

# ISRAEL'S PEACE MOVEMENT, DOWN BUT NOT OUT

*Internal squabbling, wavering policies and a severe identity crisis have robbed Israel's peace activists of much of their influence during the Palestinian Intifada.*

BY TAMAR HERMANN

**T**HERE IS SOLID HISTORICAL EVIDENCE THAT PEACE MOVEMENTS TEND to stay silent or even fall into disarray in times of war. Israel played only a passive role in the Persian Gulf war, during which the Israeli peace movement seems to have almost faded away.

Iraqi missiles aimed at civilian targets and the ensuing Palestinian applause sharply increased the collective Israeli sense of vulnerability and stirred a general rallying around the flag.

Israel's peace activists were not oblivious to these events. After long, difficult years of dissent, many now seem eager to carve out a place for themselves within the national consensus. However, this "homecoming" was only in part fostered by the war. The drive to return to the national fold is rooted mainly in the growing frustration of many peace activists over their apparent, albeit perhaps unavoidable, failure to meet the challenge of the *Intifada*.\*

The Israeli peace movement emerged as a mass campaign in the late 1970s and peaked, in terms of participation and perceived effectiveness, between 1982 and 1984, when it led the protest against the Lebanon War. It has since consisted of one large organization – Peace Now – and a growing number of small, even tiny, groups. However, the hard core of the movement never exceeded 500 to 750 activists, and even the more optimistic estimates put the number of supporters at around 150,000.

Despite these relatively small numbers, the movement had high visibility. Intensive and generally positive media coverage magnified the movement's size and impact in the eyes of supporters and rivals alike. Moreover, the movement's socio-demographic composition located it quite close to the centre of power – most groups being dominated by young, highly educated, middle-class, Jewish, urban people of European origin. In the Israeli context, this is a profile which offers a promising entrée into the political arena.

Thus the Israeli peace movement in general, and Peace Now in particular, had considerable potential for making a political breakthrough. Yet, by the time the *Intifada* broke out in December 1987, it was already clear that this potential had not been realized. By the mid-1980s, powerful centrifugal forces left it ailing and divided along the margins of the national consensus, and it was unable to fulfill its natural mission as an emissary between Israelis and Palestinians.

THE MOVEMENT'S FAILURE TO MOBILIZE PUBLIC SUPPORT, ITS LACK OF INFLUENCE with those in the decision-making apparatus who could help change official Israeli policy and its inability to maintain credibility with the two sides or to reduce the mutual violence, can be attributed to the following factors, in ascending order of importance:

First, peace activists, no less than other Israelis, were caught off guard by the outbreak of the *Intifada*, as well as by its intensity and endurance. Despite warnings as early as the late 1960s, by some leaders of early

peace groups, of the perils of a prolonged occupation of the territories and the consequent consolidation of a Palestinian national identity, the actual event revealed the gap between the intellectual expectation of such an uprising and the genuine tactical surprise Palestinians achieved.

While the issue of the historical clash between the aims of the Zionist movement and Palestinian national interests had been the focus of heated debates in Peace Now and other groups since their emergence, it took about six months for the movement to respond to the new situation. Even then, it offered neither innovative insight into the problem nor an elaborated plan for peace. Most of the peace movement's actions were restricted to protests against the harsh measures taken by the military. The same tired slogans which had been used against the first Likud prime minister, Menachem Begin, a decade before, were aimed at Labour's Yitzhak Rabin, minister of defence in the National Unity government. The few efforts to present new peace agendas, the manifesto formulated by the radical Red Line group, for example, were too intellectual and impractical in character to be productive.

SECOND, POLITICAL ACTIVISM OUTSIDE THE OFFICIAL PARTISAN CHANNELS has never been a popular way of operating in Israeli politics. Many Israelis have come to regard antiwar demonstrations and petition drives, like those initiated during the Lebanon War, as showing a lack of patriotism and civil responsibility. These negative images were reinforced by the more radical peace factions' advocacy of the individual's right to refuse military service in the West Bank and Gaza, or to take any part in the suppression of the uprising. Such calls provoked public outcry by explicitly contradicting most Israelis' sense of basic civic obligation to take part in the defence of the nation, regardless of personal political convictions, and threatened to undermine the whole movement's status as a legitimate participant in the national security debate.

The largest part of the movement had already reduced its own options by declaring more than once that despite its rejection of official policies, it stood essentially on the same side of the barricades as the Israel Defence Forces. Actions which implied confrontation with the soldiers were, in effect, declared off-limits. The question of what actions could be taken without undermining this basic claim to patriotism became more acute as Palestinians turned more violent and the military response harsher.

Third, far from contributing to a consensus within the peace movement regarding its ultimate goals and tactics, the escalation of violence during the *Intifada* brought in its wake new internal dissension. Dozens of new peace groups formed, each advocating a slightly different solution to the Palestinian problem. Radical groups like There is a Limit, Women in Black, Stop the Occupation, and Red Line advocated civil disobedience and the boycott of products manufactured by the West Bank settlers – provocative tactics that yielded minimal results, but which aroused sharply negative public reaction. Peace Now, which had struggled to sustain its public legitimacy by following a relatively moderate course – for example, by refraining, until late 1988, from openly

\* Editor's Note: *Intifada* is most often translated from the Arabic as "uprising," although it literally means "shaking up." As a discrete event, the Palestinian *Intifada* is generally understood to have begun in December 1987 as a series of spontaneous disruptions which spread from refugee camps in the Gaza Strip across the West Bank, in the wake of the violent deaths of one Israeli and four Palestinians in Gaza.