

## Editorial

# The full crimes of Ariel Sharon

Israel is a sovereign nation, which ought to be free of coercion in ordering its internal affairs. Yet, so much of the world's future at this dangerous point in history hinges on how Israeli citizens and their leaders confront the critical decisions of the months ahead—from the threat of civil strife, to the pressure to withdraw from Lebanon, to Israel's response to the growing Arab willingness to negotiate a solution to the Palestinian question—that as allies, we think it urgent that the real issues be bluntly addressed.

The call on Feb. 11 of Israeli President Yitzhak Navon for the formation of a government of national unity, although it is not likely to be implemented at this time, shows that the Sharon Affair has called into question for many Israelis the purposes and policies of their nation. "Israel is at a turning point," Navon said, plagued by political and ethnic rivalries that "are pulling the country apart."

One Israeli journalist told us that the Feb. 10 grenade attack on a "Peace Now" rally in Jerusalem had a "profoundly sobering effect on us," because for the first time it raised the specter of something most Israelis still think impossible—civil war. The bombing, carried out by provocateurs tied to ousted Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, took place right outside Prime Minister Begin's office just as the cabinet was meeting to decide Sharon's fate following the Commission of Inquiry's pronouncement that Sharon was responsible for the September massacre of Palestinians in Beirut.

The grenade attack left one person dead and nine injured. Some of our Israeli friends said that it was Sharon's way of "blackmailing" the cabinet into agreeing to let him stay on in the government as minister without portfolio.

His continued presence in the cabinet has distressed many Israelis. The daily paper *Ha'aretz* called the decision to retain Sharon a "farce" in the light of the commission's call for his removal. The *Jerusalem Post*, in an article by staff writer Yosef Goell, said that while "it is ungentlemanly to kick a man when he is down, that does not mean one should refrain from ridding Israeli public

life of someone as dangerous as Sharon."

In the view that many have expressed to us, the biggest danger Sharon poses is his ability to stir up trouble inside Israel. "Sharon doesn't have the power to make a coup, but he does have the power of forming a new political group, which would not hesitate to use weapons and to threaten Israel with civil war," said one Israeli intelligence source. "Inside the cabinet, Sharon is less dangerous than he would have been on the outside. But he still has a lot of power and can still do a lot of damage."

The power that Sharon still enjoys emanates not from his own person but from his backers in the Israeli and U.S. organized crime mafias. Sharon's immediate connection point into this unsavory crowd of underworld figures is Meshulam Riklis, who is reputed to be tied to the late organized crime kingpin Meyer Lansky. In 1948, Riklis was run out of pre-state Israel for secretly collaborating with the British, Israeli sources report. Settling in the United States, the impoverished Riklis was soon picked up by the Lansky machine and transformed, almost overnight, into a multi-millionaire through a series of financial takeovers and asset-stripping operations. In 1977, Riklis bought up Ariel Sharon and launched Sharon's political career. He also purchased for Sharon a large ranch near the Israeli town of Ashkelon.

Sharon's mafia connections do not stop with Riklis. Sharon's chief spokesman and closest adviser is Uri Dan, the official biographer of and apologist for Meyer Lansky. A former military correspondent, Dan was stripped of his security clearance credentials several years ago when he leaked sensitive military intelligence.

The Israeli underworld coordinates closely with the Lebanese and Syrian mafias around southern Lebanon's lucrative drug trade. Sharon's invasion of Lebanon last summer positioned him perfectly for overseeing the region's drug trafficking operations.

The extent to which Sharon's wings have been clipped remains unclear. However, the degree to which Israeli nationalists continue to challenge him will determine the scope of his power.