

Likud rebels nix plan, Labor, and new elections

12 MKs in new caucus vow to keep up pressure on Sharon

By Gideon Alon
Haaretz Correspondent



Uzi Landau

Likud members opposing the government decision to disengage from Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank met yesterday and have come out with three "nays" regarding the recent developments: no to the implementation of the plan, no to adding the Labor Party to the coalition, and no to moving up elections.

The group, which met in Minister Uzi Landau's office, included Minister Natan Sharansky, Deputy Minister Michael Ratzon and MKs David Levy, Ehud Yatom, Naomi Blumenthal, Yuli Edelstein, Moshe Kahalon, Michael Gorlovsky and Ayoub Kra. MK Gila Gamliel, who did not attend the meeting is also considered one of the "rebels."

The group made their views known to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at yesterday evening's party Knesset faction meeting.

The most vehement MK was Landau, who argued that "the government has adopted a clearly leftist policy. We said there would be no evacuation of settlements and withdrawals under fire, but this decision is a clear contradic-

tion of that, which caused severe shocks to the political system.

"How is the Likud different from the left now?" Landau asked.

Levy also tore into the government decision, focusing his attack on the three ministers - Benjamin Netanyahu, Limor Livnat and Silvan Shalom - who dropped their opposition to the plan. He called them "the three musketeers," mocking them "for being in favor and then opposed and then in favor, just because of a comma here, a semicolon there," he said.

"A year ago, nobody knew the Likud would be in such a situation. We are heading into the unknown." He said that

"from now on, it is clear we will not automatically vote in favor of a government that has expressed its own lack of confidence in its members and in the results of the Likud referendum."

Gamliel, who showed up at the faction session, said the way Sharon fired the two National Union ministers was "outrageous." She said that adding Labor to the coalition is her "red line."

Gorlovsky said "the decision made this week means transferring Jews." Sharon interrupted him, saying, "that is not the right expression. That should not be said in the Likud. The Likud is not an entity that does not want a peace agreement. The Likud came out of this stronger. Those who think that we are a body that does not want peace are wrong."

Edelstein said he was no longer obliged to support the government on political issues, "because they will contradict the Likud referendum," while Kra said Sharon had "disengaged from the Likud. It's Sharon, not us, who is rebelling, against the Likud."

Health Minister Danny Naveh, who opposed the Sharon plan, said that now that the plan passed the gov-

ernment, all ministers and MKs must vote for it. "Otherwise, we might deteriorate again and end up a faction of only 19 MKs."

Sharon opened the meeting in a good mood with a prepared statement saying, "I am pleased the government decision was made with a majority of Likud ministers, and we managed to preserve Likud unity. I hope the agreement we reached will lead to calm in the party, and allow us to remain the ruling party."

But after hearing the criticism, he changed his tone. When Blumenthal said the government decision had "fractured" the Likud, Sharon interrupted her. "The Likud must lead the country. You don't take a body and split it into groups. Crumbs don't lead. Leadership is only possible together."

He hinted that he might bring Shas or United Torah Judaism into the coalition if the National Religious Party walks out. "Some want the NRP, because they don't want Labor. I want the NRP because Israel cannot but have a religious party in the coalition, and it would be a mistake of the first order if there's a government without a religious party."



ISOLATED: Morag, in Gush Katif, one of the first settlements due for evacuation under the government's plan.

Latest price tag on pullback: NIS 6.5b

Compensation expected to add up to NIS 4.5 billion

By Moti Bassok
Haaretz Correspondent

Withdrawing from the Gaza Strip will cost some NIS 6.5 billion - NIS 4.5 billion to compensate the settlers who are evacuated, plus another NIS 2 billion in security outlays, experts say.

Several interministerial task forces are currently working on calculating the exact cost of the withdrawal, under the overall supervision of Justice Ministry Director-General Aharon Abramovich.

The only precedent for the evacuation of settlements is that of Yamit and the other Sinai settlements, which were dismantled in 1981 pursuant to the peace treaty with Egypt. Abramovich's team is making extensive use of the detailed staff work done then. But that effort proved to be wasted - because when the conclusions were brought to then prime minister Menachem Begin, he barely glanced at them, instead ordering: "Pay them as much as they want."

"There's no guarantee that that won't happen this time as well," commented one member of Abramovich's team.

Meanwhile, some residents of the settlements slated for evacuation are hiring their own lawyers, accountants and real estate assessors to prepare their own estimates of fair compensation. The 21 Gaza settlements are home to some 2,000 families, or about 7,000 people.

Knowledgeable sources say that the current assessment is that every evacuated family will receive an average of \$300,000 in compensation.

Thus compensation for the 2,000 families living in Gaza will run to between NIS 2.7 billion and NIS 3 billion.

In addition, the government will need to spend some \$300 million, or between NIS 1.35 billion and NIS 1.5 billion, to compensate people who owned businesses in the Strip and to find alternative employment for all the people who worked in the settlements (schoolteachers, farmers, shopkeepers, etc.)

Finally, there is the cost of the army's redeployment outside the Strip, which is estimated at NIS 2 billion. That brings the total cost to some NIS 6.5 billion.

The precise amount of compensation to the evacuated families will depend on various criteria, including how many children they have, how long they have lived in the settlement, how big their house is, how much land it sits on and where they intend to move after the evacuation.

The government wants the evacuated settlers to move either to towns in the Negev that will be specially built for them, or to settlements in the West Bank. In both of these areas, housing is relatively cheap, so the compensation they receive would be lower.

As for how the government will finance these costs, officials say that they are hoping the United States will help - although officially, both the U.S. and Israel deny that the matter has ever been discussed.

In an interview with Yoel Marcus of Haaretz (February 3, 2004), Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that he had

not yet broached this issue with Washington, but "it is clear that I will have to discuss it with them."

The U.S. financed a significant portion of the Sinai evacuation, and it also financed some of Israel's military redeployments pursuant to the Oslo process. The 1998 Wye Agreement, for instance, required Israel to move three army bases from the West Bank to Israel. The Americans built one of the new bases themselves and gave Israel NIS 270 million to finance construction of the other two.

At most, however, American aid is expected to cover only half the costs.

Government officials expect the remainder to be spread out over three fiscal years, thereby significantly easing the budgetary burden. In addition, some of the money raised through the American loan guarantees will go toward these costs. At the moment, the Finance Ministry has no intention of raising taxes or of levying a mandatory loan on the citizenry to finance the evacuation.

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Opposition in disarray as Labor gives coalition a 'safety net'

Two no-confidence motions fail as party stays away from vote

By Gideon Alon
Haaretz Correspondent

The opposition was in disarray after the main opposition party, Labor, withdrew its no-confidence motion, granting the government a parliamentary "safety net" to protect the plan to withdraw from Gaza.

The Labor Party is "creeping into the Sharon government," Hadash-Ta'al MK Mohammed Barakeh charged yesterday after the main opposition party dropped its no-confidence motion and then its MKs abstained in no-confidence motions presented by

Shas, Yahad-Meretz and the Arab parties about the government's failure to provide funding so salaries could be paid in the local authorities.

The Yahad and Arab parties' no-confidence motion was defeated by 46 to 31 (and 15 abstentions, while the Shas motion was defeated by 41-26, with 22 abstentions.

Several Likud MKs from the ranks of the "rebels" were absent from the voting while the National Union began functioning as an opposition party, voicing no-confidence in the government in both motions - except for MK Michael Noodleman, who supported the coalition.

Knesset observers say that 12 Likud MKs are now aligned with the so-called "rebels," who will vote against the government on issues relating to the disengagement.

If Labor had voted in favor of the no-confidence motions, it would have been a major success scored against the coalition but would not have

been enough to bring down the government, which would take at least 61 votes.

Labor's decision to provide the Sharon government with a safety net has enraged the other opposition parties.

Shas, United Torah Judaism and Hadash-Ta'al decided last night to withdraw their signatures from a Labor Party petition calling for a special plenum debate on the disengagement, including an appearance at the podium by the prime minister. The three opposition parties decided on the move to protest Labor's dropping its no-confidence motion. It takes 40 MKs to force a special debate and an appearance by the prime minister. Without the three parties, Labor lost the 40 signatures needed for the plenum debate, which pleased Sharon, since without the National Union and the 12 rebels, he might have lost the traditional vote approving the prime minister's speech at such special sessions of the Knesset.

Lapid hopes NRP stays in government

By Gideon Alon
Haaretz Correspondent

Justice Minister Yosef Lapid (Shinui) yesterday said he hopes the National Religious Party will remain in the coalition.

"If the NRP leaves, it will be a repeat of the suicidal impulses that have characterized the right ever since the 1990s," he said.

Speaking at a meeting with parliamentary reporters, Lapid added that Shinui would not accept either of the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, as a replacement for the NRP, "since our whole worldview clashes with their worldview."

Lapid said he supports adding Labor to the coalition whether or not the NRP leaves. However, he admitted, Labor's recent merger with Histadrut chair Amir Peretz's One Nation party has given him some second thoughts about Labor's desirability, because Peretz's economic platform is diametrically opposed to the government's current program, which Shinui strongly supports.

Bringing in Labor, he said, "would mean accepting a partner who views everything that we are doing [economically] as a calamity. I have a serious ideological problem with MK Peretz's positions."

EU response to disengagement plan - polite and cautious

By Sharon Sadeh
Haaretz Correspondent

LONDON - The European Union responded cautiously yesterday to the cabinet's approval of the disengagement plan, saying that it is waiting to see what the government decides about the plan's implementation.

"The EU is ready to support and to be actively engaged in the withdrawal plan, provided it meets the five conditions set out by the EU and that the

withdrawal plan is in line with the road map," a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said. "Our understanding is that the Israeli government agreed in principle to a withdrawal and now has to set out, through the work of a commission, the modalities of the implementation. The withdrawal should be done with the full support of the EU and the international community."

Britain's Foreign Office issued a similar response.

"We welcomed the first round of the plan," it said in a statement. "It is a positive move which we would like to see fully implemented as soon as possible. We are waiting to see the details of the implementation process, and hope that it corresponds to the full scope of the plan as it was originally presented."

The withdrawal must be carried out in accordance with the road map and in cooperation with the Palestinians, it added.

Another human bone sent by Hezbollah is not Arad's

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A human bone transferred to Israel recently by Hezbollah, claiming it was Ron Arad's, does not belong to the missing Israel Air Force navigator.

This is the second time in the past six months that Hezbollah has sent a human bone here, claiming it belongs to Arad, apparently in an attempt to implement the second phase of the prisoner swap.

In return for information about Arad, Israel has promised to free a large number of Arab prisoners, as the second stage of the deal.

The first phase of the deal took place in January 2004 when the bodies of three kidnapped IDF soldiers and businessman Elhanan Tenenbaum were returned in exchange for some 400 Arab prisoners.

There was also speculation in Arab media yesterday that if Hezbollah is unable to provide information on Arad's fate, another exchange might take place: Israeli Azzam Azzam - being held by the Egyptians on charges of spying - would be exchanged for Samir Kuntar, the murderer of the Haran family of Nahariya, in 1979.

The army is also guarding Hezbollah intensify its efforts to abduct Israeli soldiers from the border with Lebanon to force Israel to carry out the second phase of the exchange.

News in Brief

Lieberman asks Russians for help against Sharon

Former transportation minister Avigdor Lieberman has started a campaign against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the Russian media. In an open letter to Sharon published in the Russian-language newspapers on Sunday, Lieberman writes: "Yisrael Beiteinu is the only party that represents the interests of the Russian-speaking residents of Israel. When you banish it from the coalition, you are sending one million Russian-speaking people into the opposition." The Russian media have generally portrayed Lieberman's dismissal with criticism and heads of the immigrant associations also published an open letter criticizing Sharon. (Yulie Khromchenko)

Mofaz, German counterpart meet for strategic talks

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz met yesterday with his German counterpart, Peter Struck, who is on an official visit to Israel. Mofaz explained the newly approved disengagement plan to Struck and the two also discussed bilateral defense ties, including Israel's desire to purchase two new Dolphin submarines from Germany to join the

three it already has. The subs would cost some \$700 million. Mofaz told Struck that since the start of May, Israel has arrested 18 terrorists who planned to commit suicide bombings inside Israel, and that Israel's intelligence agencies believe that Iran is continuing to try to develop nuclear weapons. (Haaretz Staff)

MK calls for limits on PM's power to fire ministers

The prime minister will be entitled to dismiss a minister only with Knesset approval, if a draft private member's bill brought before the Knesset yesterday by Likud MK Gila Gamliel is passed. According to the Basic Law on the Government, the prime minister is currently allowed to fire a minister without any announcement to the Knesset and the minister automatically ceases to be a member of the government after 48 hours. Gamliel hopes to prevent the prime minister from dismissing ministers who disagree with his policies. (Gideon Levy)

China praises withdrawal plan during mandarin's visit

Foreign Ministry Director-General Yoav Biran met with Chinese Foreign

Minister Li Zhaoxing in Beijing yesterday. The Chinese minister praised the newly approved disengagement plan and said he very much admires the kibbutzim and would like to visit Israel someday. Biran presented Israel's opinions on Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, in advance of Syrian President Bashar Assad's planned visit to Beijing in another few weeks. Biran will spend two weeks in China, which was Israel's largest trade partner in the Far East last year, with bilateral trade totaling \$1.6 billion. (Aluf Benn)

Law would bypass creditors to pay municipal staffs

The government wants to enact legislation by tomorrow that will enable employees of financially troubled municipalities to be paid the wages that they are owed. Currently, any money transferred to these towns is immediately seized by creditors, and therefore never reaches the workers. The government submitted a bill on the subject to the Knesset yesterday, and Knesset Finance Committee Chairman Abraham Hirschson promised to speed it through his committee. He rejected the municipalities' request that the legislation be delayed to give them time to submit their objections. (Zvi Zrahiya)

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