

problems, with the United Nations playing the cardinal coordinating role”—a clear jibe against unilateralism. Furthermore, they set up regular consultations “on matters connected with the strengthening of interaction between the Russian Federation and the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference of which Syria is an active member,” and in which Russia seeks observer status.

The issue of aggression against Iran constitutes a “red line” for Russia. If it is crossed, the Russian government can be expected to shift its stance in the international arena, diplomatically and otherwise. The Russian-Syrian summit marks another step, by Moscow, toward re-establishing a position of influence in the region, in effect, reviving Soviet-era relations.

Regarding Iran directly, Moscow’s stance is unequivocal. Government spokesmen have reiterated their commitment to completing the Bushehr nuclear plant, and to proceeding with up to six more such plants. Several hundred Iranian technicians are being trained by the Russians to run the plant.

Just following the string of threats emanating from Washington against Iran, Russian government representatives engaged in two days of strategic discussions with the Iranians. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak visited Tehran on Jan. 24-25, for talks with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Gulam Hoshru, Deputy Chairman of the Supreme National Security Council S. Mousavian, and A. Bourujeri, chairman of the Majlis (Parliament) National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. The discussions centered on international issues (chiefly Iraq), and a “broad range of themes of bilateral cooperation and issues concerning transparency and the peaceful character of the Iranian nuclear program,” the Russian ministry official said.

Iran, for its part, knows that relations with the EU and with Russia are the best deterrents for thwarting a military confrontation. Although the leading government representatives of Iran, from President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, to Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, and Defense Minister Al Shamkhani, have reiterated the country’s commitment to defend itself if attacked, Tehran is clearly banking on the political option, through its cooperative relations with Europe and Russia. The Iranians know full well what the military-strategic consequences of a U.S. strike would be. As government spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi put it, in a briefing to the press, “We do not see it [a U.S. attack] as likely, unless someone wants to make a major strategic blunder.”

In late February, Europe, Russia, and the United States will come face to face on the issue. Bush will travel to Europe for the NATO summit in Brussels on Feb. 22, then will meet Chancellor Schröder in Mainz on Feb. 24, and President Putin in Bratislava on Feb. 25. As the opposition to the permanent-war madness continues to grow inside the United States, it can be expected that the Russian-European alliance will draw the line.

Will Sharon Heed God’s Warning to Jezebel?

by Dean Andromidas

On the basis of a secret decision, going back to July 2004, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has ordered the confiscation of Palestinian property on an unprecedented scale, in yet another gross violation of the Geneva Conventions and the norms of civilized states. Palestinian property worth hundreds of millions of dollars, including thousands of acres of land, residential, and commercial buildings in East Jerusalem, has already been, or is in the process of being confiscated, report several sources in Israel, including the daily newspaper *Ha’aretz*, and Arab member of the Knesset Mohamed Barakeh. The decision remained secret until the week of Jan. 17.

On Jan. 21, an article by Meron Rapaport in *Ha’aretz Magazine*, exposed Sharon’s decision—which is illegal even according to rulings by the Israeli Attorney General—to implement the so-called Absentee Property Law of 1950 in East Jerusalem. This is the statutory law that was passed to “legalize” the seizure, without compensation, of all property of Palestinians who have their homes in what is now Israel. Until now, this had only been implemented within the so-called 1967 borders, when East Jerusalem and the West Bank were under the control of the Kingdom of Jordan. Now it is being done in territory seized by Israel during the 1967 war.

The same day as the Rapaport article appeared, an editorial in *Ha’aretz* entitled, “Injustice and Stupidity in Jerusalem,” commented that “thousands of Palestinians, including many who live right next to their confiscated lands, are to lose property overnight worth hundred of millions of dollars, and for which no one intends to compensate them.” This outrage has been repeatedly applied, “even though the owners live only a short distance away from their confiscated property, their names and addresses are known, and no one doubts their ownership. . . .” Nonetheless, Sharon’s Cabinet “decided to label them ‘absentees’ ” so that the state could take their land.

The unprecedented move is among the bitter fruits of the Bush Administration’s endorsement of Sharon’s new “Berlin Wall” on the West Bank, and President George W. Bush’s notorious letter of April 14, 2004, which gave de facto recognition to Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Moreover, these seizures fly in the face of international law. On July 9, 2004, the International Court of Justice, in The Hague, ruled that Sharon’s Berlin Wall on the West Bank is a violation of international law and must be dismantled as soon as possible. The ruling—“Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Terri-



Israel's new "Berlin Wall" is more than twice as high as the Berlin Wall was in Germany. In the portion near Jerusalem, it cuts deep into the Palestinian West Bank, encompassing a territory double the size of traditional East Jerusalem. Sharon's new land-grab is a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

tory"—was passed almost unanimously, but Israel has refused to recognize it.

Half of East Jerusalem To Be Confiscated

Sharon's decision was calculated as a slap in the face to the new Palestinian leader, President Abu Mazen. But, the timing of the decision is also related to the fact that Sharon's wall surrounding Jerusalem—including East Jerusalem where almost 250,000 Palestinians reside and are the vast majority of residents—is nearing completion. With the decision on land seizures, the Palestinian challenges to this blatant theft of property can be brushed aside—or so the Sharon government would hope.

This wall, 8.5 meters high, more than twice as high as the Berlin Wall in Germany, cuts deep into the Palestinian West Bank, encompassing a territory double the size of traditional East Jerusalem.

Meron Benvenisti, who served as an advisor on Arab affairs to former Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, told *Ha'aretz* on Jan. 20, "It might be as much as half the property in East Jerusalem."

Ha'aretz added: "In short, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Palestinians lost property worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The State of Israel became the official owner of all these vast holdings—without the owners being able to appeal and without being entitled to so much as one

shekel in compensation. Because in the eyes of the government of Israel, these flesh and blood people, who live in Bethlehem or Beit Sahur or Tamallah and have olive groves or houses or land within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, do not exist. They are absentees."

These thousands of Palestinians are absentees only because of Sharon's criminal wall. Prior to the construction of the wall, Palestinians living outside of Jerusalem were able to reach their farmland, or collect the rents of commercial and residential property that they owned in East Jerusalem. Before the wall was completed, the Israeli government told the Palestinians that they would be issued permits so that they could reach their land. Israel told the U.S. government, the Europeans, and other governments who expressed concern, the same thing. But as of this writing, not one permit has been issued.

According to an investigative report in *Ha'aretz* Jan. 20, farmers and property owners have now been told not only that they will not get permits, but also that they no longer own their own land. *Ha'aretz* interviewed numerous farmers who showed them how the wall has cut them off from their olive groves and farmland, and in some cases was built through the middle of their homes.

"I have lands and I also have a house in Beit Safafa (which is on the other side of the wall)," Nadr Abu Gatas told *Ha'aretz*. "I pay property tax to the Jerusalem Municipality on the house, and I went to my land all these years without problems. We weren't absentees then. The people are living here, not in America. They are not dead."

In one case, Israel seized a hotel worth \$3 million, despite the fact that it was on the other side of the wall, simply by having the Israeli army confiscate it for "security purposes."

Already the Israelis have begun clearing all the land right up to the wall, in preparation for building residential and commercial buildings on land where only a few months ago, Palestinian farmers were harvesting their olives and fruits. The next step will be the real ethnic cleansing, when they start evicting Palestinians in East Jerusalem who have been renting their homes and apartments from owners who now live on the other side of the wall.

According to the same *Ha'aretz* report, even before the wall was built, Jerusalem's master plan called for building

thousands of housing units on this same land, with the full knowledge that the land was owned by Palestinians.

Not the First Time

This is not the first time Sharon has done this in East Jerusalem. In 1990, when he was Housing Minister, he used the absentee property law to seize control of property in the Old City at the foot of the al-Haram al-Sharif, Islam's third most holy site, where Sharon's legions of religious fanatics want to rebuild the Third Temple. Once these properties were seized, the Palestinian residents were evicted and replaced by members of the Temple Mount Faithful, the organization that wants to destroy the mosques on the al-Haram al-Sharif—and in the process start World War III.

This is not the first time Palestinian land has been stolen. Virtually all the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were built on land that was either seized, or purchased fraudulently for a pittance. But never has so much land, including some of the most valuable in the region, been seized simply with the stroke of Sharon's pen on a government directive.

It should be investigated whether much of this stolen land will fall into the hands of the same building contractors who have financed Sharon's political career for the past 30 years.

In a related move, the Israeli Defense Forces are now forcing Palestinians who live in Jerusalem and who wish to travel to the West Bank, to acquire special permits. The situation will make life impossible for many Palestinians who live in Jerusalem and work in nearby Ramallah or Bethlehem. *Ha'aretz* West Bank correspondent Amira Hass, who lives in Ramallah, wrote that this will, in the end, lead to more Palestinians leaving Jerusalem. "Experience shows that the humiliation and difficulties involved in getting a permit reduce the number of those seeking one. Ramallah could gradually empty itself of Jerusalemites. . . . Or alternatively, many Jerusalemites won't be able to give up their ties to Ramallah, and they will do what for decades, Israeli governments have been openly hoping for: They'll give up their residency in Jerusalem completely."

Sharon is about to extend this land grab all along his wall, with plans to extend the wall so it will encompass Gush Etzion, which will become the first large West Bank settlement block to be put fully on the Israeli side of the wall. Gush Etzion is precisely one of the "Israeli population centers" referred to in Bush's notorious letter given to Sharon in April 2004.

Even now, Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, whose ministry is responsible for the occupied territories, have issued thousands of tenders for houses in all the settlements that are already on the western side of the wall (despite the fact that they are on Palestinian land), as well as those in so-called large "Israeli population centers." For example, the government is now in the process of declaring the territory

between the Israeli settlement of Ma'aleh Adumin and Jerusalem as Israeli "state land," even though it extends deeply into the West Bank; connecting Ma'aleh Adumim to Jerusalem will cut the West Bank in two.

Opposition Calls Sharon Worse Than Jezebel

Shortly after Sharon's announcement, Palestinian President Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Abu Ala instructed Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat to draw up appropriate documents to present to the Israelis. Erekat told *Ha'aretz* that the application of this law was a violation of agreements with Israel, which pledged in the Oslo Accords not to make any change in East Jerusalem until the final status agreement.

Israeli Arab Knesset Member Ahmed Tibi, who had been an advisor to the late Yasser Arafat, sent a letter to Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz asking for clarification and demanding that Sharon's decision be rescinded.

Citing the Bible, Shulamit Aloni, former Meretz party leader, and fighter for civil liberties and peace between Israel and the Palestinians, likened the decision to "Jezebel's act against Naboth the Jezreelite, if not worse." (Aloni was referring to the story in *I Kings* 21: 1-19, where Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, conspires to have Naboth falsely accused of a crime and executed, after which King Ahab expropriated the dead Naboth's vineyard.)

Yossi Beilin, the chairman of the Yahad Party, denounced the decision, calling it undemocratic. "Neither from the left nor from the right, no one dared to do this, to take the property rights of Palestinians in East Jerusalem," Beilin said. He also announced he would convene the Yahad faction so as to fight against the decision, and hopes that Justice Minister Tzipi Livni will annul it.

Knesset Member Mohamed Barakeh of the Hadash party called the decision a "war crime." He said it proves that "Sharon's real disengagement is a disengagement from all accepted agreement for a final settlement." Even an official involved in the decision had to admit, "It's not fair that a man becomes an absentee because his tie to his land has been cut without his doing. But morality is one thing, and what is written in our laws is another."

There has yet to be any outcry from outside of Israel and Palestine. Washington obviously supports Sharon, while the European Union remains silent.

It is only a matter of time until these provocations lead to yet another round of bloodletting, as has been the case during Sharon's last five years in power. Nonetheless, Sharon should take seriously Shulamit Aloni's warning that his crime is worse than that of Jezebel, for the law of the Lord is far more powerful than that of the "Absentee Property Law": The Lord warned King Ahab that he and Jezebel would be punished for their iniquity: "And of Jezebel also spake the Lord, saying, the dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat. . . ."