentiment favouring a swift withdrawal from the occupied zone. Since the Israeli Government preferred the hawkish mode when its public was not entirely opposed to a more restrained response, it would appear that the idea of sending a message to the Syrian and Lebanese Governments about Israel's overall attitude to the negotiations was a part of the calculation.

The Western media has shifted its focus to the possibility of a Hizbollah strike against targets within Israel. For their part, Hizbollah has vowed it will do so. In the process, it would be easy to forget which side has pushed the envelope here. The U.S. administration, which has the critical say in the situation, has asked all sides to exercise restraint but if the past is any indication, the balance of pressure would be on the Syrian and Lebanese Governments rather than the other way around. Before the raids yesterday, Lebanon's Prime Minister, Mr. Salim Hoss, had asked the U.S. Ambassador here "to make the necessary contacts to prevent Israel from stepping up its attacks and carrying out its threats." That plea has clearly not had much effect.

Reuters reports:

Israel today halted its bombing of civilian targets in Lebanon as tens of thousands of Israeli's stayed in bomb shelters in the north, fearing retaliatory rocket attacks by Hizbollah guerillas.

"As far as we are concerned, the bombing can stop today and indeed it's stopped," the Public Secretary Minister, Mr. Shlomo ben-Ami, said.

THE HINDU

- 9 FEB 2000

Israeli attack shatters Mideast peace process

■ The conflict now threatens civilians in both, Israel and Syria

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
TYRE, LEBANON, FEB 9

THE peace process in the Middle East lay in tatters as a conflict between Israel and Syrian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon escalated to threaten civilians in both countries.

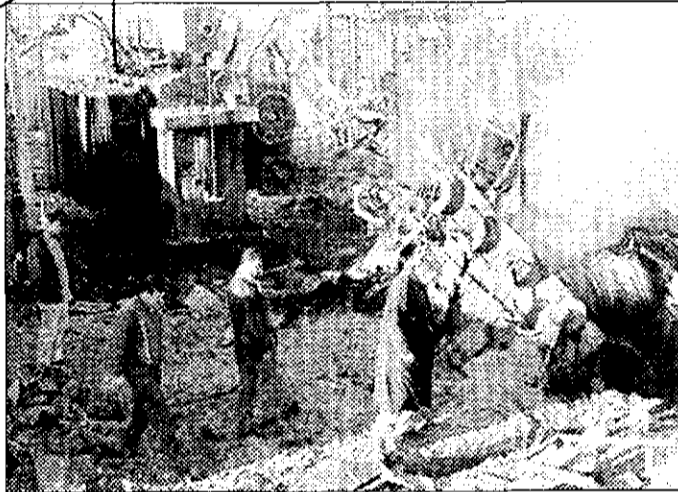
Lebanon was hit again late yesterday, and braced for a second night of punishing attacks after Israel lost another soldier and an allied militiaman to Hezbollah.

The Israeli government decreed a state of emergency in the north of the country along the Lebanese border.

Israel also gave its army broad powers in anticipation of possible new air raids over Lebanon after its latest losses, Israeli public television reported.

"Apparently the message (Israeli) Prime Minister Ehud Barak wanted to get across to Hezbollah and Syria by ordering raids against civilian targets in Lebanon overnight Monday to yesterday was not received," the TV's commentator said.

Israel's massive raids on



Lebanese civilians inspect the damaged Baalbek power station on Tuesday. Israeli aircraft knocked out three power stations in Lebanon overnight, plunging towns and villages into darkness - AFP

Lebanon's power grid in the early hours of yesterday wounded 18 civilians and left much of the country without light or heating.

The Lebanese did not have long to wait to see what the next night would bring, as an Israeli Apache helicopter slammed two missiles into an 11th-floor flat used

as a religious college in the Port city of Tyre, injuring four Hezbollah theology students, and sparking widespread panic.

At the same time, warplanes fired missiles at Hezbollah targets in the Iqlim Al-Tuffah range, further east, police said, without mentioning casualties.

INDIAN EXPRESS
10 FEB 2000

Arafat writes to Clinton on crisis

Gaza City, February 9

PALESTINIAN LEADER Yasser Arafat has written to US President Bill Clinton about the current crisis facing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Palestinian officials said.

The letter was given to the US Consulate General in East Jerusalem, to be passed on to Washington, they said yesterday.

The Palestinians announced on Monday that they were freezing talks with Israel, accusing it of not sticking to its signed commitments.

Negotiations between the two sides have stalled over differences on Israel's scheduled 6.1 per cent withdrawal from further areas of the West Bank. The Israeli Security Cabinet has approved

Talks with Israel

February 10 as the date for the withdrawal — originally due on January 20 — but the Palestinians are angry that it does not include areas close to East Jerusalem.

A summit between Arafat and

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak broke down over the issue on February 3.

Israel and the Palestinians launched what was supposed to be an intensive talks marathon at the end of January in a bid to reach an outline accord by February 13, as agreed between them under the Sharm El-Sheikh agreement they signed in September.

Both sides have admitted that the talks have so far produced no results.

(AFP)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

10 FEB 2000

Retaliation threat includes civilian targets

Lull in Lebanon as Israel talks tough

11/2
11/3
11/4

Jerusalem, Feb. 10 (AP): Israel has changed the rules of its war against Lebanese guerrillas and now will retaliate harshly for attacks on Israeli soldiers, the deputy defence minister said today.

The statement came as the latest flare-up over southern Lebanon eased today, following Israeli airstrikes earlier this week against Lebanese power stations in retaliation for guerrilla attacks that killed several Israeli soldiers.

In Israeli towns along the border, the army sounded the all-clear and residents emerged from bomb shelters after three days.

The government had ordered residents to seek cover in case the Hezbollah retaliated for the air strikes by firing rockets at northern Israel.

Hezbollah did not target Israel, but kept up attacks on Israeli army outposts in the border zone of south Lebanon occupied by Israel. In all, six Israeli soldiers have been killed by Hezbollah in two weeks.

Deputy defence minister Ephraim Sneh said Israel would no longer tolerate Hezbollah attacks on Israeli troops, and hinted retaliation in the future could target civilian infrastructure — despite a US-brokered code of reprisals that has governed hostilities for the past four years.

Under the code, both sides pledged not to target civilians or



VIEW TO A KILL: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak gets a closer look at south Lebanon from a border outpost. (AFP)

use them as shields. Israel has responded to violations, such as rocket attacks on northern Israel, with large-scale bombings, not just of Hezbollah targets, but also of Lebanese infrastructure points.

Hezbollah attacks on Israeli troops, on the other hand, usually triggered only routine air strikes on Hezbollah bases.

Sneh said the pattern of responses has changed. "The important change of principle that happened this week is that the Israel defence forces carried out a large-scale operation in Lebanon, including damage to infrastructure, not in response to firing of

Katyushas at civilians but in response to casualties inflicted on our soldiers in Lebanon," Sneh told Israel radio.

West Bank blast

A car exploded today in a West Bank village, injuring two Palestinians, including one who was in critical condition with burns over 90 per cent of his body.

Palestinian security officials would not say what caused the blast. In the past, Islamic militants have been killed or maimed when preparing car bombs or other explosives for attacks on Israel.

Israeli planes launch fresh attacks against guerrillas

BEIRUT: Israeli jets renewed air strikes late on Thursday against southern Lebanon as guerrillas kept up their tit-for-tat attacks. Lebanese police said.

An Israeli helicopter carried out a night raid on the outskirts of the market-town of Nabatiyeh, the police said. The raid came shortly after Muslim guerrillas attacked the Israeli post in Dabhse, the police said.

Hezbollah said in a statement that its guerrillas detonated a "large roadside bomb" near Yaroun, inside Israel's self-proclaimed security zone. Hezbollah sources said the bomb inflicted casualties among the ranks of the patrol.

Israeli artillery also blasted areas at the edge of the buffer zone shortly after the attacks while Israeli jets conducted ten raids on areas in the Iqlim Al Tuffah region and the western Bekaa Valley.

Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian Amal Movement have launched a series of attacks against Israeli troops inside the border zone. Amal said its guerrillas fired mortar bombs and anti-tank rockets at an Israeli patrol and two Mirkava tanks going into the Beauforte Castle on the edge of the central sector

of the occupied border zone.

Hezbollah said its guerrillas fired mortars on forts at Armata, Rihan and Bir Kallab. The Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army (SLA) confirmed the attacks and said they inflicted no casualties.

A pro-Iranian Hezbollah guerrilla was wounded in one Israeli air raid at the edge of the occupied border zone, Lebanese security sources said. They said the raids came after Israeli authorities told the 300,000 inhabitants of northern Israel near the Lebanese border that they could leave their shelters.

The Israeli government had declared a state of emergency in the frontier region on Tuesday. Israel blasted on Tuesday three Lebanese power plants in Beirut, eastern and northern Lebanon. The raids resulted in injuring 18 people in eastern Lebanon and knocked the country's electricity supplies.

In a related development, Sheikh Nacem Kasseem, deputy secretary general of Hezbollah said on Thursday that the "Katyusha (rocket) is a weapon that still exists in the battlefield and that the movement still reserves the right to use it whenever it's needed." (DPA)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

12 FEB 2000

Barak warns Lebanon of reprisal

By Kesava Menon

BEIRUT, FEB. 12. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak's warning that he will avenge the death of a soldier killed in southern Lebanon yesterday hangs over this city like the rain clouds which have blotted out the sun on this late winter morning. Lebanon is vulnerable to the might of Israeli arms and there are a number of targets that the Israeli air force can choose to hit as they have done in the past. Talks that could have ended the current crisis were abruptly broken off yesterday but they surely must resume some time soon since no one will benefit from the stalemate.

The Israeli delegation walked out of a meeting of the Monitoring Group (consisting of five countries, including Lebanon and Israel) which supervises the April 1996 understanding. As per the understanding Israel and the Lebanese Shia militia, the Hezbollah had undertaken not to attack civilians in areas under the other's control or to launch attacks from civilian areas under their control. The Monitoring Group's job was to ensure that these mutual undertakings were observed and to deal with complaints of non-compliance. Yesterday's extraordinary meeting was to have discussed Israel's attacks on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure earlier this week and the attacks which Hezbollah carried out against Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon. The meeting did not achieve much before the Israeli delegation walked out on hearing of their soldier's death.

Before the meeting, there were reports that Israel would seek an amendment of the 1996 undertaking, especially of that aspect which deals with the launching of attacks from civilian areas. Lebanon was determined to oppose any amendment and the respective positions are unlikely to change if and when the Monitoring Group meets again. Meanwhile, Israel has introduced a slanted interpretation of the developments that have taken place since the beginning of this year.

Even Israel had not claimed that the attacks on their soldiers till the beginning of this week were launched from civilian areas. Israel bombed civilian targets in Lebanon in reac-

tion to these attacks. It was only after Hezbollah struck back on Tuesday and Wednesday that Israel claimed that the attacks were being launched from civilian areas. Now they are trying in retrospect to argue that even the Hezbollah attacks before Tuesday were launched from civilian areas and the U.S. administration has happily gone along with this interpretation. In fact, reports from south Lebanon give the lie the Israeli claim that the attacks since Tuesday were launched from civilian areas.

What Israel indeed seems to be seeking is a ceasefire by the Hezbollah. This could, of course, become a general ceasefire since Israel would have no further need to hit Lebanese targets if their soldiers were not attacked. Hezbollah has so far maintained that its resistance will continue so long as Israel continues to occupy Lebanese territory. There are a few factors that Hezbollah has to weight before it changes its position.

Hezbollah first has to consider Mr. Barak's promise to withdraw from south Lebanon by July this year, irrespective of whether Israel and Lebanon have reached an agreement. Opinion polls in Israel show that 80 per cent of the people want their army to be pulled out immediately. While Hezbollah can take this as proof that they have achieved their aim, they also need to ponder whether the Israeli public opinion will continue to be so strongly in favour of a withdrawal once Hezbollah stops harassing their troops. Given the distrust of Israel that is ingrained in the Lebanese mind, Hezbollah fears that Mr. Barak will not carry out the withdrawal once the pressure on his troops eases.

If Hezbollah were to stop its attacks now, it could do so with the credible claim that it is quitting when ahead in the game. As Israel's frustrated attacks on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure shows, it has not been able to counter Hezbollah's increasingly efficient hit and run tactics. The Hezbollah has pushed Israel to the point where it is now thinking of ending its occupation of Lebanese territory. If the Israelis do not quit in July the Hezbollah may resume its operations. Meanwhile it can claim credit for pushing Israel to this point.

THE HINDU
13 FEB 2000

Barak hints at April pull-out

ERIC SILVER
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

JERUSALEM, Feb. 13. -- Amid growing recognition that Israel is losing the war of attrition with Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, Prime Minister Ehud Barak hinted today that he might withdraw his troops as early as April, if he saw no sign of a breakthrough in peace negotiations with Syria.

The army is drafting plans to protect Israel's front-line civilians from south of the border.

The Prime Minister would still prefer to leave as part of a deal with Damascus that would stabilise the region. But he appreciates that the casualty toll — seven Israeli soldiers have died in the past two and a half weeks — is sapping the will to fight of the conscripts and the stoicism of their families. Since Mr Barak is standing by his election promise to leave Lebanon by July, they don't see why they should risk death for the sanctity of a timetable.

Aryeh Itah, a reserve colonel whose son was killed by a Hezbollah missile on Friday, made an impassioned television appeal to Mr Barak: "Take the boys out of Lebanon. Please do it quickly so that my son, Tzahi, will be the last sacrifice."

Young infantrymen serving north of the border last week

579 112
begged visiting reporters to "help us get out of here". One of them told Israel radio: "You have to be in Lebanon to understand that there is no way we are going to win this war. None of us wants to be the last one killed in it."

A straw poll, published today by the Ma'ariv tabloid daily, found 12 of Mr Barak's ministers favouring early evacuation, with only seven opposed. Supporters ranged from the Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shimon Peres to hawks like the Russian immigrants' leader, Mr Natan Sharansky, and the National Religious Party's Yitzhak Levy, as well as the ex-chief of staff Amnon Shahak.

Ministers are no longer convinced that President Hafez Assad has made a strategic choice for peace — or that Mr Barak could sell the Israeli voters the terms Syria is offering. By fostering Hezbollah's campaign and publishing viriolic anti-Israeli propaganda, Damascus is eroding any trust there might have been.

The Justice Minister, Mr Yossi Beilin, an architect of the 1993 Oslo breakthrough with the Palestinians, said: "I don't understand why the Syrians missed the boat with Rabin, Peres and Netanyahu. They have here a government that is ready to pay the price for peace. I hope they're not going to miss the boat again."

THE STATESMAN
14 FEB 2000

September deadline for Palestinian statehood

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM, Feb. 14. — On the day Israeli and Palestinian negotiators missed an important target date on the road to peace, Mr Yasser Arafat set a deadline of his own — a declaration of Palestinian statehood by September, with or without Israel's blessing.

A resolution passed last night by the Palestinian leader and his Fatah Revolutionary Council, a gathering of 132 top Arafat loyalists, said the Palestinians are entitled to statehood this year, no later than September.

September is the deadline for a peace treaty with Israel that could define the terms of Palestinian statehood. However, talks have run into rough weather, raising questions about whether an agreement is possible by the deadline.

Yesterday, an important tar-

get date was missed — the first of three ambitious peace deadlines set by the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak.

A framework treaty had been scheduled for signing at the White House yesterday. Instead, the day was marked by mutual recriminations, with each side blaming the other.

The Palestinians say Mr Barak prefers to reach a peace treaty with Syria first, and have demanded high-level US intervention.

However, the USA appears to be reluctant to step into the dispute. The USA's envoy for West Asia, Mr Dennis Ross, was initially scheduled to begin a trip of the region on Tuesday, but postponed it until Sunday.

The chief Israeli negotiator, Mr Oded Eran, said that in four months of talks he never got a proposal from the Palestinians that he could have taken back to Mr Barak.

Some Israeli analysts believe

Mr Arafat may prefer to get to September without a peace treaty. If that happens, he would not be forced to make painful concessions on the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees that would likely earn him the disdain of much of the Arab world. At the same time, he would have the option of a unilateral declaration of statehood in September.

Palestinian negotiators say they are serious about reaching a peace treaty by September, and that a unilateral declaration is not the preferred option. Mr Arafat has full or partial control over less than 40 percent of the West Bank, with much of the land split up and scattered through the territory.

In an effort to get the Palestinians back to the table, Mr Eran said Israel was ready to concede a key Palestinian demand: a contiguous block of land in the West Bank.

THE STATESMAN

15 FEB 2000

Palestinian State will be declared this year: Arafat

Gaza, February 18

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY President Yassir Arafat has said that an independent Palestinian state would be declared this year whether Israel and the Palestinians reached a permanent solution or not.

Mr Arafat told reporters on his return to Gaza after a one-day visit to Cairo, where he held talks with President Hosny Mubarak. "With or without a final agreement, there is a holy date for the Palestinians, and this year is the year of declaring the Independent State."

Israel and the Palestinians agreed last September in Sharm-el-Sheikh resort in Egypt that they would sign a framework agreement on final-status issues on February 13, and reach a permanent solution on September 13. A meeting between Mr Arafat and Israeli

Prime Minister Ehud Barak failed three weeks ago to overcome differences after Israel postponed a pullback from 6.1 per cent of the West Bank that was supposed to take place on January 20.

Right after the meeting, the Palestinians announced that there is a severe crisis in the peace process, and accused Israel that it is not committed to the implementation of the peace accords. The February 13 dateline passed without the agreement being signed.

Mr Arafat said that his visit to Egypt is part of the continuous exchange of views between the Palestinians and Mubarak, adding that the crisis in the peace process was the major subject of the talks.

US peace envoy Dennis Ross will come back to the region on February 20, where he will try bring them back to the negotiation table. (DPA)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

19 FEB 2000

HD-16

Where David is Goliath

Many Lebanese honour the Hezbollah for being the only force willing and ready to take on the might of Israel.

KESAVA MENON

writes on the role of the 'Party of God'.

HEZBOLLAH, THE Party of God, is a name that evokes trepidation in much of the world. But in Lebanon the feelings towards this party are quite to the contrary. Whatever misgivings non-adherents may have about its long-term political goals, many Lebanese honour the Hezbollah for being the only force willing and ready to take on the might of Israel.

"I am a Maronite Christian and a woman," says a young professional. "By all these counts I should feel apprehensive about the Hezbollah. But when I look around I don't see anyone else, either the international community or our Arab brothers, doing what the Hezbollah is doing to Israel. Shake the Israeli belief that they

arms. Despite being placed on the U.S. State Department's list of states that sponsor international terrorism, Syria can justify this support on the grounds that the Hezbollah is a national liberation movement fighting foreign occupation rather than an international terrorist organisation as properly defined. This claim becomes valid when the Hezbollah confines itself to attacking Israeli forces inside the zone which they occupy in southern Lebanon and refrains from launching rocket attacks into Israel as it was wont to do in the past. This change-over in the choice of targets has not helped the Hezbollah rid itself of the terrorism label; neither has it facilitated the removal of Syria's name from the State Department's list. But the change-over indicates the Hezbollah's growing abilities and has led to an adjustment of Israel's approach to Lebanon.

The attacks that the Hezbollah has launched of late, especially since the beginning of this year, show that it now has the ability to strike deep within the zone occupied by Israel. It has also improved its armoury, replacing Russian-made Sagger rockets with U.S.-made TOW anti-tank missiles which have longer range and greater accuracy. Military experts familiar with the situation on the ground also opine

actions it takes. But the mismatch between the Hezbollah's attacks on Israel's soldiers and Israel's attacks on Lebanese civilians is so glaring that it leads to increased disgust abroad and disquiet at home. Popular support within Israel for a unilateral pull-out from Lebanon is currently running at 80 per cent. This should have strengthened Mr. Barak's conviction that he was right to promise a unilateral pull-out soon after he was voted into office last year.

Israel's Cabinet met last week to discuss the ways and means of a unilateral withdrawal. As matters stand, there is a good prospect that this pull-out will take place and sooner than expected. At the same time, Israel has sought to re-define the terms on which it will deal with the Hezbollah and Lebanon in the short-term till the pull-out takes place. Earlier Israel's stated policy was that it would strike Lebanon's civilian infrastructure if and when the Hezbollah attacked its (Israel's) civilians within its borders. Now Israel is putting forward a new doctrine. Since it has promised to withdraw from Lebanon by the middle of this year, Israel says the Hezbollah should refrain from attacking its soldiers within the occupied zone as well.

The Hezbollah can draw satisfaction from the fact that its military operations have



A woman holds aloft the Lebanese flag after Israeli troops withdrew from an outpost in south Lebanon and (at right) the Hezbollah chief, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, addresses his men.

can do what they like with us with impunity. Sure, I respect the Hezbollah."

No amount of long-range reading or study of the relative military and strategic strengths can prepare a visitor for Lebanon's utter vulnerability to Israel's power. Lebanon just does not have the strength to interdict even a small part of the force which Israel can unleash against it from land, sea and air. Most Arab states have given up any thought of matching Israel's military might or its strategic ties with the U.S. Syria is still in a mode of defiance vis-a-vis Israel and it has a significant presence and say in Lebanon but does not, or cannot, do anything to stop Israel's frequent forays into Lebanon — probably both because it does not want to expose itself to the same danger and because it wants to avoid the wider conflagration which will certainly follow if it retaliates.

What Syria has done, all sides to the dispute seem to concur, is to sustain the Hezbollah and provide it with a conduit for

that the Hezbollah fighters are far better trained now and have the ability to penetrate, hit and exit the scene of operations with great swiftness. For all the reputation for flexibility and innovativeness that Israel's defence forces have developed over the years, they are not able to cope with the Hezbollah's new abilities. As Israeli soldiers within the zone have been quoted as saying, their forces are like the mythical Goliath to the Hezbollah's David.

Israel's leaders — the Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, most notably but also some on the other side of the political divide — appear to have realised that their occupation of the southern Lebanon zone is untenable in the long-term. For one there is the steady haemorrhaging of their forces. For another, their policy of punishing Lebanon, by destroying its civilian infrastructure, for every attack by the Hezbollah might not be sustainable in the long-term. Israel is of course confident that the U.S. will give unstinted backing irrespective of the kind of

contributed directly to Israel's decision to withdraw from Lebanon. The Hezbollah has long-term objectives in Lebanon's politics. It could therefore calculate that it has sufficiently established its credentials as Lebanon's premier freedom fighters so that it can now devote its energies to domestic politics. In any case, it will retain the ability to resume military operations if Israel does not pull out of southern Lebanon.

An Israeli pull-out will not lead to a peace between the two countries. Officials in Beirut are very firm and clear that they will sign a comprehensive agreement with Israel conjointly with Syria and not otherwise. Syria will make peace with Israel only on the condition that Israel return the Golan Heights. Till now the Hezbollah's successes against the Israeli forces in southern Lebanon had provided Syria with powerful leverage to use against Israel. If the Hezbollah were to terminate its operations against Israel, Syria would be weakened in its own negotiations with Israel.

Barak sets date for Lebanon withdrawal

Jerusalem, February 21

ISRAELI PRIME Minister Ehud Barak has said during a speech he is committed to evacuating Israeli Army forces from southern Lebanon "before or until July, by agreement".

Israel Radio carried Mr Barak's remarks which included the promise that Israel will exhaust every possibility to reach an agreement in Lebanon, since a withdrawal without agreement "may demand more victims".

To ease criticism of Israel's recent bombing raids in Lebanon, he is sending the head of his political staff Dani Yatom to Moscow, to fill in Russian Premier Vladimir Putin on the political situation in West Asia.

Yatom was in Egypt on Sunday in an attempt to ease Arab outrage against Israeli actions in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, US West Asia envoy Dennis Ross is supposed to visit Israel today, and he will meet Mr Barak and Palestinian chief Yasser Arafat in order to seek an outlet to the deadlock in the Israeli-

Palestinian talks.

Mr Barak set a new target date for a framework agreement with the Palestinian authority, this time for May 2000.

The current withdrawal planned for February 12th has not been executed due to an ongoing stalemate of the negotiations between the two parties.

Meanwhile, Syria has proposed family reunions for Druze living on the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights with their relations in Syrian-controlled areas, Israel Radio reported today.

It said Jerusalem received the unexpected proposal for meetings via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Syria has for several weeks been fiercely criticising Israel's policy on peace negotiations and its air raids on Lebanon.

Some 17,000 Druze live on the Golan, which was annexed by Israel in 1981. Until now the only way they could meet relatives was by using loudhailers across a line of border fortifications.

(DPA)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

22 FEB 2000

Tit-for-tat attacks in south Lebanon

ASSOCIATED PRESS & AGENCE
FRANCE PRESSE

BEIRUT, Feb. 25. — In renewed hostilities after several days of calm, Israeli jets struck targets in southern Lebanon in apparent retaliation for a guerrilla attack on an Israeli outpost near the border today.

Today's air raid was the first in southern Lebanon in a week and came amid increasingly acrimonious exchanges between Israeli and Lebanese officials.

Two Israeli jets struck a hilly area just north of an Israeli-occupied zone southeast of the port city of Tyre at 8:10 a.m. (6:10 a.m. GMT), firing two air-to-surface missiles, officials said in Lebanon.

In Jerusalem, the Israeli military said its jets targeted guerrillas before returning safely to base. The air raid came less than two hours after guerrillas fired rockets at an Israeli Radar outpost about 1.2 miles north of the Israeli border near the Mediterranean coast.

Hezbollah said its guerrillas destroyed one of the fortifications at the outpost in a direct rocket attack. The Israeli military said that while rockets and mortar bombs fell on Israeli and Allied South Lebanon Army positions they caused no casualties or damage.

The firing marked the revival of violence that had subsided in recent days as Israel and Hezbollah traded threats of massive retaliation for attacks against each other's positions.

The Israeli-Lebanese border saw a major escalation in fighting in early February. Seven Israeli soldiers have been killed in guerrilla attacks in the south since end-January. Israeli warplanes destroyed three power stations in Lebanon, wounding at least 15 civilians earlier this month.

Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, said his army will strike again at Lebanese targets to retaliate for casualties.

Israel occupies a swath of southern Lebanon, it says, it needs as a buffer against guerrilla strikes. Mr Barak has promised to withdraw Israeli troops from south Lebanon by July.

Earlier this week, the Israeli foreign minister, Mr David Levy, threatened to make Lebanon pay "blood for blood, soul for soul, child for child" if his country was attacked from southern Lebanon.

The Lebanese Prime Minister, Mr Salim Hoss, yesterday denounced the remarks, saying Mr Levy revealed himself as "one suffering from the complex of haughtiness and racism".

Although Mr Levy was backed by his Prime Minister,

he drew fire from fellow ministers and leaders of parties in the ruling coalition. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, founder of the religious party Memad, said on the radio today that he was "shocked by the low moral level" of Mr Levy's remarks.

"He used reprehensible rhetoric and if I were head of government I would sack him," Rabbi Amital said.

Meanwhile, the government today expressed dismay over comments made by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of France, Lebanon's former colonial master, in which he condemned guerrilla attacks by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah against Israeli troops in south Lebanon.

France "condemns Hezbollah attacks, and any terrorist attacks, notably against soldiers or the civilian population," said French Prime Minister, Mr Jospin, who is currently visiting Israel.

He also urged Israel to avoid attacking civilian targets in Lebanon.

Criticising Mr Jospin's comments, Lebanon's Prime Minister said today: "It is hard to believe or understand the logic behind the serious remarks."

Mr Hoss compared Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation to that of the French resistance against German occupation of France.

THE STATESMAN
26 FEB 2000

Hezbollah strike again

REUTERS & AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

JERUSALEM, Feb. 27. — On a day that the Israeli Cabinet kicked off its first ever marathon debate on Lebanon, a roadside bomb planted by Hezbollah guerrillas wounded a pro-Israeli South Lebanon Army militiaman inside Israel's South Lebanon occupation zone, a militia security source in Marjayoun told a news agency.

The bomb went off while the SLA militiaman was driving his car on the Khardaly bridge in the eastern sector of the 15 km deep zone, the source said.

In Beirut, the Iranian-backed

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the attack which brought to 12 the number of SLA militiamen wounded in Lebanon since the beginning of 2000. Seven SLA militiamen have been killed in the same period.

Hezbollah said in a statement that their guerrillas launched several attacks against Israeli and SLA positions inside the zone.

Today's attack was the bloodiest since Hezbollah guerrillas killed an Israeli soldier on the edge of the zone two weeks ago.

Just after today's attack, a Lebanese security source said Israeli warplanes raided the outskirts of the village of

Zawtar, north of the central sector of the zone. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

In Jerusalem, the agenda for debate in the Israeli debate included Prime Minister Ehud Barak's pledge to withdraw troops from South Lebanon by July.

"The purpose is to determine Israeli strategy in Lebanon, including the expected political timetable," a government official was quoted as saying in the press. Army radio said most ministers were likely to back Mr Barak's proposals. Calls for an early withdrawal from Lebanon mounted after

the death of seven Israeli soldiers in just three weeks in a series of Hezbollah attacks.

Arab rage peaked yesterday when the French Prime Minister, Mr Lionel Jospin, was stoned by angry Palestinian students for his description of Hezbollah guerrillas occupation as "terrorists".

Syria today accused Mr Jospin today of pandering to the Jewish vote before 2002 presidential elections. Syria's official press accused the French Prime Minister of being an opportunist and said West Asia issues should be kept out of other countries' election campaigns.

THE STATESMAN
28 FEB 2000

Israel 'undermining' W. Asia peace process

Riyadh, February 28

HC-14
SAUDI ARABIA and Syria have accused Israel of undermining the West Asian peace process and urged it to prove it is serious about peace by withdrawing from Arab lands. The two states also held the United States and Russia - the two sponsors of the West Asian peace process - responsible for ensuring an end to Israeli attacks on Lebanon.

The comments were made in a joint statement after talks between Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal and his Syrian counterpart Farouq al-Shara in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

The statement - carried by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) late yesterday - said the two states held "Israel responsible for undermining the peace process".

Prince Saud said at the beginning of the talks that Israel's attacks on Lebanon had "cast a shadow over its seriousness in taking forward

the peace process", SPA reported.

"Israel must realise that Arabs will look at its actions in Lebanon as a yardstick of its seriousness towards peace," he said, adding that he hoped Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Beirut in March would take a firm, unified position against Israel's attacks on Lebanon.

Israel's Cabinet yesterday held its first comprehensive debate on ending its occupation of south Lebanon.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak has promised that the troops will leave by July 7 but says he would prefer to have a peace deal with Syria first.

The Saudi-Syrian statement said the states emphasised the responsibility of the United States and Russia to make Israel abide by the land-for-peace principle - including a complete withdrawal from southern Lebanon and from the Golan Heights, captured from Syria in 1967. (Reuters)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES
29 FEB 2000

Barak ploy to lure Syria draws flak

ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM, Feb. 28. — Prime Minister Ehud Barak's latest attempt to lure Syria back to peace talks — with an assertion that his four predecessors effectively agreed to give back all of the Golan Heights — was met with angry denials by former Prime Ministers today.

Syria said it does not trust Mr Barak's promises and would hold out for an Israeli withdrawal pledge in writing.

Mr Barak's remarks at a marathon Cabinet meeting yesterday, seemed to be a last-minute attempt to salvage the peace talks with Syria.

Mr Barak claimed that Mr Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, Mr Shimon Peres and Mr Benjamin Netanyahu signaled to Syria that they were ready to withdraw to the 1967 lines if conditions were right.

The current Israeli government will not ignore the negotiations, since 1991, he said.

The Prime Minister's remarks seemed to be aimed at creating public opinion for a withdrawal from the Golan, while also sending a new signal to Damascus.

But *Al Baath*, the mouthpiece of the Syrian ruling party, said that only a written pledge would be accepted. Mr Barak "does things that contradict what he says and says things that contradict what he does", the paper said.

Israel has refused to make an upfront withdrawal pledge

before the issues of security arrangements and normalization are spelt out.

The 1967 border is not defunct, said Mr Yossi Beilin, Israel's justice minister, expressing doubt over Mr Barak's intention of going back to the same line. But Mr Shamir, Mr Netanyahu, Mr Peres and Mrs Leah Rabin said the Syrians were never promised a complete withdrawal.

Mr Shamir said he didn't offer the Syrians any territory. Mr Netanyahu, a hard-liner, said he was ready to make some concessions but would never agree to complete withdrawal while Mr Peres said he always opposed explicit commitments and that borders must be defined in negotiations. Rabin's widow also said her husband never made a detailed promise, instead engaged in hypothetical discussions with US envoys.

Opposition leader, Mr Ariel Sharon, accused Mr Barak of hiding behind his predecessors.

"It is very disappointing that Barak ... does not have the courage to say that he is willing to give concessions," Mr Sharon said.

US envoy's mission fails: Mr Bill Clinton's special West Asian envoy today neared the end of a mission to rescue Israeli-Palestinian peace moves today, Reuters adds.

After meeting Mr Arafat, Mr Dennis Ross said: "I am going back to Washington to consult with the President... And we will decide what the best next step will be."

THE STATESMAN
29 FEB 2000

Barak has ace up his sleeve?

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), JAN. 2. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak will today lead his delegation for talks with Syria scheduled to start tomorrow at a venue in Sheperdstown, in the State of West Virginia, U.S. According to a report in the Israeli press, Mr. Barak is carrying a document which contains an initial negotiating position and provides a powerful argument against his political opponents.

The talks are expected to commence with separate meetings between Mr. Barak and the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton on the one hand and between the U.S. Secretary of State, Ms. Madeleine Albright and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr. Farooq al Sharaa on the other. It is expected that the schedule and agenda for the discussions will be decided at these meetings. A media blackout is to be imposed and some extraordinary precautions have been taken, including a ban on mobile phones. The talks are to last for ten days but Mr. Barak is expected to return after a week. It is not clear whether the Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. David Levy, who is accompanying Mr. Barak to the U.S., will then carry on the talks with his Syrian counterpart.

According to the Israeli press, four negotiating committees are to thrash out different aspects of the dispute between the two sides. Separate committees will deal with the question of borders, security, normalisation and water. Israel is keen that priority should be given to the negotiations on security and normalisation leaving the border and water questions for later. Syria is, of course, more interested in settling the border and water questions first since it wants the return of territories which Israel has occupied since 1967. If the Syrians do agree to a speedier settlement of the security and normalisation issues, it would mean that they have received a priori assurances on the return of their territory, mainly the Golan Heights.

As could perhaps be expected given their focus on security, the Israeli delegation has a large number of serving and retired soldiers. Besides Mr. Barak, who was himself Chief of Staff, the delegation includes the Tourism Minister, Mr. Amnon-Lipkin Shahak, who succeeded Mr. Barak to the top army job. The present Chief of Staff is Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz. The Israeli delegation also includes

the Attorney-General, Mr. Elyakim Rubinstein who had participated in the Camp David talks as a young lawyer. It is unlikely that the Syrians will make the same mistake as the Palestinians did when they undertook the Oslo negotiations with inadequate legal representation. The Palestinian failure to judge the weight of the small print in those accords has contributed not negligibly to the problems they have encountered in the implementation stage.

According to a report in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, Mr. Barak will be carrying a copy of a letter that shows that his predecessor, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu was ready to withdraw from the Golan Heights. The letter was purportedly written to the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton by a U.S. businessman, Mr. Ron Lauder who was carrying back-channel contacts with Syria on behalf of Mr. Netanyahu. In the letter, Mr. Lauder is said to have told Mr. Clinton that Mr. Netanyahu had agreed to withdraw from "the Syrian territory" captured in 1967. Such a formulation falls short of the Syrian demand that Israel withdraw to the June 1967 border because a portion of the territory thus claimed was, according to Israel, not under Syrian sovereignty at the relevant point of time.

Mr. Barak should not have a problem in running with Mr. Netanyahu's formulation since he has given sufficient indicators that a withdrawal from the Golan is a distinct possibility. However, the letter comes in handy to beat back the Israeli Opposition which has only launched its campaign against the return of the Golan Heights. The Israeli Opposition can hardly argue against the return of the Golan when their erstwhile leader had promised as much while he was Prime Minister. When *Haaretz* approached Mr. Netanyahu for his comments, however, the former Prime Minister denied that he had decided to return the Golan.

AFP reports from Jerusalem:

Mr. Barak said today on Israeli public radio that peace with Syria had a "very painful" price. "Peace with Syria has a very painful and very hard price, but it is necessary," he said a few hours before he was due to leave for the U.S.

Mr. Barak said he was convinced that peace with Syria would be approved by a "large majority" of Israelis in a promised referendum on any deal.

U.S. pins hopes on W. Asia talks

By Sridhar Krishnaswami

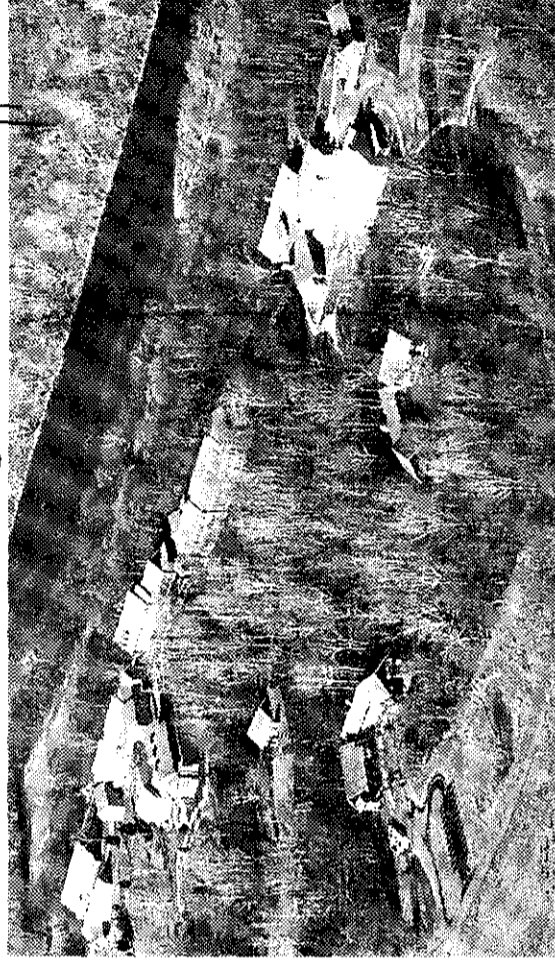
WASHINGTON, JAN. 2. With Israel and Syria getting together for their tough negotiating sessions starting on Wednesday, there is no doubt that senior officials of the Clinton administration will be with the teams all the way.

The President, Mr. Bill Clinton, is expected to be at the start of the first session at Shepherdstown, West Virginia; and both the Secretary of State, Ms. Madeleine Albright, and the top West Asia negotiator, Mr. Dennis Ross, will be available throughout, it is being maintained.

As in the case of any sensitive and high profile involvement of the United States — Camp David or the Wye Plantations, for instance — the venue for the Israel-Syria talks has been deliberately chosen. It is a semi-secluded spot some 90 miles from Washington D.C. where the two teams and the Clinton administration can do some real talking in the absence of the media crowd. From a security standpoint too Shepherdstown will be easier to manage than any downtown location. Most important is that of proximity to the nation's capital.

The administration and the White House have made it clear that a peace accord between these two critical West Asia States is a very high foreign policy priority for this year; and there is no doubt that Mr. Clinton would like to see a comprehensive West Asia peace as a part of the history books and his eight-year legacy by the time he steps down formally in January 2001. Washington has played a key mediating role in West Asia, but none is under any illusion of what is on hand right now.

For the last four years the Israelis and the Syrians have been deadlocked in the negotiations over the Golan Heights. The two sides even disagree over where the talks broke off;



An aerial view of the National Conservation Centre outside Shepherdstown in West Virginia, where the Israel-Syria peace talks are set to begin on Monday. — AP

what had been agreed upon or even where it all should begin.

But the recent meeting here in December 1999 between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Syrian Foreign Minister did go the distance in breaking the ice, although no firm commitments have been made.

Syria is demanding that all of the Golan Heights captured by Israel in 1967 must be returned in return for "peace," the terms of which is yet to be clearly spelled out.

The Jewish State is demanding security guarantees and the two sides would have to

work out the future of some 18,000 Jews who are said to be living in the Golan Heights.

The U.S. has said in very broad terms that it is willing to "fund" a peace settlement, although no one is sure what the price tag is going to be.

Some argue that the price tag for peace between Israel and Syria would be anywhere between \$10 and \$20 billions, and the money for this has to be appropriated by Congress. But the problem is also that Syria is one of the nations listed by the State Department as officially sponsoring terrorism.

W. Asia talks: 'minor' irritants to the fore

By Kesava Menon

RD-16

MANAMA (Bahrain) JAN. 4 While media attention has focussed on the major issues to be discussed by Syria and Israel in the talks which commenced in Shepherdstown (West Virginia, U.S.) yesterday, some relatively "minor" issues have come to light. Issues such as the plight of Syrians in Israeli jails, the future of liberation fighters based in Damascus and the fallout of a Syrian-Israeli settlement on other regional States have been relatively overlooked till now. But the resolution of these problems could be just as important in the search for a permanent settlement between these two States.

In the Shepherdstown talks, conducted principally between the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak and the Syrian Foreign Minister Mr. Farooq al Sharara with strong contributions from the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton and his Secretary of State, Ms. Madeleine Albright, the focus is on four major aspects. Separate joint committees are discussing the questions of the border to be fixed between Israel and Syria, the security guarantees by both sides, the degree and pace of normalisation between them and water distribution from the Golan Heights watershed. Before the talks got underway there was some hope that the two sides would, at least, be able to finalise a "Declaration of Principles" to cover some or all of these issues. But the word from Shepherdstown is that hopes should not be raised too high since the two sides have just begun the excruciating task of taking up the details.

Even the U.S. administration, which appears desperate to wind up the different strands of the West Asian negotiations before Mr. Clinton's term in office ends, is just saying

that they believe there is a historic opportunity for a breakthrough on the Syria-Israel track. They have also, however, cautioned that this breakthrough may not occur in the current round of talks even though they could last for anything up to ten days. There is already talk of another round in February.

In the region meanwhile, issues which are not prominent in the Shepherdstown talks are being raked up. Syrian students have demanded the release of their countrymen jailed in Israel. The question of their continuance in custody cuts to the heart of the dispute between the two sides. To the Israelis, many of the imprisoned Syrians are terrorists, while for their own countrymen they are people fighting a legitimate war of liberation against foreign occupation. It is inconceivable that Syria will allow its nationals to languish in Israeli jails after the conclusion of a final settlement. Yet, the Israeli Government will also be under pressure from those who are against the release of prisoners with "Jewish blood on their hands".

Israel is likely to demand that Damascus close down organisations like the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which have rejected the Oslo processes and are based in Syria. The cynical view is that the Syrian Government treats these Palestinian organisations as mere chips in the bargaining with Israel but there is an ideological and historical affinity between the Syrian leadership and the DFLP/PFLP. Damascus is unlikely to hand over the leaders and members of these organisations to Israel.

An attractive alternative is a deal whereby the members and leaders of the DFLP/PFLP are allowed to return to the Palestinian territo-

ries. The DFLP leader, Mr. Nayef Hawatmeh has already been given permission to enter the Gaza Strip. But if the members of these organisations, which Israel accuses of being actively involved in terrorism, are allowed to settle in territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority then Israel cannot argue against the resettlement on these same territories of Palestinian refugees who may not be involved in any political activity. Israel's stand is that they will not agree to allow Palestinian refugees to return even to the PA controlled territory.

If a final settlement is achieved, whatever its shape, Syria should come to re-possess most of the Golan Heights.

U.S. mediation fails to pave way for Israeli-Syrian talks

SHEPHERDSTOWN (West Virginia): President Bill Clinton has left here after a day of peace talks ended without a face-to-face meeting of Syrian and Israeli leaders.

State department spokesman James Rubin denied reports from Israeli sources that the three sides had met at a dinner, saying that such a meeting had never been anticipated. "There was never a plan for a formal three-way discussion and this impression was created earlier in the day," he said.

He strenuously denied that the lack of such a trilateral meeting on the first day of the talks constituted a setback. "I wouldn't say that all is lost or that there has been a breakthrough," Mr Rubin told reporters, maintaining that direct talks were "not the only way to make progress."

"You can make a lot of progress in proximity discussions as opposed to face-to-face discussions," he said.

An Israeli official nonetheless said the talks hit an impasse when Syria cancelled a planned trilateral dinner meeting of Mr Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian foreign minister Faruq

Al-Shara.

A source close to the Syrian delegation said the proceedings had run into trouble because of a dispute over the agenda but added that further efforts would be made today to overcome the conflict.

Mr Rubin acknowledged that separate meetings between Mr Clinton, secretary of state Madeleine Albright, Mr Barak and Mr Shara had not yet produced an 'action plan' for the rest of the talks.

"This first day is designed to develop an action plan and that is what we're working on," he said.

With Israeli and Syrian leaders beginning their meeting on Monday near Washington to talk peace for the first time since 1996, Shimon Peres reflected on his own frustrations in trying to reach a deal with Syrian President Hafe Assad that year.

"If the Syrians will bring with them a little bit more flexibility than the previous occasions, then we can estimate an early resolution," Mr Peres told reporters in an interview. "If they will repeat the same stubbornness, it will be a long time." (AP)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

- 5 JAN 2000

West Asia peace process moves on

SHEPHERDSTOWN (U.S.), JAN. 5. A day after a procedural dispute nearly derailed Israeli-Syrian peace talks here, United States officials have pronounced the process back "on track" following Washington's intervention.

In an hour-long trilateral meeting with the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, and the Secretary of State, Ms. Madeleine Albright, the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr. Faruq al-Shara, said they remained committed to end 50 years of enmity. *W. H. S. 21*

"The 'Trilat' was a very constructive and productive session that put the process clearly on track," the State Department spokesman, Mr. James Rubin, said. *HD-16 67*

"The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to what we are trying to do here," he said, admitting to a sense of relief over the "substantial" and "vigorous" meeting.

"We were quite pleased with how today unfolded in light of the hurdles we had to overcome," he said as Mr. Clinton, Mr. Barak and Mr. Shara and their delegations met informally.

That gathering lasted about an hour after which Mr. Clinton left to return to Washington by motorcade, officials said. There was no immediate indication of what transpired at the informal session.

The three-way meeting had been anticipated on Monday — the first time Mr. Barak and Mr. Shara had been in the same locale since agreeing last month in Washington to fully resume the talks after a nearly three-year break — but was abandoned after the dispute over the agenda emerged.

According to sources in the delegations, Israel had been insisting that substantive negotiations begin with a discussion of normalising relations with Syria while Syria maintained that the talks could only begin with a discussion of their key demand: Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

Mr. Rubin declined to say exactly how the obstacle was removed but said the solution provided for all contentious issues — which also include water rights, security guarantees for Israel and a timetable for implementation — to be addressed in the coming days by expert committees.

He refused to say which issues would be discussed by the committees.

In addition, Mr. Rubin rejected suggestions that either the Israeli

or Syrian sides had given into concessions demanded by the other. Israeli and Syrian sources also denied they had backed down on their stances. "The problem has been settled and the four working groups from each side will carry out negotiations simultaneously," said a source close to the Syrian delegation who accused Israel of trying to change the agenda from what had been agreed upon at their first meeting in December.

At the same time, an Israeli official said the dispute had been resolved when the Syrians dropped some demands. "The crisis has been resolved to Israel's satisfaction and talks are going to resume on normalisation and security," the official said.

But one source close to the Israeli delegation maintained the spat had been caused by domestic political considerations of both delegations, each of which is worried about appearing weak to their home audience. "This was an artificial crisis to a certain extent," the source said.

Despite the explanations and justifications from the two sides, the resolution of the dispute was the impetus for Mr. Clinton to return to talks in this rural West Virginia community after failing to produce the three-way meeting in a flurry of meetings on Monday.

"They are both very serious ... And I'm going up there today," Mr. Clinton told mediapersons at the White House before leaving, but after being briefed by Ms. Albright on the results of her morning meeting with Mr. Barak.

Jews stage protest

Protesters led by ultra-orthodox Jews have demanded that Israel immediately stop negotiating with Syria over a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Relinquishing the strategic high ground, which Syria has set as the price for peace, would leave Israel's northern border unprotected, the leader of the protesters, Mr. Levi Huebner, said. "The Golan is our security," he said. "Peace will be in security and trust in our neighbours."

Mr. Huebner arrived at Shepherdstown with about 40 other demonstrators in a convoy of nine vans from Brooklyn, New York, headquarters of the strict Lubavich Hasidic movement.

He said the protesters planned to stay at least one day in the designated demonstration area, a park along a state highway less than a mile from the Clarion Hotel where some of the talks are being held. — AFP, AP

THE HINDU

- 6 JAN 2000

USA claims talks rescue, Syria sceptical

AGENCE-FRANCE PRESSE &
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SHEPHERDSTOWN (USA), Jan. 5. — American officials today announced a rescue of Israeli-Syrian peace talks seemingly headed towards collapse yesterday, AFP reported.

From Damascus, however, came an AP report that quoted a Syrian spokesman as saying the Israelis were "playing games" with the negotiations.

And a third report from Jerusalem, also from AP, quoted a confidant of the Israeli Prime Minister as saying the Syrians must end their alliance with Iran and ensure that Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon are disarmed, before they can hope to make peace with Tel Aviv.

In this West Virginia town, US state department spokesman, Mr James Rubin, declared peace talks were back "on track" after intervention by President Clinton.

At an hour-long trilateral meeting yesterday with Mr Clinton and secretary of state, Mrs Madeleine Albright, Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, and the Syrian foreign minister, Mr Faruq al-Shara, said they remained committed to end 50 years of enmity.

"The trilateral was a very constructive and productive session that put the process clear-

W BANK PULLOUT

JERUSALEM, Jan. 5. — Israeli troops today began pulling out of a military base in the West Bank as part of a transfer of 5 per cent of the land to Palestinian control. Shortly after noon, two trucks loaded with furniture drove out of the Yosef military camp near the West Bank town of Nablus, a sign that the two-day withdrawal had begun. By Thursday evening, Israel is to hand 3 per cent of the West Bank to Palestinian civil rule and another 2 per cent to full Palestinian control. In all, Israel is to evacuate six military bases, the army said. — AP

ly on track." Mr Rubin said. "The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to what we are trying to do here". The USA, he said, felt a sense of relief over the "substantial" and "vigorous" meeting.

The three-way meeting had been anticipated on Monday — the first encounter between Mr Barak and Mr Al-Shara since agreeing last month in Washington to fully resume talks after a nearly three-year break — but was abandoned after a dispute emerged over what to take up first.

The US assessment notwithstanding, in Damascus today,

Mr Fayez Sayegh, chief of Syria's official news agency, Sana, was sceptical on the talks.

"Those who believe that the Israeli side went to Shepherdstown with a clear peace plan that is consistent with international resolutions and the land-for-peace-principle are wrong," he wrote.

"It is difficult to know what the negotiations will result in ... but it is easy to know what has become evident, which is that the Israeli side, which is an expert at playing games, is still giving one impression and acting on another".

Expression and communication are tightly controlled in Syria, and the government often uses its official news agency to spell out its views to Syrians and the world.

Terms were set on behalf of Israel too.

"If someone seriously desires peace with us, he will have to break off alliances with people who to this day talk about destruction of Israel," deputy defence minister, Mr Ephraim Sneh told Israel radio.

Mr Sneh, known to be close to Mr Barak, was referring to a speech on Friday by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in which the Iranian spiritual leader called for the "annihilation" of Israel. Mr Sneh did not say if Mr Barak had raised the same demand in Shepherdstown.

THE STATESMAN

- 6 JAN 2000

It's Golan or nothing, says Syria

REUTERS

DAMASCUS, Jan. 6. — Syria today hammered home the message that it would accept nothing less than full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights as a condition for making peace with Israel.

"No peace can be achieved until the principle of withdrawing from the entire Golan is unconditionally accepted by Israel," said the English-language official newspaper *Syria Times*.

The Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr Farouq al-Shara, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, are meeting in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, to reach a framework for peace to end 50 years of enmity between the neighbours.

The US administration yesterday pressed both sides to come up with new ideas after they failed to agree even on where the talks stood when they broke off in 1996. Syria and Israel resumed peace talks in Washington last month after a four-year break.

"Even if all the procedural hurdles — like the one which marked the start of the second round of talks in shepherdstown — are cleared, a solution to the conflict is unlikely to be achieved without a full commitment to return to the 4 June 1967 lines," it said.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria during the

W ASIA MEET

JERUSALEM, Jan. 6. — Russia plans to host the first multinational West Asian peace talks in more than three years in Moscow next month, the Russian Foreign Minister, Mr Igor Ivanov, said today. The meeting would be at the level of foreign ministers. — Reuters

1967 Arab-Israeli war and Syria has insisted that the territorial dispute be settled before turning to the Israeli agenda of normalisation and security.

Syria says it's ready to trade full Israeli pullout from Golan, captured in the 1967 war, for full normal ties. Israel has said it was ready for land concessions but has not said how much land it would give up.

"Israel should accept spelling out the words 'full withdrawal...'" said Al-Baath, organ of President Hafez Assad's ruling Baath Party.

"Israel should either offer what is needed for peace or block it and expose the region to the worst and most dangerous possibilities. The talks are very decisive and there is no room for any manoeuvres or procrastination," it added.

An AFP report from Shepherdstown quoted the US state department spokesman, Mr James Rubin, as saying that

President Bill Clinton could return to the town today to spur momentum in the Israeli-Syrian peace talks.

He said yesterday that the secretary of state Mrs Madeleine Albright would recommend that Mr Clinton re-join the talks, which he said were moving at a sluggish pace.

"We feel that with work today and tonight and tomorrow it'd be appropriate again to convene at the presidential level, that's why Albright will be recommending that," he said.

An Israeli official earlier described the mood at the talks as "not warm." "It's moving very slowly and the Americans are trying to bridge the large gaps," he said, adding that Israeli and Syrian delegates only engaged in direct contacts in the presence of US officials.

Mr Rubin compared the process after the third day of talks to "a creaky machine that needs to be oiled up" and said Mrs Albright had told both the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr Farouq al-Shara that Washington wanted more progress made.

Over lunch with Mr Barak and at a later meeting with Mr Shara, held while two of the four expert-level committee meetings on security and normalisation of relations were on, Mrs Albright spoke of the need to accelerate negotiations.

THE STATESMAN
- 7 JAN 2000

Stakes high for Iran, Turkey

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) JAN. 7. Two West Asian states, Turkey and Iran, have geared up to face the prospect that the long era of regional conflict could end if Syria and Israel resolve their dispute.

Surprisingly, the Arab states, which could be affected the most if such a development does take place, seem to be the least prepared. The United Arab Emirates is trying to work with Egypt to organise a summit but this effort could turn out as unsuccessful as the similar ones in the past.

Turkey has established a special relationship with Israel in the military and economic fields. Although both states have denied this, there seems to be little doubt that the hostility towards Syria, which they have in common, is a major factor in this relationship. If Syria and Israel were to resolve their differences it would almost certainly lead to closer association between Damascus and Washington. A major development in this regard would be the removal of Syria from the U.S. State Department's list of states sponsoring terrorism. Instead of the economic embargoes imposed on Syria because of its placement on the list, the U.S. could turn around and encourage investments in that country.

Ankara's fear is that Syria's estrangement from the U.S., and the consequent pressure on it, could end before the issues outstanding between Turkey and Syria are resolved. It has, therefore, demanded that Syria's name should not be struck off the list of terrorist states until Damascus clamps down on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK has been waging an armed rebellion against Turkey in which several thousands have been killed. Turkey claims that the PKK has offices and runs training camps in the part of Lebanon controlled by the Syrian army.

Just before the Syria-Israel talks got underway in U.S., there were reports that the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, would speak to his Syrian counterpart, Mr. Hafez al Assad, about a proposal to enhance Syria's water supplies. If Syria gets back the Golan Heights in a deal with Israel, it would also



UNYIELDING TALKS: The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, listens to the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, during their meeting in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, on Thursday. — AP

re-possess the Baniyas reservoir, a major water source, which is currently integrated with the Israeli water grid.

Israel wants Syria to allow it to continue drawing water from Baniyas and Syria has indicated that it is not averse to it. However, Syria too does not have an abundance of water and is dependent on the 700 cu.m per day which Turkey releases down the Euphrates river.

Like Turkey, Iran has reason to believe that a Syria-Israel rapprochement will adversely affect its interests. At one level, Iran's objection is ideological and related to its hostility to the "Zionist entity" which it believes is an imperialist implant in the West Asian Muslim world. But at a more basic level, a Syria-Israel rapprochement would affect Iran's regional standing.

Owing to the presence of large numbers of Shias, and followers of the off-shoots of Shia Islam such as the Druze and Alawis, the Levant is in a sense a part of the Iranian cultural Imperiuma region where Iran has strong claims to primacy. An Israel-Syria accord would leave Israel as the unquestioned regional power and Iran will thereby be directly affected. It is small wonder that Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamenei, has spoken out against the negotiations between Israel and Syria and it re-

mains to be seen whether Iranian attitudes will change if the President, Mr. Hojatolleslam Syed Mohammed Khatami's powers are increased after February's parliamentary elections.

While Turkey and Iran have a coherent response to the development on the Syria-Israel track, the Arab world still struggles for the unity necessary before it can even try to evolve a cohesive response. One kind of response has been provided by the irrepresible Col. Muammar Qadhafi of Libya, who declared that Israel has no place in West Asia. Col. Qadhafi has advised the Israelis that they might be better off looking for land in Alaska where they could settle.

Clinton seeks to revive stalled talks

SHEPHERDSTOWN (U.S.), JAN. 7. The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, has returned to Shepherdstown, the venue of the West Asia peace talks, to press Israeli and Syrian leaders to end an impasse that has brought the negotiations to a standstill.

Mr. Clinton, on his third visit to the venue since the dialogue began three days ago, met the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, before holding talks with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr. Farouq al-Shara, a U.S. official said on Thursday.— AP

The talks stutter along

Despite the serious efforts being put in by the U.S. administration, there is scope for a lot of doubt about the outcome of the Israel-Syria talks, reports

KESAVA MENON. H

won a few points since it had insisted that the security and normalisation questions should be sorted out before the territorial and water issues were taken up. Although Mr. Clinton had to jolly the Syrians along before they agreed, the fact that they did not complain once the matter was settled was a sign that they were still hopeful that their interests would not be neglected. They had probably concurred that there was some logic in the Israeli argument that the

count was so low mainly because its citizens had been drilled to rush into shelters as soon as the Syrians started firing. But the Syrian bunkers were situated sometimes only a few hundred meters away that it is difficult to believe that many more could not have been killed if that was the intention. Moshe Dayan, former army chief and legendary Defence Minister, has also written in his autobiography that his forces often provoked Syrian fire so that they could pinpoint gun positions and subject them to heavy barrages.

These reports only confirm what Syria has been arguing all along that it too needs assurances against an Israeli attack. One of the best guarantees against an Israeli attack is control of the Golan Heights. If Israel continues to control the Golan, as it does currently, then its armoured forces will continue to menace Damascus which is only an hour or so drive away from the present ceasefire line. Given the preponderance of military strength at Israel's command the Syrian demand for possession of the Golan has a lot of weight even from the security point of view. Not to mention that Syria is the rightful owner of the Golan under international law.

Israel believes that its security interests require that it be allowed to keep forward surveillance posts on the Golan even if it does return the rest of the plateau to Syria. Here again Syria has the valid counter-argument that its far greater weakness requires that it too be given similar protection. This argument might, however, be meant to be used as a bargaining chip to whittle down Israeli demands since if Syria has a forward position on the Golan slopes it can keep watch on Israeli movements on the plains below. The real trade-off will, however, be in the size of the de-militarised zones. Israel wants the whole of the Golan to be a de-militarised zone and it wants a deeper area where Syria should not be allowed to keep armoured units. Syria is sure to ask for de-militarised and non-armour zones of equal depth.

The other issue which Israel had insisted be taken up before the question of borders was discussed was that of the degree of normalisation. Israel has reason to feel that the peace treaties it has finalised with the other Arab states — Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority — have merely resulted in a state of no-war rather than a real peace. It wants Syria to open the borders, establish full diplomatic relations and generally create conditions for meaningful people-to-people relations. The opening of its market to the far stronger Israeli one is not something that Syria will relish. On the other hand, if the conditions for a real peace with Israel are created Syria might become a more attractive destination for foreign investments.

Overall, after the opening stages of the negotiations Israel had, on appearances notched up a small diplomatic and legalistic victory. However, Syria too has valuable achievements to look forward to in the negotiations on security and normalisation and Damascus might not be too sorry that these issues have been taken up first.



A show of support for the Israel-Syria talks ... an elusive peace?

THERE IS no doubt that the on-going talks between Israel and Syria are extremely "iffy". Although both sides make a great deal of noise about their commitment to resolving the problems they have with the other, and despite the very serious efforts being put in by the U.S. administration, there is scope for a lot of doubt about the outcome of the talks. Negotiations, led respectively by Israel's Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, and Syria's Foreign Minister, Mr. Farooq al Sharaa, are said to be "chugging along" though the U.S. had to mount at least one rescue mission before the weekend.

After three days of talks at the venue in Sheperdstown, West Virginia, U.S., the two sides were able to work out the agenda for the discussions. A black-out had been imposed on the media and therefore the exact details were not available. But it appeared that the committees on post-settlement security arrangements and normalisation would get down to work first. Committees on borders and water were to convene after a day's delay. The negotiations had stuttered at first because the two sides could not agree on the agenda for talks. However, the talks soon ran into trouble again when the border issue was not taken up as scheduled and the Syrians threatened to walk out. A compromise had been worked by the week-end with the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, giving the antagonists a road-map of what they had achieved till then.

On the face of it, Israel appeared to have

schedule for talks could not be otherwise decided, provided, of course, that the border talks were not inordinately delayed.

The Israeli argument was that the depth of its withdrawal from the Golan Heights (the question of where the border should be drawn) could only be determined after it knew the degree of peace and security it could get in exchange. Israel's policy on any possible Golan withdrawal was laid down by the late Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, a few years ago when he said "the depth of the withdrawal will depend on the depth of the peace". In this formulation, the operative word is peace, signifying that Israel wants something more than just a Syrian assurance that it will not attack.

Israel has talked a lot in the past of how its northern territories near the Sea of Galilee were constantly under artillery attacks when the Syrians were sitting on the forward slopes of the Golan Heights till 1967. Now that the re-started talks have opened the real possibility of a deal with Syria, the Israeli media has begun carrying reports suggesting that the Syrian efforts from the Golan were not as dangerous as they have been made to appear till now. These reports suggest that the Syrians for the most part shot only into a few disputed enclaves along the Golan/Galilee border and only when Israelis entered those enclaves to farm or dig. Very often the Syrians shells did damage buildings in Israeli kibbutzim but the casualty count was so low as to suggest that the Syrians usually did not intend to hit civilians. Israel could argue that the casualty

US peace pill for Israel, Syria

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA 9/1

WASHINGTON, Jan. 8. — US President Bill Clinton, met Israeli premier Mr Ehud Barak and Syrian foreign minister for the second time in a week and presented them with a working document to bridge differences that have held up talks on a potential peace deal between the two sides.

Mr Clinton flew in yesterday to Shepherdstown to personally resolve the stalemate. He presented to both leaders a paper containing summary of peace talks held four years ago between Yitzak Rabin and Syria's President Assad.

Briefing newsmen on the latest round of peace talks later in Washington, state department spokesman, Mr James Rubin said "the working document provides a summary of the issues to be decided between the parties. It is designed as a procedural tool for focus on substantive discussions and bridge differences that exist."

Mr Rubin indicated that Mr Clinton did not make any suggestions on how it was to be done. He left that to delegations of the two sides, who

have so far fought three wars and were still officially in a state of war.

After receiving the paper, both sides said they would resume talks, held up since Thursday, after a day's holiday, marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramzan.

The paper includes talks between Israeli and US officials on key issues of normalisation of ties, security arrangements, borders and waters — which were being discussed threadbare by four committees of experts before the talks ran into snags.

Syria insists that Mr Rabin promised to return the Golan heights, captured during the 1967 war, to Damascus. The Israelis however say Mr Rabin

left no such papers. Tel Aviv refuses to countenance any such demand as restoration of the 1967 borders which would deny its access to water.

Israel is instead pushing for recognition of an earlier border put up by the French and the British, who controlled the area before Israel or Syria came into existence. This border awards some water to the Israelis.



Mr Bill Clinton

THE STATESMAN
- 9 JAN 2000

ROAD TO PEACE.

Ending 50 years of distrust

THE atmosphere of distrust between Israel and Syria, now engaged in peace negotiations at Shepherdstown, West Virginia, is indicated by two things. The talks got off to a slow start because the two sides could not agree on which side's demands should be taken first; it took two days of shuttling between Israeli President Ehud Barak and Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Shara, Assad's deputy, to get an agreement to meet. Secondly, the Syrians wouldn't agree to hold the talks at any West Asian venue, as they feared that private discussion within their delegation would be overheard by Israeli bugging devices. The crux of the matter is the strategic Golan Heights, which the Israelis seized during the six-day war in 1967, and which the Syrians want back. Israelis appear willing to concede the Golan Heights for peace, but insist that a Syrian occupied Golan be demilitarised. The Syrians are dragging their feet over this, demanding "full rights" over Golan.

Israel's compulsions for peace are many. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1981 and set up a "security zone" in South Lebanon; since then Israeli-sponsored Lebanese Christian and Syrian-sponsored Muslim groups have fought themselves to a standstill, while South Lebanon has turned into something of a Vietnam for Israeli troops stationed there. Withdrawing from South Lebanon, however, would mean that Syrian-sponsored Hezbollah guerrillas come within striking distance of targets within Israel, something that Israeli public opinion will not tolerate. Barak is a tough negotiator, and is unlikely to give ground unless assured of peace both on the Golan Heights and the frontier with Lebanon. This said, there are several factors working in favour of a settlement. The Israelis made peace with Egypt in 1977 and is now in the process of settling with the Palestinians; relations with Syria are the last sticking point in a comprehensive West Asian peace deal. The Cold War also fuelled rivalries in the region, with Israel backed by the US and Syria by the USSR. It is indicative of how far events have travelled that the Syrians now accept the US as an honest broker. With US weight behind bringing the old foes together, a deal may be on the cards.

THE STATESMAN
10 JAN 2000

Nothing lost, nothing gained

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), JAN. 11. The Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak and the Syrian Foreign Minister, Mr. Farooq al Sharaa are to return home today after the conclusion of the first round of negotiations held in the U.S. Mr. Sharaa is to hold consultations with his President, Mr. Hafez al Assad and the rest of the Syrian leadership while Mr. Barak is reportedly coming back to Israel to deal with what he describes as the "public dimension" of the negotiations. Both leaders will return to the U.S. for the second round of negotiations scheduled to begin on January 19.

As expected, the first round of talks did not bring any breakthrough on substantive issues in dispute. However, the procedures have been set into a pattern and that augurs well for the second and possible future rounds. The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, who intervened directly five times during the negotiations, has envisaged a two-month period for the conclusion of a final settlement between Israel and Syria. He has also expressed the view that a delegation from Lebanon could join the process and initiate talks with Israel. The U.S. President will, of course, be better informed about the progress made but on the basis on what has been known through the curtain of a media blackout, Mr. Clinton's projections look optimistic at best.

In terms of procedure, the two sides have got down to discussing the substantive issues in four different areas. Four committees, consisting of representatives from both sides, have begun discussing questions relating to security arrangements after a final deal, the pace and quality of normalisation, distribution of scarce water resources and borders. As per the initial schedule, the committees on normalisation and security were to have begun discussions first with those on the borders following a day later. But there was a delay in convening the meeting of the committee on security and the Syrians, fearing that Israel was manipulating the process, threatened to walk out of the talks. That problem was resolved and all four committees met simultaneously over the last two days. The fact that the security and normalisation committees met before the border committee did represent a procedural victory for Israel. Their delegation could claim that this was a recognition of their long-held position that the depth of their withdrawal from the Golan Heights — the lo-

cation of future border lines — would depend on the depth of the peace and security they receive from Syria. As per the format now in place, Israel will probably be able to assess the graded lines that Syria has drawn for itself on the security and normalisation issues, the pace and degree of normalisation and the strength of security zones that they will tolerate in different and varying circumstances. Israel will then, if security is their only concern as they insist, be able to calculate how much of the Golan they can safely return.

Now that Israel has not been able to delay the start of discussions on the border question, Syria has reason to feel satisfied that their agenda is not being neglected. It is possible that Israel will continue to slow down the work of the border committee so as to make it lag behind the security and normalisation committees. But Syria will also be able to gauge the progress being made in the border committee and thereby calibrate its response to Israel's security and normalisation demands. All in all, the talks are likely to be in the form of a spiral

forward with progress being made on one of the aspects for a while before that is halted so that the talks on other aspects catch up.

The Syrians regard a working paper drawn up by Mr. Clinton and his officials as a major gain from the talks. This working paper sets out the points of agreement that have been reached and the differences yet to be sorted out. Both sides will be encouraged, in the second round, to bridge their differences on the basis of this white paper. This document is being regarded as positive by the Syrians because they believe that Israel has a habit of fudging agreements after they have been made. It is unclear if the white paper, when it talks of the areas of agreement, also encompasses the understandings that may have been arrived at by February 1997, when talks between Syria and Israel broke off. The Syrians say that Israel had by then agreed to a substantial withdrawal from the Golan Heights and that this compromise had been entered in the Memorandum of Understanding that was deposited with the U.S.



Israelis, in support of keeping the Golan Heights and not turning it over to Syria in exchange for a peace treaty, demonstrate on Monday in Tel Aviv. Over 100,000 persons participated in the rally. The sticker reads: "The people are with Golan". — AP

Israeli PM in a double bind on Golan deal

ERIC SILVER
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

JERUSALEM, Jan. 12. — Mr Ehud Barak, who flew home yesterday from a week of inconclusive negotiations in West Virginia, will have a hard time persuading Israeli voters to endorse any deal with Syria that entails a withdrawal from most or all of the Golan Heights.

On Monday night, over 100,000 demonstrators gathered in a Tel-Aviv square for a rally sponsored by Golan settlers with slogans like "The Golan is my home". Two ministers in Mr Barak's coalition, from the National Religious Party and the Russian immigrant Yisrael B'aliya, were present at the rally.

Undoubtedly one of the biggest demonstrations ever massed by the Israeli Right, the protesters were not restricted to the familiar, national-religious settlement lobby.

Among the forest of Hebrew and English placards were dozens in Russian proclaiming: "We will say no to Assad".

The leader of the more Right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu said Russian voters, who brought Mr Barak to power, would determine the result of the promised referendum.

It's no idle threat. The 6-lakh Russian immigrant vote is the most volatile of Israel's ethnic, religious and ideological constituencies. It swung back and forth in the last three elections, putting Yitzhak Rabin in power in 1992, Mr Netanyahu in 1996 and Mr Barak in 1999.

According to Tel-Aviv University's "Peace Index", over 70 per cent of the ex-Russians oppose a Golan pull-out, even for peace. Among those who voted for immigrant parties, the tally is nearer 78 per cent.

"Russians," said former Soviet dissident Mr Edouard

Kuznetzov in "Jerusalem Report", "come from a heritage of a large empire and find the idea of giving land to anyone, let alone a sworn enemy, incomprehensible. That Syria was a staunch ally of the Soviet state doesn't help."

Ms Tamar Hermann, who directs the Peace Index, added that the Russians in general tend to be more hawkish towards the Arabs. They were more hostile to the very idea of cultural integration into "backward" West Asia. And they found Israel, even with the Golan, uncomfortably small.

A survey by a veteran pollster on Friday found 53 per cent of Israelis against full withdrawal for a full peace, even if it also included withdrawal from

South Lebanon. Only 41 per cent were in favour, down from 45 in mid-December. Even for a partial withdrawal, support has dropped by 10 per cent in less than a month.

Apart from the Russians, the Peace Index finds orthodox and ultra-ortho-

dox Jewish voters overwhelmingly opposed to any compromise with Syria. Among voters of the Sephardi Shas party, half are against a withdrawal. Only 20 per cent are in favour.

Though Mr Netanyahu is reported to have offered President Hafez Assad a substantial Golan pullback, 70 per cent of those who voted for him last year told the Peace Index that they now opposed such a deal. Even among Mr Barak's Labour voters, 35 per cent are against full withdrawal.

The Prime Minister is in a double bind. He can't go out and campaign for a "yes" vote until he knows the terms he will be offering. Nor can he afford to reveal his bargaining hand to the Syrians while they're still negotiating. He is now dangling the prospect of "bringing the boys home" from Lebanon, where Israel is entangled in a bloody guerrilla war with the Hezbollah.

SYRIA OPTS OUT

DAMASCUS, Jan. 12. — Syria will not take part in multinational West Asia talks in Moscow next month unless there is progress in bilateral negotiations with Israel, a Syrian official has said. Russia plans to host the first such talks in over three years on 1 February.

— Reuters

THE STATESMAN

13 JAN 2000

Signs in Algeria

ALGERIAN PRESIDENT Abdelaziz Bouteflika's peace overtures have elicited a predictably mixed response from the Islamic militants. While leaders of the much depleted Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and certain other groups have agreed to give themselves up to the authorities, the hardcore has spurned the move. For long, the Algerian authorities maintained that there was no point talking to outfits like the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as they have adopted violence as their creed. But President Bouteflika has virtually staked his presidency on his pledge to end nearly a decade of terrorist violence plaguing the north African country. He has certain advantages which his predecessors did not have. Even though the extremists have continued their depredations, though with lesser frequency, the split in the Islamic front and efforts to establish a semblance of democracy in Algeria, have undermined militancy to a large extent. That the people have rejected the ultras was evident from their thronging of the polling stations during the recent presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections.

What is worrying, however, is that the GIA has rejected the amnesty offer. It is this group which counts the most. The GIA leaders are considered by their followers as "scourges of God" dedicated to "purifying" Algeria by fire and steel. No one is immune from their attacks, not even their own supporters. Its members have indulged in crimes like decapitating, raping and humiliating women. No guerrilla war is clean. And the GIA, which has earned a dreadful reputation for itself as a savage guerrilla group, can expect little mercy at the hands of its opponents. Algeria, which has been bleeding from terrorism for many years, now finally appears to be winning the war against terrorism. Its success is bound to send a strong message to all those societies fighting the Islamic zealots.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

15 JAN 2000

Turks demand Ocalan's head Govt undecided

Ankara, January 14 *14-19*

LEADERS OF Turkey's coalition Government have decided to abide by a stay of Abdullah Ocalan's execution order issued by the European Court of Human Rights, but there is still no final decision on whether the leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) should be hanged or not.

Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit announced on Wednesday that the case file of Ocalan will remain at the Prime Minister's office and not be sent immediately to Parliament, where a majority vote is needed for approval of the execution.

With Turkey striving to become a full member of the European Union, it may seem odd if there is a debate on whether to obey a stay of execution. But this assumption does not take into account the depth of anger directed at Ocalan and the thirst for revenge among most Turks. Families of those killed in the conflict have not called for an end to the war but for Ocalan to be hanged.

Ocalan is held responsible for the deaths of more than 32,000 people. A Turkish court in June sentenced Ocalan to death for treason, a ruling that an appeal court upheld in November.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) rode a wave of anti-Ocalan feeling to become the second largest party in Parliament during national elections last April. In recent weeks, MHP members openly called for an immediate vote on Ocalan's fate.

Pressure will now increase for Turkey to abolish death penalty, a decision already agreed on by the ruling coalition. But several leaders have already said: "Hang Ocalan and then abolish death penalty." "Shame On You" was the headline in the 'Ayyildiz' newspaper, above a photograph of a funeral of a Turkish soldier killed in a clash with PKK rebels. (DPA)

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES
15 JAN 2000

DECISION ON OCALAN / TURKEY DETERMINED TO JOIN E.U.

Ecevit moves against many odds

By Batuk Gathani

BRUSSELS, JAN. 16. Turkey is seen going through a process of major social, psycho-political transformation with Ankara's momentous and epoch-making decision to postpone the execution of the jailed rebel leader, Mr. Abdullah Ocalan.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Bulent Ecevit's Government has agreed that the death sentence passed last year against Mr. Ocalan should be suspended, while his appeal to the European Court of Human Rights is heard. Mr. Ecevit said the Turkish Government would respect an injunction from the court to delay the execution. In all his recent statements, Mr. Abdullah Ocalan has pleaded for national unity and reconciliation.

The European Union Governments have greeted the news with optimism amid growing conviction that Turkey is more than determined to join the E.U. It is also argued that in its quest to join it, Turkey is seen biting the bullet in the background of populist domestic pressure to immediately execute Mr. Ocalan.

One fifth of the Turkish population is Kurdish and today Kurds play a significant role in the Turkish society and establishment. But a decade-and-half old secessionist war launched by Mr. Ocalan and his Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) has cost some 37,000 Turkish and Kurdish lives. Mr. Ocalan was captured in Kenya a few months ago. Since then, the PKK has toned down its secessionist rhetoric and momentarily suspended its gory fight for independence.

There are large Kurdish communities in neighbouring Iran and Iraq and Kurdish nationalists have propagated the cause of a new state of 'Kurdistan' to be carved out of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. The Turkish President, Mr. Demirel also has joined the country's main human rights group in welcoming the decision to postpone the execution. He said: "We have to think about unity not separation... every one must work for peace. If we all come to our senses the future will be better."

Mr. Ecevit has also managed to convince his

eight-month-old coalition government's partners, particularly the ultra rightwing 'Nationalist Action Party' to take a moderate stand. The Government is seen raising the standard of human rights and democracy in Turkey.

But there are still many imponderables as Turkey tries to be a fully democratic, prosperous and peaceful country. Its fast growing and prosperous middle class is essentially secular and European oriented in its lifestyle and thinking. At the same time, the social and political challenge posed by Islamic fundamentalists cannot be underestimated.

The military has consistently warned the religious fundamentalists that as protectors and custodians of the secular and Kamalist heritage, it will challenge and curb any lurch towards religious fundamentalism. Turkey has yet to undergo high transformation before it qualifies for the E.U. membership.

The current debate in the E.U. is if the west can still count on Turkey to contain the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism in central and west Asian region. But the progressive pro-E.U. Ankara is hurt by the E.U.'s grudging acceptance of Turkey in Europe. Many Turks feel such an attitude may undermine its secular and pro western orientation. In private conversations, many Turks say the reality is that the E.U. will always find ways and means



Members of the Italian association against the death penalty in the world - 'Hands off Cain' - (nessuno tocchi Caino) march in front of Rome's Colosseum after the decision of the Turkish Government to delay Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan's execution, last week. In the background is the Colosseum that will be illuminated with golden light for 48 hours as it is done whenever someone is spared from execution. — AP

to block its full membership and hence, Turkey should stop 'humiliating itself' by running after the west.

Its membership of the E.U. may not materialise for another decade or two under the current set of circumstances. Turkey has an overwhelming clout over the Caspian oil supplies and its military facilities provide a strategic location for projecting power to the oil rich Gulf region and the Caspian basin.

Despite the pull of Islamic fundamentalists, Turkey remains overwhelmingly secular and widely rated as a progressive and enlightened society in the Islamic world. But it remains to be seen if it can match the E.U.'s standards in economic and political matters.

THE HINDU
17 JAN 2000

Postponement of Israeli-Syrian talks exposes rift

JERUSALEM: The postponement of a new round of Israeli-Syrian peace talks in the United States has exposed deep differences over the fate of the Golan Heights, amid a flurry of west Asian diplomatic moves.

Hard on the heels of the postponement, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak met Palestinian president Yasser Arafat late Monday night in surprise talks over their troubled peace process, which Palestinians fear has been cast aside by the Syrian track.

The two met in secret in central Israel to weigh postponing by two months, the February 13 deadline for a U.S.-brokered framework accord, the forerunner to a permanent peace deal to be concluded by September, Israeli political sources said.

Officials were unavailable for comment on the meeting, which sources said lasted for more than three hours. In a round-robin of summits this week, Mr Barak was to have met Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Shara for a third round of talks on Wednesday. He was also expected to meet U.S. president Bill Clinton and Mr Arafat. Mr Barak's departure is now

on hold, his office said. Syria, on Monday said, the next round of peace talks with Israel had been postponed over concerns about Israel's commitment to withdrawing from the Golan Heights. A Syrian official said "the return of the Golan is not a matter for bargaining of negotiations".

Mr Shara spoke by telephone with U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright Monday evening about a new date for the next round of talks, a Syrian official said. He did not say whether they had agreed on a new date.

Washington said Syria and Israel would send lower-level experts to the United States within a week to continue talks, which resumed in December after a 45-month breakdown. A senior U.S. official said the sides disagreed over which issues to take up first. He declined to elaborate, but Syria has repeatedly called for debate over its demand

that Israel agree to return the entire Golan, captured in the 1967 Middle-East war. Israel has said it must first hear Syrian views on security arrangements, normalisation of ties and water resources.

The procedure for tackling those issues dogged the last round of talks in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, earlier this month. They ended after a week with no tangible progress despite repeated on-call intervention by Mr Clinton.

Mr Barak took office last July vowing to swap land for peace but has yet to set out the "painful" withdrawal he foresees.

The talks have been watched with concern by Palestinians, who fear their peace track could be left in the shadows by the high-profile Israeli-Syria negotiations. Mr Barak angered Palestinians on Sunday by announcing he would put off the handover of more West Bank land due to have taken place this

week under their own September peace deals.

Mr Arafat is to give Mr Clinton an outline for a permanent peace with Israel, which the sides have vowed to forge by September. The Palestinian leader is to leave for Egypt and Washington on Wednesday, in time for a Thursday meeting with Mr Clinton. Israeli hawks, meanwhile, urged Mr Barak to suspend talks with the Palestinians, after a pipe-bomb explosion in a rubbish bin wounded at least 16 people in Hadera in northern Israel.

Police called the bombing an apparent Palestinian militant attack. Mr Barak, defending the peace process, vowed "terrorism" would not break the Israelis' spirit. Western diplomatic sources said Syria had been angered by the publication in the Israeli Ha'aretz newspaper last week of a U.S. working document setting out areas of consent and discord in the talks with Israel. They said Syria believed reports of the document, billed by Ha'aretz as a draft treaty, had made it look as though Damascus was making concessions on the key issue of territory. (Reuters)



Yasser Arafat



E. Barak

Arafat to voice concern over tardy peace moves

REUTERS

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20. — The Palestinian leader, Mr Yasser Arafat, arrived in Washington today for a meeting with President Bill Clinton, complaining his peace moves with Israel were going nowhere fast.

Mr Arafat voiced pessimism during a stop in Egypt despite official statements that he and Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Ehud Barak, agreed on Monday to redouble efforts to close a framework deal for a treaty by 13 February.

"We did not come out with a concrete result, only promises that have not been fulfilled," Mr Arafat said when he met reporters in Cairo on his way

to today's White House talks.

Mr Barak, who came to power six months ago vowing to accelerate peace moves, angered Palestinians by delaying a handover of another 6.1 per cent of the West Bank. The transfer was to have taken place today.

Mr Arafat said he would ask Mr Clinton, the leading mediator in Arab-Israeli peace moves, to get Israel to meet an agreed upon September deadline for the treaty Mr Arafat hopes will give Palestinians an independent state.

The Palestinian leader will first join secretary of state, Mrs Madeleine Albright for lunch in her home, which her spokesman, Mr James Rubin, said would be a chance to assess

what could be achieved before the 13 February deadline for a framework accord.

Mr Rubin said the deadline was a "formidable challenge", adding "but we have not given up hope. The people who do the work in this business have seen a lot of problems resolved in the final days of a negotiation".

Mr Clinton had planned to meet Mr Barak this week and Syrian foreign minister, Mr Farouq Al-Shara. But their meeting was put off because of differences over the fate of the Golan Heights.

"I'm actually quite hopeful," Mr Clinton said. "I would not say the gaps in the positions are 90 per cent. I'd say they're much closer to 10 per cent than 90 per cent."

THE STATESMAN

21 JAN 2000

Israeli Parliament to publicly debate nuclear policy

Jerusalem, January 20

AFTER HALF a century of secrecy, Israel's Parliament is going to publicly debate the country's nuclear policy, the Speaker of the House has said. Although no date has been set, the debate will bring the long-taboo subject of Israel's nuclear capacity into the light for the first time.

Issam Mahoul, an Israeli Arab member of Parliament, initiated the debate, following the release of 1,200 pages of testimony from the trial of Mordechai Vanunu, who was convicted of spying after he disclosed Israel's nuclear weapons secrets to the 'London Sunday Times' in 1986.

He has been in prison ever since, according to AP.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

21 JAN 2000

10.15 Israel, Syria moving forward

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), JAN. 21. The impasse in the negotiations between Syria and Israel, though worrisome, is not calamitous, seems to be the view in West Asia. As the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton has stated, there is the immediate problem of sequencing the issues to be negotiated and there is also the perennial fear that the two sides will not be able to summon the will to surmount the hostility of the past 50 years. The two sides appear to have shown the inclination to move towards a compromise though they have not actually taken a step forward.

Despite a news blackout on the negotiations, a leak to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, saw the publication of the "working paper" which Mr. Clinton and his aides had drawn up at the conclusion of the negotiations. As per the report in *Haaretz* the working paper is a draft agreement with a preamble and articles. The points on which there is disagreement is in parenthesis. In essence, the working paper is what Mr. Clinton said he intended it to be -- a document which sets out the areas of agree-

ment and also the differences which remain to be bridged so that further negotiations can be planned accordingly. However, there is some uneasiness that the U.S. has made the document a draft agreement instead of leaving it as a simpler discussion paper.

One of the most crucial facts that the document reveals is that Israel has given up its insistence that the border between the two countries should be the same as laid down in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1923. By this agreement, the two imperial powers, the U.K. and France, divided the Levant, with France taking charge of the Syrian and Lebanese provinces of the Turkish empire and Britain taking Palestine (including present-day Israel) and Jordan. Israel had insisted that the 1923 line, which would leave the Sea of Galilee well within its borders, should be treated as the legitimate border.

While the Israeli position does not preclude their argument that they should retain a presence on the Golan Heights, the non-mention of the 1923 line looks significant on the basis of several other considerations. *Yediot Acharot*

(though it is considered less reliable than *Haaretz*) reported that the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak had assured Mr. Clinton in October last year that he would agree to the recognition of the June 4, 1967 line as the border. This newspaper report is backed by several commentaries articles which suggest that Mr. Barak and his close associates have reconciled to the 1967 line.

If Mr. Barak has indeed agreed to the 1967 borders, which runs below the escarpment of the Golan plateau, then he has virtually conceded the main Syrian demand that Israel return the whole of the Golan. There is apparently scope for flexibility since the line was not fully demarcated between 1948 (when Syria advanced beyond the 1923 line) and 1967. There was apparently only a patchwork mapping, understandable given the conditions of armistice which then prevailed.

If Israel has shown some flexibility on the question of borders, Syria too is seen to be not rigid on matters of concern to Israel. For instance, the "working paper" seems to make clear that Syria will permit a military observation post

on Mount Hermon even after they re-possess it. The difference is that Syria wants the observation post to be manned solely by French and U.S. personnel while Israel desires that they too have an "effective presence" in this monitoring facility.

Moreover, in the article relating to normalisation of relations, Syria (as per the working paper) is seen to be in almost total agreement with Israel that there should be wholesale normalisation once other differences are overcome.

Both sides appear to have got some satisfaction in the negotiations. Syria has made some progress towards having the 1967 border recognised and Israel's main concerns in respect of security and normalisation appear to have been met. But Syria appears to believe that the publication of the "working paper" in *Haaretz*, which was bound to rouse domestic opposition in Israel, was a ploy by the Israeli Government to back off from a firm commitment. They have, therefore, insisted that Israel give a written commitment on recognising the 1967 border as the final one. Israel is not prepared to give such a commitment.

Clinton for compromise in W Asia peace process

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, Jan. 21. — President Bill Clinton has advised the Palestinians and Israelis to compromise and settle for less than 100 per cent in order to reach a settlement.

"As in any process like this," Mr Clinton said at yesterday's meeting with Palestinian leader Mr Yasser Arafat, "there must be inevitable and difficult compromises. No one can get everything that either side wants."

Mr Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Mr Ehud Barak face a 13 February deadline for an outline of an accord, but all key

issues separating them remain unresolved.

"I'm convinced we can get there and I'm convinced that Chairman Arafat is proceeding in great good faith," Mr Clinton said at a photo session in the Oval Office. White House officials made no statement after the hour-long meeting, and there was no indication what a frustrated Clinton administration may do to try to hasten a settlement.

On the Israel-Syrian track, talks are suspended indefinitely. But Mr Clinton has told reporters: "I think they'll both have something to say before long. I think they'll keep work-

ing right along." And, he said, differences between Israel and Syria are "more bridgeable than I would have thought."

Mr Arafat agreed with Mr Clinton's statement that the issues between him and Barak were difficult. However, he ducked when asked if he was willing to compromise. With evident satisfaction, meanwhile, Mr Arafat said he had reached agreement with Mr Barak for Israel to transfer another 6.1 per cent of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority. But it wasn't clear whether the two sides had resolved exactly what land Israel would surrender.

THE STATESMAN

22 JAN 2000

HP-17

Amnesty in Algeria

ONE SIGHT that cannot be missed by a visitor motoring down the winding streets of Algiers is the clumps of young men hanging around street corners with apparently nothing to do. Given the ubiquitous presence of footballs these young men perhaps dream of becoming another Zinedine Zidane and taking the soccer world by storm. Even those who are not that ambitious know that ferries to Europe ply every day from the bay on the other side of the hills from the city's poorer neighbourhoods. Escape from the reality of Algeria, either in fantasy or physically, might be the foremost thought in the minds of Algerian youth but the Government will know that it has truly won hearts and minds when the youth can be persuaded to stay.

This is likely to be the major challenge before the Algerian Government in the immediate future. The idleness or disinterestedness of the youth is one clear sign that the high tide of Islamic militancy is over. If the call of the militants still had some resonance the youth on the street would have been more sullen, more menacing. But as early as April last year, before Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika became President, the mood appeared to be one of indifference to politics. There was no future in militancy both because the Government had already gained the upper hand and because it was clear by then that the militants really had no ideas about a fulfilling future.

The militants' inability to present any plans for a better future for Algeria and the intense brutality of their campaign provided cause for alienation. Through their use of extreme violence, appeal to local loyalties and the rural population's abhorrence for the Algerian security forces, the militant groups were able to sustain themselves in the field. But when quantum of available force made for the main difference between the two sides the better organised institutions of the state were bound to prevail. This war of attrition could, however, have continued for indefinitely longer if the Algerian Government had not been able to present the right formula, and at the right time, to swing popular support (even if marginally) to its side. With the masses turning against them, the Algerian militants were like fish in a drying pool.

Soon after becoming President, Mr. Bouteflika presented his plan for "peace and civic concord". Its basic element was the offer of a partial or complete amnesty to those militants who laid down arms and were believed to have not committed murders and

With the masses turning against them, the militants were like fish in a drying pool,
KESAVA MENON on the hopes for peace in Algeria.

23/1

rapes or carried out bombings. It was believed that important elements in Algeria's power structure — the senior army officers and bureaucrats who wield power behind the scenes — were not too happy about Mr. Bouteflika's plans. But he appeared to have fished them when he called a referendum and won endorsement.

Mr. Bouteflika had set a January 13 deadline for the militant groups to lay down arms. Even when the plans were first announced it was taken as a fair guess that Mr. Bouteflika was primarily targeting the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). This was the armed wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which had fought and almost won the 1992 parliamentary polls till they were cancelled because the Algerian establishment did not want an Islamic force to take over. For the Government, the AIS was a preferable interlocutor from the militants side for several reasons.

Firstly because with the mass mobilisation that it had achieved till 1991 the FIS could claim linkages with people at large and not

remain merely a group of ideological die-hards. As its military wing, the AIS could at least lay claim to some popular base. Secondly, the FIS and later the AIS as well had been engaged with the Government for quite some time. Despite the collapse of some tentative understandings arrived at earlier, the AIS had declared a unilateral cease-fire back in 1998 itself. There was of course the catch that the AIS, like the other militant organisations, did not appear to be completely monolithic but it at least had a leadership willing to explore the possibilities of a compromise.

Groups of AIS fighters began laying down arms soon after the peace and civic accord plan was endorsed in the referendum. However, the basic core of a few thousand fighters held out till just a few days before the deadline for the closure of the amnesty offer. They and the Algerian authorities are understood to have been engaged in negotiations till the last minute, with the AIS pressing for a complete amnesty for all its fighters. Eventually, on the eve of

the January 13 deadline, the AIS declared that it was dissolving itself and within a few hours Mr. Bouteflika was to follow by granting an amnesty to all AIS cadres. Some of the older AIS fighters, or those who were wounded, were allowed to go home while others were made to fight alongside the Government's forces.

Besides the AIS, another smaller group, the Islamic League for Preaching and Combat, was also reported to have availed of the amnesty offer. It is unclear whether it got the same treatment as the AIS. Two hardline groups, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, remain in the fray. The GIA in particular is understood to have been the main force which perpetrated the most barbarous incidents during the nine-year insurgency. It has perhaps calculated that the amnesty offer will make little sense when there are so many who will be hungry for revenge.

As of the moment, the Algerian security forces appear well set to liquidate the hardcore militant bands. The Government, however, has its task cut out in rehabilitating the militants when large numbers of their own personnel have themselves been directly affected by the violence. Beyond these immediate tasks lies the more important one of ensuring that Algeria's youth have a better future to look forward to.



Algerian security forces on patrol ... isolating militants.

West Asia accord on final status likely

By Kesava Menon

MANAMA (BAHRAIN) JAN. 25. It is likely that Israeli and Palestinian officials will sign some sort of an agreement on February 13. It is also possible that this document will be called "Framework Agreement on Final Status Issues" as it was supposed to be called when the deadline was originally set. However, it would be overly optimistic to think that the agreement will bring the two sides much closer to, let alone clinching, a permanent settlement of their dispute.

The Palestinian Authority President, Mr. Yasser Arafat, who was in the United States last week, refuses to divulge whether he still believes that the framework agreement will be signed. Provision for such an agreement was made in a deal struck last September — the Wye-II memorandum — and it was envisaged as a document which would provide the outline for a permanent settlement.

Even at the outset, the two sides and the U.S., which had brokered the deal, had played safe by suggesting that it might not be much more than a declaration of principles. But in the euphoria of a signing ceremony and the momentum created after the Wye-II measures were implemented initially, there was brave talk that at least some of the contentious issues would be resolved, come February.

Even cautious optimism appears to be ruled out now. According to reports in the Israeli press, the U.S. is talking only of a declaration of principles at this stage. Although negotiators from the two sides embarked on an intensive round of talks over the last week there

is no sign that they have made progress on any one of the five major issues that have to be settled before a permanent settlement can be reached.

The U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, who wants Israel and the Palestinians to arrive at a settlement before the end of his term in office, is reportedly pressing them to make compromises. That would imply that he has given up earlier hopes of brokering a deal in which neither side believes it has lost too much.

There were reports earlier this month that the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, was contemplating a significant concession in respect of the Palestinians' demand that they should have East Jerusalem as the capital of their state. According to these reports, the Israelis were readying to transfer the village of Abu Dis on the fringes of Jerusalem. Abu Dis has been identified as having the right location and adequate space to set up the Palestinian capital area once the state is formed. Given its location, its link-up with East Jerusalem would have been natural and the Palestinians would have been able to claim that Al Quds (the Arab name for Jerusalem) had indeed become their capital.

These reports also stated that Mr. Barak was thinking of transferring the supervision of civil affairs in the Arab-populated districts of East Jerusalem to the control of the Palestinian Authority. If these two transfers — of Abu Dis and of civilian affairs in East Jerusalem — had come to pass then the Palestinian demand on Jerusalem would have been substantially met though the question of authority over the Walled City would still have remained a con-

troversial hold-over. However, just before Mr. Arafat left for Washington, he was reportedly informed by Mr. Barak that the twin transfer could not take place in the immediate future.

While the Palestinians do seem reconciled to some adjustments of the borders between the West Bank and Israel, which could include the permanent transfer of a large number of Jewish settlements and their lands to Israel, there is no sign that any headway has been made on the issues of settlements and borders. The question of the Palestinian refugees, and their right to return, cannot be settled except in the wider context of agreements between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other. Those talks are stalled as well.

All that remains to be substantially dealt with in the likely declaration in February is the question of Palestinian statehood. It is no longer seriously suggested that any party, including Israel, can prevent a Palestinian state from coming into being. Even the Israeli right wing seems to have recognised that Palestinian statehood is very much on the cards.

However, Israel still has a problem with a unilateral Palestinian declaration of statehood before a comprehensive deal is struck. It fears that if the Palestinians declare their state, and get recognised by others, then Israel would be cast as having illegal possession of another state's sovereign territory. So, although Mr. Arafat still insists that he has the right to declare statehood by September, Israel and probably the U.S. as well, will do their best to head him off till a comprehensive settlement has been reached.

Golan is their goal

From the Syrian perspective, the recovery of the Golan Heights is the issue, writes KESAVA MENON. If the price is the dropping of an ideology-driven hostility to Israel, then so be it.

WHEN TALKS between Syria and Israel resumed in mid-February, Mr. Farooq al Sharaa, Syria's Foreign Minister, made an impassioned speech in which he said that the West had not paid adequate attention to the suffering of the Arab peoples at Israel's hands. This speech did not go down well with his Israeli interlocutors nor reportedly with many U.S. officials. But the truth is evident also in the manner in which all sorts of considerations, besides their concern for their own people, are given equal importance while assessments are made of the motives which led the Syrian Government to restart talks with Israel.

The simple truth is that at least 1,50,000 Syrian citizens were forced to leave the Golan Heights when it was captured by Israel in 1967. They and their descendants, estimated as numbering more than 4,00,000 now, have been trying to make a living in other parts of Syria thereby affecting the country as a whole. Upwards of another 1,50,000 Golan residents, mainly Druze, continue to live on the Golan under Israeli occupation but have refused to relinquish their loyalties to Syria. This despite the fact that fellow Druze tribesmen who live in the hills that are part of Israel have long been loyal citizens of that country and have provided some of its best soldiers.

The plight of the Golan Druze has been best encapsulated in the stories and photographs of divided families using megaphones to talk to each other because they cannot communicate in any other way across the ceasefire lines. They also have numerous complaints about land confiscations and other disabilities they suffer under Israeli occupation.

From the Syrian perspective, the recovery of the Golan is the issue. If the price to be paid for that is the dropping of an ideology-driven hostility to Israel then so be it. Here again the Arab perspective is different from the western or the Israeli one. The Syrians like other Arabs believe that future demographics

will work in their favour. Their populations are growing at a faster rate than that of Israel and the Arabs therefore hope that there will come a time when the Jews will be swamped. There could be other developments in the future — cultural assimilation or secularisation of regional politics across the spectrum — which could lead to an erosion of the concept of a state for the Jews. These projections might not be accurate (for instance, the fact that the population growth rate among religious Jews is far higher than that of the secular does not appear to have been adequately assessed) but the Arabs do recognise that the future need not be wholly captive to the past.

Syria's Government would also have calculated that not all the treaties in the world can make people forget five decades of hostility. The Egyptian and Israeli Governments made peace well over a decade ago. Other than a deal which enables Egypt to sell its gas to Israel, and the sight of Israeli tourists at the Pyramids or the Taba sea resort, there is very little to show that the peoples of the two countries have kissed and made up. The signing of a peace deal might signify the recognition of the fact that they have to live with Israel at least for the immediate future. But it need not signify the abandonment of the belief that a "State for the Jews" is an abomination in West Asia.

When Syria's President, Mr. Hafez al Assad, assented to the resumption of talks with Israel he was confronted with certain hard facts. For one, Israel was moving quite steadily towards completing the circle of peace, or at least a civil truce, with its neighbours. Despite the war of rhetoric still going on it was reasonable to expect that the U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, would be able to get the Palestinians to make their peace with Israel by the end of this year. That would leave Syria and Lebanon as the last hold-outs, to the irritation of a world that has become weary of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Open hostility towards Israel had also become unsustainable with the rest of the Arab world realising that the policy of confrontation was no longer the best available option. An external ally like the Soviet Union no longer exists. Given the increasing edge which Israeli is acquiring in the technological dimension of warfare, unstinting U.S. support to it and the burgeoning relationship between Tel Aviv and Ankara, the Syrian prospects in a military confrontation with Israel are fast dwindling. Then again the Syrian economy is in dire straits with high unemployment and inflation and there is little prospect of drawing foreign funds or even redirecting internal resources while there is uncertainty about peace on the borders.

As against the poor returns that can be expected from a continuation of the confrontationalist policy were the real dividends that could be derived from a peace treaty. The last four Israeli Prime Ministers, including the present one, have strongly hinted that they recognise the necessity of a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights if a comprehensive peace is to be established. They have also hinted strongly that they could contemplate such a withdrawal if their concerns are satisfied. Mr. Assad, like everyone else, is well aware that Mr. Clinton sees a comprehensive West Asian peace as a major component of his legacy. Mr. Clinton's Presidency does not have long to run and Mr. Assad's own health is not very robust either. Time for a deal is getting to be at a premium.

Even after he restores the Golan to Syrian sovereignty, Mr. Assad might face the hostility of militant Sunni groups who are ideologically committed to the destruction of Israel. These groups are small and have not much leeway in tightly-controlled Syria but the Sunnis are the biggest sectarian group in the Syrian populace. However, with the return of the Golan Druze to his fold, Mr. Assad will have the support of another ethnic group which along with his own Alawites forms the backbone of the Syrian army.

New round of West Asia talks begins

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JERUSALEM, JAN. 30. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began a new round of intensive peace talks near Jerusalem today, just two weeks ahead of a target date for a framework accord on the most sensitive issues dividing the two sides.

The delegations for the negotiations, expected to last 10 days, were led by Israel's chief negotiator, Mr. Oded Eran, and his Palestinian counterpart, Mr. Yasser Abed Rabbo, the office of the Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Barak, said.

Mr. Eran is due to accompany Mr. Barak on his visit to Egypt for talks with the President, Mr. Hosni Mubarak, before returning to rejoin the negotiations with the Palestinians.

Under the U.S.-brokered Sharm El-Sheikh Accord signed in September, the two sides set a February 13 deadline to finalise an outline accord on the key outstanding issues of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, borders and statehood, Jewish settlements and water-sharing ahead of a September target date for a permanent settlement.

But both sides have cast doubt over the like-

lihood of them reaching a framework accord by February 13.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Barak denied claims from an anonymous U.S. official that Mr. Barak will meet Mr. Arafat.

The date of their next meeting has not yet been decided, Ms Meirav Parsi-Tzadok said.

A U.S. official at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, said yesterday that Mr. Barak and Mr. Arafat had provisionally scheduled a meeting for Thursday or Friday. The meeting would take place at the Erez Crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, the official, who asked not to be identified, said.

Unlike Mr. Arafat, Mr. Barak did not attend the Davos forum. — AFP

Russia to host meet

Reuters reports from Moscow:

Russia will host the first multilateral West Asia talks in more than three years on Tuesday in a move intended to underline Moscow's push for a bigger role in the strategically important region

The Russian Foreign Minister, Mr. Igor Iva-

nov, and the U.S. Secretary of State, Ms Madeleine Albright, will jointly chair the talks, which bring together representatives from Israel, a string of Arab states and donor countries including Japan and the European Union.

The talks, held at the Foreign Minister level, will focus on cross-border issues such as arms control, the environment, water, refugees and economic cooperation. But setbacks in Syrian-Israeli talks and very slow progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track have clouded hopes that the one-day Moscow meeting will achieve anything substantial.

Syria's decision to stay away from the talks has underscored Moscow's loss of influence over a key Soviet-era ally. Syria's client, Lebanon, also plans to skip the meeting. Both countries say it is pointless to discuss regional cooperation without making peace with Israel first.

Moscow sent out its invitations earlier this month just before the recently resumed Syrian-Israeli talks were suspended.

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