

Israel is moving towards civil war...
PLO is treading a disastrous path...

Israel Shahak tells why

ISRAEL Shahak, one of the most iconoclastic persons imaginable, is quite a remarkable intellectual and political phenomena. Holocaust survivor and professor of chemistry at Hebrew University in occupied Jerusalem, Shahak is probably the most outspoken critic of Israeli racism and advocate of Palestinian rights.

He has, nevertheless, in recent months also become quite a critic of the PLO leadership.

Last week in "From Washington" I concluded quoting Shahak as he called Nabeel Shaath, one of the Yasser Arafat's most senior advisors and Chairman of the Palestine National Council's Political Committee, very unpleasant and pejorative names.

So I followed up during our lunch conversation with an admittedly provocative question: "Tell me more about the PLO" I asked Shahak. Why is Arafat going down a course that might be leading him to disaster? I don't understand."

Shahak's answer was characteristically sharp and no-nonsense. "I also don't understand. I can tell you my opinion that the course is disastrous. But I don't understand why he is doing it. I'm a scientist by training and the description of phenomena is one thing, and particular reasons why is quite another thing."

"But you see no possibility his strategy will succeed?" I continued.

"Not only this, but I think that it will lead Palestinians, and also us progressive Jews, to disaster."

"Can you elaborate on what you mean by 'disaster'?"

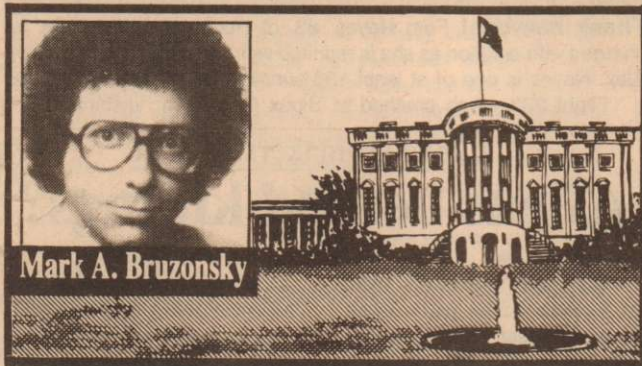
"First of all, and the most important, you have the PLO bureaucracy which is held by all political circles in the US in contempt—and the more they are flattering the Americans the more in contempt. The Intifada is held in honour, not for moral reasons but because they have resisted the power of Israel for so long. The PLO has always failed with Israel."

Asked if looking ahead he sees the demise of Fatah's leadership of the PLO, Shahak hesitates just a bit.

"It depends on many factors that I cannot see, for instance how much money they have...I don't know. But that this policy is leading to a big failure, to a big division between the real Intifada leadership and the PLO". Shahak is confident.

"The PLO is besieging Shamir's office with offers for direct

From



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Washington

talks. To attempt the impossible brings a person or an organisation into contempt from everybody."

"You have to distinguish between Palestinian struggle and Palestinian military confrontations. Military confrontation if it is moderately successful bring, together with hatred, a great deal of respect. And as I already told you the Intifada invokes a lot of respect, because it is successful—also here in this country, in congress, and in the State Department. But the failures of the PLO...unsuccessful policies repeated and repeated and repeated against all evidence...breed only contempt. This is axiomatic."

"What do you think they want to talk with Shamir about?" I then asked, continuing to try to go deeper into Shahak's rather unique analytical approach.

"I don't know. I must confess to you I don't understand their reasons for the PLO activities. There are so many things lacking in my information that I don't know. But the more they are attempting to talk to Shamir, the less they are talking about what is happening in the territories."

"Nabeel Shaath doesn't even mention what is happening in the territories. Walid Khalidi doesn't even mention what is happening in the territories...Ten wild horses couldn't even drag me to hear Walid Kahlidi."

Then the conversation switched to what's going on in Israel itself, and here too Shahak doesn't pull his punches at all.

"People like Amos Oz are preparing for civil war," Shahak began, hardly giving me time to catch my breath.

"Amos Oz called on May 26 at

a big rally for a civil war! And not because of the Palestinians, but because when the settlers finish with the Palestinians they will continue with Jews like Amos Oz and Israel Shahak! In a poll taken on June 8 by the *Yediot Aharanot*, which I don't have to tell you is the biggest Israeli paper, 58 percent of Jews said that they are expecting a civil war between Jews and Jews in Israel, and only 40 percent didn't."

With Shahak having now raised the crucial issue of what's possible within Israeli politics, I thought it best to find out just what he thought this talk of civil war could be leading to. So I suggested to him that if indeed a civil war were to break out, his side seemed to me likely to lose it.

"Of course not! You don't know anything about Israel" he practically lashed back.

"The upper class controls, even in the army, so many sources of strength that, of course, we have good chances of winning a civil war. A civil war is not won by masses, but by trained soldiers. And who are the best trained soldiers in Israel? They are coming from the upper class."

"If there will be a civil war between paratroopers and Golan reserves do you for a moment hesitate who will win?"

"You're assuming that half of the army is going to fight on your side," I interjected.

"I don't know in numbers, I mean in quality," he responded. "Numbers don't win a war. Quality wins wars! Training wins wars! Dedication wins wars!"

Then I asked him about Dan Almagor, the well-known former mainstream Israeli playwright who recently wrote the

poem "We Shoot Children, Don't We" warning his many friends in the Israeli army of possible war crimes trials in the future.

"Yes, him too," Shahak responded noting that he like Oz has also been warning of civil war. "But he's on the fringe, he's not part of the consensus. Dan Almagor is like me, he says that we are Nazis."

"If I am moderately optimistic after two or three years, it is for Israeli reasons. Very strong opposition to Shamir is a very real possibility", Shahak noted at this point, making it clear he wasn't talking about Right-wing but Left-wing opposition.

"You mean the possibility of the Labour Party coming back?" I asked.

"Labour, what Labour! Labour is a dead body. Labour will never come to power under any circumstances. But opposition that will force the government to take very radical steps after very long suffering and struggle."

"You mean negotiate with the PLO?" was my next question.

"No, of course not negotiate with the PLO. It would be a very great loss of face and for many other reasons. But one-sided withdrawal from most of the territories, from a great part of the territories."

Asked what would then happen to the settlers, Shahak simply said that "if it should come to this they'll be no lack of Israelis that will shoot at the settlers and with pleasure."

As I said at the outset in reporting about Israel Shahak one doesn't have to like him to respect him and to in some ways admire him. He seems a man quite alone, the proverbial seer shouting in the "wilderness", the quintessential individualist upholding his moral and political visions.

Shahak's translations are clearly a labour of love. By simply making available from the Hebrew the most insightful and usually damning information Shahak has become a minor legend slaving away as he still does on his English typewriter.

A pretty minor legend at this point, however. His monthly translations, now being distributed by the American Educational Trust (AET) in the US, still have fewer than a hundred American subscribers.

But it's quality, not numbers that count. Shahak is a true believer in this maxim.

and because it is America's destiny to lead."

Historic moment

His proposal was made in a ceremony, on the steps of the National Air and Space Museum, marking the historic moment on July 20, 1969, when American Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped on the Moon's sea of tranquillity to fulfill a pledge made eight years earlier by President John Kennedy.

The two moonwalkers stood with Bush on Friday, along with Mike Collins, the third Apollo 11 crewman who said, "we have rested on our Apollo laurels long enough; it's time to get moving again."

Bush's proposal — to establish a US Moon base early in the next century and then mount a manned Mars mission — likely will ignite a long national debate both in a budget-minded Congress and among those who believe US dollars should not be spent on costly space endeavours but on solving more earthly problems.

Budget deficits

At a time of huge budget deficit, Congress already is balking at the start-up costs for the US space agency's \$30 billion space station, which Bush said was "a first and necessary step for sustained manned exploration."

Congress, he said, is "where the future of the space station — and our future as a space-faring nation — will be decided."

Bush offered few details beyond his broad goals and said he was leaving it to Vice President Dan Quayle as head of the National Space Council, and to the space agency to come up with "realistic timetables." Putting the space station in orbit has been scheduled for after 1995.

The President chose to look beyond the budget debate over the space station.

"We must commit ourselves anew to ... the permanent settlement of space," he said. "We must commit ourselves to a future where Americans and citizens of all nations will live and work in space."

Richard Truly, the Space Agency administrator, hailed Bush's initiative as "dynamite" and said that if the programme is approved, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) will be ready to establish a Moon base "in the dawn of the new century."

Truly said cuts in the Nasa budget in recent years have weakened the agency so that in its present structure it could not carry out such visionary plans.

Truly said he had no estimate on how much Bush's programme would cost. But he noted that during the prime of the Apollo programme Nasa's funding represented more than four percent of the national budget compared with about one percent now.