

The Middle East Plunges Back into War and Chaos

by Dean Andromidas

Within the last four weeks, a decade of peace-making has been wiped out, and the Middle East is descending into a Thirty Years War that promises the same brutality and religious strife that characterized the 17th-Century war that destroyed half of Europe. The rapid pace of events makes it impossible to forecast what disaster will occur over the next hours or days.

In the span of one week, the peace agreement which Clinton falsely claimed to have achieved in a summit with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, at Sharm Al-Sheikh, Egypt on Oct. 16, shattered. Barak announced the suspension of the peace process, and entered into negotiations for a national emergency government with Israeli right-wing Likud chairman Ariel Sharon—the “Butcher of Lebanon” who triggered the violence with a deliberate provocation, by visiting, with Israeli police forces, Islam’s sacred Al-Aqsa mosque on Al-Haram Al-Sharif, on Sept. 28. And, the Oct. 21-22 Arab League summit displayed a militant unity in support of the Palestinian cause that has not existed in decades (see accompanying article).

In the West Bank and Gaza, the death toll has reached 131, all but eight being Palestinians, while thousands have been wounded, many seriously. The psychology of war and siege is gripping the minds of both Arabs and Israelis. Because of an escalating alarm over the threat of terrorism, all U.S. forces in the Middle East and Gulf have been put on heightened alert.

The ongoing conflagration is a dramatic result of the fatal trap Clinton fell into, when he decided to offer “bridging proposals” at the Camp David summit last July, on how to

carve up sovereignty over Jerusalem, including sacred sites such as the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif.

Clinton failed to introduce initiatives premised on the crucial need for economic development, as envisioned in the Oslo Accords of 1993, particularly infrastructure development and the creation of new water resources, that would create a viable Palestinian state while integrating Israel into the region’s economic development. Sharon’s provocations blew open the Pandora’s box by turning a territorial dispute into a religious war, in a region where religious symbols can fire the passions of fanaticism on all sides.

Thus, one sees the bitter scenes of Europe’s Thirty Years’ War re-enacted in a Middle East landscape. The renewed Palestinian *Intifada* is now called the “Al-Aqsa Intifada,” named for the mosque in Jerusalem, while the Israeli military counter-operation is codenamed “Field of Thorns.”

Carreening Out of Control

The unleashing of such passions has led to an uncontrollable situation on both sides. In one extremely serious battle in this irregular war, approximately 50 fanatical Israeli settlers, led by its ex-paratrooper rabbi, and including men, women, and children, some fully armed with assault rifles and submachine guns, marched past a Palestinian refugee camp near the Palestinian city of Nablus, which has been the scene of the most bitter violence. The predictable clash ensued, as hundreds of stone-throwing Palestinian youths, accompanied by a few gunmen, drew the predictable Israeli response of use of heavily armed forces, including helicopter gunships to rescue the settlers. On the following day, once calm had been temporarily restored, the battle zone became a funeral scene, with

the black coffins of the dead carried before hundreds of mourners marching in long winding files through the paths leading to the graveyard.

Proving how dangerously the situation has slid out of control on all sides, it was later revealed that the Israeli fanatics had been given permission for their march by the sympathetic local Israeli Army commander. His permission was in total violation of standing orders by the top Israeli military command.

The situation is far worse than a rejection of the peace process and simply turning back the clock to the Middle East of the 1980s. An entirely new terrain has been created.

The Arab League Meets

The Arab summit on Oct. 21-22 demonstrated a degree of Arab outrage and unity not witnessed for decades, and in the forefront of which are several of the same Arab states that were leading players in the peace process of the 1990s.

In his speech to the summit, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called upon the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and in the refugee camps in neighboring Arab countries, as well as the Arab-Israeli population, to learn the lessons of the Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Assad declared that the latter demonstrated that it is possible to force the Israelis to respond to reality and withdraw from occupied Arab land.

Under the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the summit created two funds, a \$200 million Jerusalem Intifada Fund, to "assist the families of Martyrs," and a \$800 million Al-Aqsa Fund, to finance a project that would strengthen the Arab identity of Jerusalem.

On the day following the summit, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa expressed the mood in the Arab world, in an interview with the Lebanese daily *As Safir*. Moussa declared that the peace process is dead. "Now we are back at zero. This creates a new situation, which presupposes new actions. Each country should decide," he said.

Moussa confirmed, "The problem is, all forces inside Israel have put the peace process on the shelf. There is complete political chaos inside Israel. . . . I believe Barak mismanaged the peace process, and did not understand it. If Barak thinks with the mind-set of a former chief of staff, it would be the worst thing for the peace process. He has to think as a man who has the full picture, as head of state, who is in a conflict. Therefore, he has to think as a political not as a military man, who responds to public demonstrations with airplanes and tanks."

On the U.S. role, Moussa said, "We must admit the American bias toward Israel inflicted heavy losses on the peace process. Israel would never have dared do what it is doing, unless it saw someone supporting it." Regarding the statements by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, he added, "We all agree that the American bias toward Israel has led to what has happened. A strong and committed stance by the U.S. as a

broker for the peace process, could have brought it under control. We did not have this in the [Arab summit] final communiqué, because we focussed only on relations with Israel."

Moussa also remarked on the intifada, that "We never denied in any stage of our political work, that occupation leads to resistance. The peace process has failed because of Israeli policy, and this naturally leads to resistance. The Arab summit supports this resistance." Moussa voiced support for the anti-Israel campaign of the Islamic militant organization Hezbollah in Lebanon. He said, "The Palestinian resistance is legitimate, as was the Lebanese resistance. The Arab summit decided to support the intifada; it was necessary. If asked, we say we do, because this is what we decided."

Such statements are coming from the first Arab nation to sign a peace treaty with Israel, and the one country which continues to actively cooperate with the United States in attempts to cool down the situation.

Although Egypt and Jordan did not cut off diplomatic relations with Israel, other moderate states have. Tunisia, Oman, and Qatar broke off their low-level economic and diplomatic relations with Israel. More dramatic, was the announcement by the Kingdom of Morocco that it was severing its relations. Morocco has long been one of the important players in the peace process, and one of the first Arab nations, after the Oslo peace accords were signed, to establish official relations with Israel.

These governments are responding not only out of sympathy for the Palestinian cause, but to the radicalization now taking place among their own people. The Al-Aqsa intifada has continued unabated in the Occupied Territories, with reports of the more militant Hamas and other Palestinian factions taking part as full partners. While current activity is clearly directed at the strong points of the Israeli military occupation, especially the settlements, terrorist attacks within Israel itself can be expected.

On Oct. 20, leftist and Islamic groups, including the Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, met in Beirut "to draw up a comprehensive confrontation plan," including the use of military means. They also called for using the "oil weapon." In Jordan, riots broke out when 10,000 Palestinian refugees began a march to the Allenby Bridge, the River Jordan border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank which is controlled by Israeli security forces. Although they never reached the border, the idea of masses of unarmed Palestinian refugees crossing into the West Bank from Jordan, or into northern Israel from Lebanon, is one of the tactics believed to be under consideration.

On the diplomatic level, the Palestinians have not only hardened their positions, but are also demanding a fundamental change in the form of negotiations. At a press conference in Ramallah on Oct. 25, Palestinian Parliament speaker Ahmed Qureja, acknowledging that President Clinton is no longer an "honest broker," said that if negotiations with Israel are



A demonstration against the war in Lebanon, on Aug. 25, 1982. Some of the Hebrew banners read: "Stop Sharon," "We are not the policemen of the Middle East," and "The government's policy in Beirut has brought about the perversion of our image as a chosen people." The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* is calling for a revival of the peace movement today.

renewed, the Palestinians will demand that the UN, Russia, China, and the European Union also participate.

Is Barak Preparing a War Cabinet?

Only 48 hours after the Sharm Al-Sheikh non-agreement, Prime Minister Barak declared "a time out" in negotiations with the Palestinians, thus declaring the peace process dead. Meanwhile, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) released an assessment that the violence in the Occupied Territories would continue for many months, and that the chances of a general war are greater than they were a month ago.

With this political backdrop, Barak opened official negotiations for a national emergency government with Sharon. As of this writing, it appears that the formation of such a government is inevitable. According to the proposal that Barak gave to Sharon, in the latter's capacity as chairman of the Likud party, the sole purpose of the government would be to deal with the security crisis. Sharon, along with other parties who wish to join, would be represented on the so-called "security cabinet." Although this cabinet would be comprised of such Labor Party ministers as Shlomo Ben Ami, Yossi Beilin, and Shimon Peres, all of whom are believed to be pushing for a renewal of negotiations with the Palestinians, Barak has offered Sharon a special status whereby only Sharon and Barak would set the security agenda of cabinet meetings.

It should be emphasized that Sharon and Barak are personally committed to creating not only a government of national unity for the current crisis, but also one that would govern for

the next three years.

The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, which has represented the pro-peace element in Israel, called on the peace camp to mobilize to stop Barak. The daily warned, "Barak is trying to persuade his colleagues in the One Israel [Labor] faction, as well as the public, that bringing the Likud under Sharon into the government does not contradict the government's commitment to the peace process. The Prime Minister is throwing sand in the public's eyes. There is no doubt that he, himself, is aware of the efforts being made by the U.S. Administration and by Egypt to calm the situation in the territories and in the Arab world, and to pave the way back to the point in the negotiations at Camp David. The talks being held with a figure like Sharon, whose foreign policy views are well known, are liable to drag Israel into an extraordinarily dangerous diplomatic and security adventure."

Resistance to bringing in Sharon has been openly expressed by such people as Cabinet Minister Yulis Tamir and by Knesset (parliament) members Uri Savir, an architect of the Oslo Agreement, and Dalia Rabin Pelosoff, the daughter of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was murdered on Nov. 4, 1995 by Zionist fanatics. But the Labor Party pro-peace "heavyweights," such as Beilin, Ben Ami, and even Peres, have been "wobbling on the fence," according to *Ha'aretz*.

Right-Wing Zionists Mobilize

Sensing the weakness of his opponents, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a disciple of the fascist Vladimir Jabotinsky, has returned to the political stage. Reassured by polls showing that he could beat Barak if elections were

held now, and commanding the support of half of the Likud party, he has called for early elections in return for his support for the emergency government.

This is more than Netanyahu's well-known opportunism: It is the spearhead of a major mobilization of right-wing Zionist circles internationally. The most prominent such activity, has been a call for an international Jewish summit, to counter the Arab summit, by Ronald Lauder, Chairman of the Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Lauder is the scion of the multibillion-dollar cosmetics empire of Estée Lauder, and is the chief financial backer of Netanyahu's political career. Lauder made his call at a press conference in Jerusalem, at a time when leaders of Jewish organizations from around the world, including Edgar Bronfman of the World Jewish Congress, were arriving in Israel for a show of solidarity. Other voices in these organizations criticized Lauder's proposal as a "right-wing scheme."

In moves that will escalate religious tensions, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists are deploying en masse to Jerusalem. On Oct. 20, Sharon spoke to a conference of 1,500 self-styled Christian Zionists from all over the world, organized by the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem. These fanatics, drawn from organizations that represent millions of fundamentalist Christians, are fully in support of the most radical Jewish claims on the Temple Mount and Jerusalem.

Also going to Jerusalem was New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind (D). A founder of the fascist Jewish Defense League of the late Meir Kahane, Hikind has been courted by First Lady Hillary Clinton in her election bid for the U.S. Senate from New York. Hikind is considered a "Jewish extremist" by the Israeli police, and was refused permission, along with 100 other extremists, to attend a house-opening ceremony in the Arab Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

Barak's 'Separation Plan' Is a Disaster

In place of the peace process, Barak has proposed a "unilateral separation" plan, whereby Israel will unilaterally withdraw from parts of the West Bank, but remain in control of the Jewish settlements. The open question would be, where to draw the line. Sharon opposes such a policy, but stated that he would agree to an "interim agreement where Israel maintains all the settlements and strategic points it sees as necessary. This would leave the Palestinians with only 42% of the West Bank, cut up into a patchwork of bantustans, all of which is obviously unacceptable to the Palestinians, who have declared they will resist it.

The plan was roundly criticized by Gen. Shlomo Gazit (ret.), former head of Israeli military intelligence, who was recently quoted in the Israeli press, saying that the only workable plan is a full Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory. "We need a courageous Prime Minister who will say [to the Israeli settlers]: 'I'm sorry we've misled you for 33 years and

brought 170,000 people into the territories. Now this is the border. We recommend that you leave, but anyone who wants to stay will be a citizen of Palestine.' I see no other way. It can't be done piecemeal." Nonetheless, he admitted that as of yet, no Prime Minister has the power to implement the policy. "Only the sword of Alexander of Macedon could cut through the Gordian knot we have shortsightedly built here over the last 33 years."

Arab Summit Displays Unity for Palestinians

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

Under great pressure from the Arab and Islamic peoples that have been enraged by the ongoing Israeli provocations and assaults on Palestinians, Arab leaders convened their Extraordinary Summit on Oct. 21-22 in Cairo. The summit was organized and chaired by Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak; it was the first all-Arab summit since 1996, and the first to include Iraq since the 1990 Gulf War.

The results of the summit came as no surprise to many analysts and observers, however, all of whom agree that the most important aspect of this meeting was the unity shown by the Arab leaders to pursue a united policy vis-à-vis the Israel-Arab conflict and other related regional issues. In addition, a number of developments in and around the region have emerged around the summit, signifying a shift in the strategic relations of the Middle East to the rest of the world. These developments, which went almost unreported by Western media, included Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi's visit to Iraq to launch a new mechanism to normalize relations and trade.

Another significant development was the high-level visit of Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz to China, South Korea, and Malaysia. The main item of his discussions with leaders of these countries was military-industrial cooperation. Well-informed sources state that these moves came in light of increasing frustration among Persian Gulf countries against the current Anglo-American policy of unconditional support for the state of Israel.

Meanwhile, Russian policymakers have stayed away from the chaos in the peace process created by the U.S. Administration's policies, while taking constructive moves toward the Arab countries. An envoy from the Russian government started a tour of Iran and Arab countries in the Gulf, to push an initiative for security cooperation in that region, including the reintegration of Iraq in such a mechanism.