

# Americans for Peace Now Israel Study Tour

## September 6 – September 11, 2014

### Introduction

Americans for Peace Now (APN) conducted a study tour to Israel from September 6 – September 11, 2014.

Several themes dominated our meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials, journalists, and activists. This report explores themes that came up in our meetings, and provides highlights from meetings that were not off the record. It also provides some information about things that the tour participants saw.

We came to Israel right after a very difficult summer. The summer began with the tragic kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenage yeshiva students and then the murder of a Palestinian teen, immediately followed by the war between Israel and Gaza's Hamas. We arrived shortly after the declaration of a ceasefire.

Several themes dominated the conversations with our various speakers:

- Israel's "peace camp" seems hopeful that regional alliances, particularly vis-à-vis the "Islamic State (IS), could serve to support renewed efforts for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Specifically, hopes are that shared regional interests would revive the Arab Peace Initiative (API) to serve as a vehicle for renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. Speakers noted that even Israel's hawkish Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has recently mentioned the API as a positive initiative.
- While Israel's "peace camp" views regional alliances as a constellation that could be leveraged toward negotiating a two-state solution, Israel's right wing is looking at regional anti-terrorism coalitions as a way to *deflect* attention from a two-state solution.
- Speakers were almost unanimous that Prime Minister Netanyahu has conclusively proven that he is not interested in a diplomatic breakthrough toward a two-state solution. It has become clear, most of our speakers said, that Netanyahu views his role as being a guardian of the status quo. As a result, the pro-peace camp seems united in its conviction that its focus should be on replacing the government rather than on influencing Netanyahu to move toward peace.
- Lack of leadership and resolve on the Israeli, Palestinian, and American sides to bring about reengagement on the negotiating process prompts Israelis across the political spectrum to come up with unilateral plans and proposals, whether focusing on unilateral annexation or on unilateral withdrawal.
- Further intensifying the sense of frustration with the diplomatic impasse is the impression that Netanyahu is not being seriously challenged, neither within Likud nor by other party leaders. Furthermore, even the Israeli media, which has traditionally been a biting watchdog of Israeli democracy, seems to be allowing Netanyahu and the right to set the terms of the discussion, with very little pushback.

- Some of our speakers noted that contrary to widespread perception, Israel's peace camp is neither in disarray nor is it shrinking. Israel's Peace Now movement boasts many new volunteers and a lot of people who are now expressing interest in the movement and its agenda, particularly during and after the war. In fact, Peace Now's protest in mid-August, during the Gaza war, under the slogan "Changing Direction: Toward Peace, away from War," attracted over 10,000 people, many of them new, young, protesters.
- While the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement brought stability to Israel's south, it has not pacified the West Bank and particularly East Jerusalem. The situation there is extremely unstable, with daily violent demonstrations, protest strikes, and other forms of resistance to Israel's rule. Members of APN's study tour experienced the tension both on their visit to Ramallah and on their tour of Jerusalem's Old City.
- In the south, despite their precarious situation, not all residents are gung-ho. Not only in the Gaza-Envelope kibbutzim (most of them historically identified with left-leaning movements such as Hashomer Ha-Tzair) but also in development towns such as Sderot, many are pushing for a diplomatic solution to the Gaza challenge, along the lines of a two-state solution. In the words of Zohar Avitan, a pro-peace activist in Sderot, many are angry not at Gazans, but at the Israeli government, which is prioritizing the settlements over the south.
- Most Palestinians feel that they don't have a partner on the Israeli side and are now looking for options other than diplomatic engagement to try to change the status quo. Palestinians are more focused on unilateral actions such as bolstering the concept of Palestinian statehood on the international arena.
- Rawabi is both a sign of hope and an expression of difficulty: On the one hand, progress toward completion of the first planned Palestinian town in the West Bank shows a serious attempt at laying the foundations of a peaceful, independent Palestinian state. The apartments, which had been selling out as they became available, provide not only hope, but also jobs (Rawabi is the largest private employer in the West Bank). Unfortunately, the other side of the coin is that the Israeli government is putting many obstacles in the path of Rawabi's success, reinforcing the recognition that this painful exercise in independence is taking place under Israeli occupation. For example, Israel is delaying approval for a water line to Rawabi, demanding that neighboring Israeli settlements tap into the Rawabi water line. Rawabi's planners and entrepreneurs strongly reject this demand. They view it as forcing them into legitimizing the settlements.
- Palestinians are extremely concerned about the future sustainability of the Palestinian Authority. In addition to erosion in public support for the PA, donors to the PA, both Arab and European, are showing fatigue. They are asking why they should continue to fund the semi-autonomous government (the Palestinian Authority), which is supposed to be a temporary vessel leading to Palestinian statehood, if it only provides Israel with cover to continue the occupation in perpetuity? In relation to Gaza, the donors are asking, why they should put money into rebuilding a perpetual war zone, which Israel is repeatedly destroying in retaliation for rocket launching and other militant hostilities?
- Post-Gaza war, Israelis are expecting a harsh UN report on the war. The expectation is that when the report comes, it will further isolate Israel.

These are some of the more prominent themes and trends that can be synthesized from our speakers' remarks. They don't, however, represent the wealth of information and analysis that the group absorbed in five full days of tours and talks.

This is the fourth year in which APN's annual Israel Tour was open to the public. We had 24 participants including a handful of APN Board members, several APN activists with some background on the issues, and several who had little or no contact with APN and who did not know much about the issues.

We met with *Shalom Achshav* leaders, organizers and activists, with Knesset members and politicians, including Israel's President Reuven Rivlin, with Palestinian leaders, with experts on Israeli and Palestinian public opinion, with Israeli and Palestinian experts on strategic and political affairs, with senior Israeli and American journalists, with Israeli and Palestinian human rights activists and prominent private-sector leaders, with The U.S. Consul General in Jerusalem, and with others. We toured the West Bank and East Jerusalem, spent a day at Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip, and spent half a day in Hebron. We spent a day in Ramallah, a day in Tel Aviv, briefly visited Jerusalem's Old City and briefly visited the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

## **Speakers**

Following is a list of people with whom members of APN's Israel Study Tour met:

### **Israeli politicians, officials, experts, journalists and pundits:**

**Dan Rothem**, Senior Research Consultant for the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace.

**Daniel Seidemann**, Jerusalem expert, founder and director of Terrestrial Jerusalem.

**Hagit Ofra**n, Director of Peace Now's Settlement Watch Project.

**Orly Halpern**, freelance journalist, editor of Peace Now's daily review of the Israeli press, News Nosh.

**Gershon Gorenberg**, Author, journalist, blogger, and expert on the history of the settlement movement

**Orit Struck**, Member of Knesset (The Jewish Home) and settler. Resides in the Jewish Quarter of Hebron

**Lior Amichai**, Peace Now's Settlements Watch Project Deputy Director

**Tal Schneider**, Israel's leading political blogger

**Amir Tibon**, Diplomatic correspondent for the Israeli news website Walla!

**Omri Yadlin**, President of Sapir Academic College, Sderot

**Zohar Avitan**, Director of the Pre-Academic Program at Sapir Academic College, Sderot

**Arnon Avni**, Israeli political cartoonist, resident of Kibbutz Nirim, Peace Now activist.

**Omer Bar-Lev**, Member of Knesset (Labor), member of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, member of the Knesset's Arab-Israeli Peace Caucus.

**Dorothy Harman**, Breaking the Impasse.

**Bob Rosenschein**, Breaking the Impasse

**Pnina Sharvit Baruch**, Senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). Expert on international law and conflict resolution.

**Benedetta Berti**, Research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). Expert on political violence and conflict in the Middle East.

**Nitzan Horowitz**, Member of Knesset (Meretz), heads the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Caucus for Regional Cooperation.

**Merav Michaeli**, Member of Knesset. Member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

**Yossi Alpher**, Expert on Israeli national security and the author of Peace Now's weekly analysis of strategic affairs, Hard Questions, Tough Answers.

**Michael Sfard**, Peace Now's legal counsel. Expert on international human rights law and one of Israel's leading legal experts on West Bank settlements.

**Reuven Rivlin**, President of the State of Israel.

**Palestinian officials, experts and activists:**

**Jawad Abu-Eisha**, Palestinian resident of Hebron. Activist for Youth against Settlements

**Bashar al-Masri**, Businessman, developer of Rawabi

**Saeb Erekat**, Chief negotiator for the PA

**Mohammed Daraghme**, Associated Press' Palestinian Affairs Correspondent.

**US officials and non-officials:**

**Michael Ratney**, Consul General, U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem