

Israelis speak out: Dissenting voices

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 13, 2003](#) issue

During his visit to London last month, President Bush cautiously addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “Israel should freeze settlement construction, dismantle unauthorized outposts, end the daily humiliation of the Palestinian people, and not prejudice final negotiations with the placements of walls and fences.”

Israel’s settlement program has gone on for decades. Proposing a “freeze” is ludicrous, evoking the image of a few carpenters putting down their hammers in deference to Bush’s request. “Dismantle unauthorized outposts”? In other words, remove the trailers that zealous settlers have hauled out to remote West Bank hills? That gesture is somewhat akin to removing a bucket of water from Lake Michigan. “End the daily humiliation” is a meaningless phrase until there is an end to the military occupation.

The vague reference to “the placements of walls and fences” has to do with the very concrete 400-mile-long wall Israel is building, much of it on West Bank land. Bush could have emulated Ronald Reagan’s 1987 Berlin speech and said, “Prime Minister Sharon, tear down this wall!” He did not, of course, because the president is running for reelection. His conservative base of uncritical supporters of Israel, including many Christian Zionists, would not permit it.

Nothing has changed in the American political debate between those who support Israel’s hardline policies absolutely and those who favor them almost absolutely. There will be no change in this debate until Americans pay attention to courageous Israeli voices like that of Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon, the army chief of staff who was quoted recently as saying that the network of restrictions placed on the Palestinian population, with its road closures, curfews and roadblocks, breeds explosive levels of “hatred and terrorism.”

Americans need also to hear voices like that of the four former chiefs of Israel’s powerful domestic security service, Shin Bet, who concluded, in an unprecedented joint interview with Israel’s largest-circulation Hebrew-language daily newspaper, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, that “the Israeli government’s actions and policies during the

three-year-old Palestinian uprising have gravely damaged [Israel] and its people” (*Washington Post*, November 15). The four men—Avraham Shalom, Yaakov Perry, Ami Ayalon and Carmi Gillon—directed Shin Bet at different times from 1980 through 2000.

Shalom (director from 1980 to 1986) said, “We must once and for all admit that there is another side, that it has feelings and that it is suffering, and that we are behaving disgracefully. . . . We have turned into a people of petty fighters using the wrong tools.”

Members of the Sharon government would not comment directly on the interviews, the *Post* reported, but one official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, “I don’t want to add more fuel to this; these, of all people, should have known this is the worst time to conduct public debate on these issues.”

The four men disagreed with their government on the issue of timing. Perry (1988-1995) said that Israel is “going in the direction of decline, nearly a catastrophe in almost every area—economic, political, social and security. If something doesn’t happen here, we will continue to live by the sword, we will continue to wallow in the mud and we will continue to destroy ourselves.”

The Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land, which President Bush dismissed with the mild suggestion that Israel “freeze” current construction, drew a much stronger condemnation from Perry: “Sharon has often talked about the fact that we will be required to make painful compromises, and there are no painful compromises except for evacuating settlements.” And the wall being built by Sharon’s government, a wall President Bush worries might “prejudice” final negotiations, drew much stronger language from Shalom, who said it “creates hatred . . . expropriates land and annexes hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to the state of Israel. The result is that the fence achieves the exact opposite of what was intended.”

In a warning that American political leaders also need to hear as they continue to support a narrowly focused U.S. “war on terror,” Gillon argued that Israel’s “political agenda has become solely a security agenda. It only deals with the question of how to prevent the next terror attack, not the question of how it is at all possible to pull ourselves out of the mess that we are in today.” Ayalon described Israeli policy in the Palestinian territories in religious terms: “Some of it [is] patently immoral.”

Such strong criticism of Israel is rarely heard in the U.S., in part because of the fear that it will evoke charges of anti-Semitism. But that charge will not stick on the four Shin Bet leaders nor on the army chief of staff. Nor does anti-Semitism describe Roman Bronfman, a Meretz party member of the Israeli parliament (Knesset), who wrote recently in the Jerusalem newspaper *Ha'aretz*: "The Jewish people, who went through a Holocaust just decades ago—a short moment in historical terms—must not oppress another people and deny them their rights and any shadow of hope for a future."

Bronfman added, "If Israel wants to be embraced by the family of nations as a full member, it must learn how to behave according to the accepted rules around the world—rules of ethics, fairness and justice." Bronfman is not a self-hating Jew; nor is he making anti-Semitic remarks. He is concerned about the future of his nation.

Where is his political counterpart in the U.S. Congress?