

Yosef Olmert is a 35 year old professor who obtained his BA from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the History of Muslim countries and his Ph.D from the London School of Economics. He has been teaching at the Tel Aviv University since 1981 in the Department of Middle East History. He is also a researcher at the Dayan Centre for Middle East History. He is at York this year as part of the Canada Israel Foundation for Cultural Exchanges. *Excalibur's* Elliott Schiff spoke with Olmert recently about the current political climate in the Middle East.



## Olmert on the Middle East: 'A light at the end of the tunnel?'

**Q.** In a recent article in *Atlantic Monthly*, Conor Cruise O'Brien states "the idea that Israel can withdraw to its pre-1967 territory and live there behind secure and recognized frontiers, in peace with its neighbours is an agreeable international pipe dream." Can you comment on the validity of this statement?

**A.** The idea that there can be an arrangement in the Middle East whereby Israel completely leaves the West Bank and there is complete full peace between it, Jordan and the Palestinians, is a nice dream but a very unrealistic one. At the same time I do honestly believe that it would be in the interest of Israel itself to keep the door open for the possibility of negotiations over the

future of the West Bank with a view to making even substantial concessions when it comes to serious negotiations and serious dialogue, but one has to bear in mind that we will have to learn from mistakes in the past. And the most recent mistake was some of the articles of the Camp David accords which don't seem to be fulfilled, especially by Egypt, and therefore I believe that any discussion about the West

Bank would be a much more complicated and difficult discussion than anyone can anticipate.

**Q.** Along similar lines there was an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in which Thomas Friedman said "the whole rhetoric of politics that has been developed by Arab, Israeli and American diplomats since 1967 has grown obsolete and out of touch with what is happening in

the mind of Israel." Having spent this year away from Israel would you agree with this assessment?

**A.** No, I think his assessment is not correct, for two reasons. Inside Israel itself there are many people who don't want to see any concessions made. The fact of the matter is that there is a Prime Minister from the Labour Party who takes a very moderate approach and he is more popular than ever before, not necessarily because of his foreign policy, but it may be the case as well.

The outside image of Israel is something I can hardly comment on but I imagine it is still the image of a nation which is very eager to achieve peace, which is ready to make concessions for peace, but at the same time is fortified by the bitter memories of the past and especially the recent past regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is therefore a bit more suspicious of peace moves and some people misinterpret it as saying Israel is not interested in making concessions, but that is not the case. I think it is very simple to know what is on the mind of Israel. We are the only country in the Middle East where there is free press. Everybody can freely travel the country and find out for himself what is on the mind of Israelis. There is no question that people can get an idea of what is going on in Israel unlike countries like Syria or Libya that are dictatorships and we have no idea of what really happens there.

**Q.** You mentioned Camp David, and that is the focus of a lot of problems, with Israelis themselves thinking about further peace negotiations. I came across a quote by Shlomo Avineri in which he stated "the enemy before Camp David was an abstract enemy. Now you are in contact with an enemy at peace and you see that he is still an enemy. Before you could have illusions, now you can't."

**A.** Yes, unfortunately I think the quotation you bring forth by Avineri, who is by no means militant—he is very moderate and dovish—is unfortunately true. There were high expectations before the treaty on relations between Egypt and Israel. If you remember, the late President Sadat was the first to raise the slogan that "you have to have a dramatic step to break the walls of hatred and suspicion," but unfortunately it is not happening like this. We can see that from the fact that there is a sustained anti-semitic campaign in the Egyptian press as if nothing happened. We have the same old stories with the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and so on disseminating freely in Egypt. There is still a lot of suspicion on the part of the Egyptians toward visiting Israelis. There were nasty incidents such as the one in Sinai when Israelis were murdered. There is an emergence of fundamentalist elements inside Egypt, but since I consider myself to be an eternal optimist I should say that despite all that, the fact that there is a great deal of the peace treaty that has been fulfilled is an indication that maybe the mistake made eight or nine years ago was that we had too many expectations. But we shouldn't be misled to believe that peace as a principle is a mistake.

**Q.** Would you say that it has been Mubarak's policy all along not to warm up the peace, or is he having trouble controlling the fundamentalist upsurge in Egypt?

**A.** It's a combination of the two. It has been his policy to distance himself from the traditional Sadat policies on a variety of issues such as the imbalance in the relations between east and west. Egypt is a more neutral country, so to speak. They resumed full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. It has been his policy to moderate a drive towards a free western-type economy in Egypt, something that Sadat was very keen on. At the same time it is true that he is under enormous pressure from the fundamentalists. Unfortunately this is probably the biggest tragedy of all. Even if he gives in entirely to the fundamentalists in terms of Egypt's relationship towards Israel, nothing would change in Egypt because the fundamentalists don't want to see an abolition of the peace treaty, they want to see an Islamic Republic like Iran, and this is something that is not going to provide any solutions to Egypt's population problem. Egypt's biggest problem is overpopulation, 48 million people, and a growth rate of 1.3 million a year. How would

you stop all of this when you have fundamentalists who don't want to control the birth rate? So Mubarak may think that by giving in by some extent to the fundamentalists he could gain some time, but eventually doomsday will come for him in terms of his confrontation with the fundamentalists and he should take immediate steps. In fact just recently he said that if they take him to the point of no return he would impose martial law and clamp down on them.

**Q.** With this as a backdrop, there was talk recently of a meeting between Peres and Mubarak. Can you see this happening in the near future?

**A.** There was an Egyptian promise to Israel that there would be a meeting once the Israeli cabinet came to a decision to hand over the issue of Taba (a small strip of territory near Eilat) to binding arbitration. The Egyptians went back on this promise, the same way they go back on many others. The problem is you can't go back on too many promises without waking up sleeping dogs; without waking up those elements inside Israel who say this, why bother at all if those people don't abide by their agreements. And I regret very much to find that Mr. Mubarak is looking for excuses not to come to a talk with the prime minister of a nation with which Egypt has completely peaceful relations.

**Q.** What about the Egyptian complaints that other than the invasion of Lebanon 40 days after the Israeli evacuation of Sinai, portions of the treaty that were to provide for Palestinian autonomy have not been addressed?

**A.** The Israeli government never promised to Egypt that in return for the whole of Sinai and peace from Egypt that we would refrain from attacking Palestinian terrorists if they attack Israel, or we should refrain from attacking Syrians if they attack Israel. Egypt could not expect Israel to be completely paralyzed because of its peace with Egypt. As far as the autonomy talks with the Palestinians are concerned, so far as I can remember, it was the Egyptians who opted out from these talks altogether. But it is true to say that this is a major problem to be discussed between us and the Egyptians. There may be room here for more Israeli concessions but unfortunately perhaps this was all too unrealistic to start with. Maybe you can deal with it only when you deal with the Jordanians and Palestinians, not necessarily with Egyptians. But we shall have to wait and see, because Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Peres is now engaged in a campaign to get Mr. Hussein to get involved in talks with Israel exactly on this issue and maybe something will come out of it.

**Q.** Do you believe that the rotation of the Israeli government will go ahead as scheduled next October, and if so, what effect will this have on the peace process?

**A.** Well who am I not to believe it? If there is any agreement my political leaders committed themselves to, why wouldn't they comply with it? But since I am not naive and since we are dealing with politicians you can always expect trouble. The argument is simple. This government has been the best Israel has had in years. They have tremendous achievements in many fields. For example in curbing inflation, which is almost a miracle. In terms of extending our foreign relations with many more nations in Europe and Africa. Many people believe that this has come about only because of the existence of national unity, and many people indicate in polls that they would like to see this government continuing. Those who take upon themselves the responsibility of disbanding the government would have to pay dearly in new elections. So I therefore believe that out of political necessity and not out of love for each other, the agreement will materialize and in October 1986 there will be a new prime minister, the old one, Mr. Yitzhak Shamir.

**Q.** How do you see that affecting Israel's foreign policy?

**A.** It should not affect it dramatically if until then we already have a beginning of a process with Jordan. Because there is a great deal of continuity in our political tradition. It is a democratic state and one government cannot go back on the promises of another government and in addition to this, it would be a government which Mr. Peres would still be a member of. So it won't be a case where Likud (one of the two main parties) controls the government entirely. I would imagine that certain people in Likud would try and slow the process and there will be occasional troubles. However, what we do now would commit any future government, therefore it is time to start a dialogue with Jordan and moderate Palestinians.