

Voices in the wilderness

Watching the timid little men who run Ottawa, one almost forgets that there still are politicians who have the courage to do what they believe is right for their country — no matter the cost in lost votes.

Matti Peled and Muhammad Mi'ari — the oddest couple in Israel's dizzying political galaxy — are two such rare men.

Peled is a gruff, former major general who fought valiantly in many of Israel's wars. This retired member of the Israeli general staff is also a professor, with a PhD in Arabic and Arabic literature. In 1975 Peled founded the Israeli Council for an Israeli-Palestinian Peace. Nine years later he was elected to the Knesset from the Progressive List for Peace Party (PLPP).

The two-MP party's other member is Muhammad Mi'ari, a Palestinian lawyer elected to the Knesset in 1984. Mi'ari has a long record of defending Palestinian prisoners and working for human rights. Sadly, these Israeli MPs have been cold-shouldered by North American Jews.

"It's getting harder and harder to talk to the North America Jewish community," Peled told me. "We never get invitations from the mainstream community." Why? Because Peled, Mi'ari and their party advocate the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip which were captured in 1967 by Israel. And they dare advocate breaking the biggest taboo of Israeli politics — direct negotiations with Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization.

Considering that Israel recently made any contact with the PLO a crime punishable by three years in prison, one may imagine just how unpopular is the PLPP's position. Both Peled and Mi'ari have met PLO chairman Arafat on a number of occasions and maintain discreet contact with the PLO.

Peled told me he was the frequent target of death threats by Jewish extremists. Mi'ari, in turn, has been the target of both Arab and Jewish extremists; his home was recently burned and his family threatened. Such is the price of peacemaking in a region seething with hatred and revenge.

Many Israelis simply cannot face the fact that one day they will have to do something about recognizing Palestinian rights. Many Palestinians will not accept the fact that they will never recover all of pre-1948 Palestine. It's easier to shoot the

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bearer of ill tidings than listen to his message.

And, as Peled suggested, to stage terror attacks aimed at wrecking hopes of peace negotiations.

Peled, in fact, cited a recent statement by Arafat in Baghdad that he was ready to meet with any Israelis to discuss peace. The western media simply ignored Arafat's offer, just as they did the PLO leader's acceptance of UN resolution 242.

While some Israelis and Palestinians are ready to sit down and talk peace, most members of the North American Jewish community will not hear of dealing with the PLO. "They have been brainwashed by the right-wing Likud Party," Peled explained. "They hear only one side of the story."

The Likud, lead by Yitzhak Shamir, will shortly assume the dominant position in the present coalition government. This, Peled predicted, would mean an end to PM Shimon Peres' recent peace efforts and a return to the old, uncompromising policy of Menachem Begin. Shamir has promised more settlements on Arab land, and more pressure on Palestinians. All of Peres' positive work will be negated, Peled predicted.

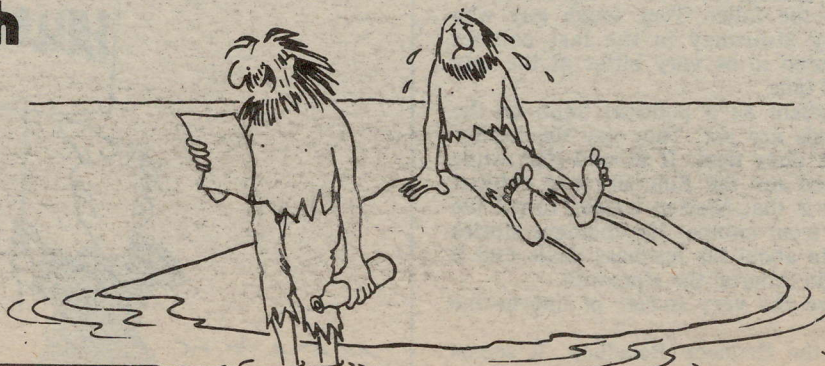
Israel's "hard line," said Peled, would get even harder. Israeli elder statesman Abba Eban, according to Peled, recently warned that "the U.S. is pushing Israel to an even more intransigent position."

Thank U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz for this. Shultz is a deeply confused man who seems to think of Israel as a six-gun aimed at his many personal enemies. Peled, and the rest of the Israeli left, are not eager to see their nation become America's Mideast enforcer.

Heretical views, indeed.

Yet North Americans ought at least to consider the lonely, and perhaps even Quixotic quest of this Jewish general and Arab lawyer. After 50 years of Mideast war, some new voices need to be heard in the Arab-Israeli wilderness.

Punch



"Great! It's the ice-cream franchise!"