

Former Ministers Invite Intervention

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People & People/Akiva Eldar

Up until a little more than 18 months ago, Shlomo Ben-Ami was foreign minister, in charge of the negotiations with the Palestinians. He spent hours with them in Jerusalem, Stockholm, Washington and Taba. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak held his first meetings with Yasser Arafat and his people while Shahak was in the deputy chief of staff's uniform.

Later, as minister of transport and a security cabinet member in Ehud Barak's government, he participated in the Camp David negotiations. After the elections, Shahak served as a liaison to the Palestinians.

On Monday, Ben-Ami, Shahak, and former absorption minister Yuli Tamir, also a Barak government minister and a dove, sent a letter to President George Bush, saying that there is currently no possible solution to the conflict through bilateral negotiations. Unlike other Israelis, who decided that same understanding means there's no way to solve the conflict, and it's best the U.S. not intervene too much, they call on Bush to draw a completely different conclusion.

In the letter, copies of which were sent to Secretary of State Colin Powell and to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, the three former ministers call on the U.S. "to move beyond its traditional role as a sponsor and mediator for bilateral negotiations. Today, the United States must lead the international community, with the support of moderate Arab states, to develop in detail a solution ... and to vigorously encourage both sides to accept it."

The three report to Bush that "within the Israeli public there is solid support for this approach. For instance, in a recent poll conducted by the Steinmetz Center of Tel Aviv University, some 67 percent of Israeli Jews support an active American effort to formulate a detailed peace agreement for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They want the United States to then recruit international support in an effort to convince the parties to accept this agreement.

"If both peoples can be presented with a detailed final status agreement which would end the conflict and meet their most basic needs," the letter goes on, "it is highly likely that the two peoples will say 'Yes' and will compel their leaders to do likewise. Such an approach can occur only with your leadership. We appeal to you to move in this direction."

"The direction" the three want the U.S. to lead the government and Palestinian Authority, is not just any direction. They specify general outlines for a solution to end the conflict and open the way to a general resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict that would bring normalization to the Arab world. Those elements are:

- Two states, one Jewish and one Palestinian

- Withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 with border adjustments and territorial swaps
- Sharing sovereignty in Jerusalem following the formula, "What is Jewish will be Israeli, what is Arab will be Palestinian"
- A solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees that is based on compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement. There will be no specific right of return to the State of Israel.
- Special arrangements to ensure Israeli security
- An announced and enforced end to the conflict, including all forms of terrorism and violence

Ben-Ami, Shahak, and Tamir promise Bush that if he leads along those lines he will discover sweeping international support. The problem is that Bush knows those principles aren't in the direction of his good friend Sharon. Maybe that's why Shahak told a friend that the letter is likely to end up as just a lonely voice calling out in the desert.