

Sharon Sabotages Palestinian Talks

by Dean Andromidas

Leaders of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas completed talks in Cairo, Egypt Nov. 13, as part of an ongoing multinational effort to establish unity among the various Palestinian factions. This is part of an Arab-European effort to get Israel back to the negotiating table. But Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has expressed nothing but scorn for these talks, and has done everything possible—through his policy of assassination and widespread military campaigns that target entire Palestinian cities—to sabotage any development that could lead to reopening peace negotiations.

The Cairo talks were held from Nov. 9-13. The Fatah delegation was headed by Zakaria Aggh, head of the movement in the Gaza Strip; Fatah officials Tayeb Abdel Rahim and Sakher Habash; and Palestinian Energy Minister Abdel Rahman Hamad. Also present was Arafat's economic adviser Mohammed Rashid. Hamas was represented by Moussa Abu Marzouk and Osama Hamden. These were the first talks since 1996, when the PLO engaged Hamas in talks in an effort to convince them to join the Palestinian Authority.

Although an agreement ending suicide attacks in Israel was apparently not reached, nonetheless Hamas and Fatah decided to form a joint committee within the Palestinian Authority, and continue talks on cooperation. A statement called for joint activity between the two groups, to strengthen and buttress Palestinian national unity in any way possible. Also included was a call to resume talks between all Palestinian factions "in order to reach a diplomatic view that will serve as a common denominator for the Palestinian nation," since "diplomatic opposition to end the occupation is the legitimate right of the Palestinian nation and it serves Palestinian national interest."

Three Arab Countries, EU Involved

Even this agreement is unprecedented in Fatah-Hamas relations. If strong cooperation can be established on the political level, then attacks by the armed groups such as the Fatah-linked Al Aqsa Brigades and the Hamas armed wing, Islamic Jihad, could be curbed. The latter attacks have come to be seen as provocations that simply play into the hands of Sharon's brutal policy of repression.

These talks have to be seen in the context of an effort begun in March, with the peace initiative of Saudi Arabia's

Crown Prince Abdullah for settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. The effort cannot be separated from the attempt to neutralize the danger of a U.S.-led attack on Iraq, which would inflame the entire region. Egypt, which enjoys the best relations with Yasser Arafat, and Saudi Arabia, which supports Hamas, are playing the leading role as mediators. But Syria was also involved, since Hamas' Political Bureau is based in the capital, Damascus. According to Egyptian sources cited in the Israeli press, the talks would not have been possible without Syria's endorsement. Moussa Abu Marzouk, who led the Hamas team, is a member of the Political Bureau in Damascus.

The European Union has played a very important role as well. For the last six months, the EU team, led by its Middle East security specialist Alistair Crooke, has been working with the various Palestinian factions in an effort to hammer out agreements. Their aim is to bring the different factions and armed groups under the centralized lead of the Palestinian Authority, in an effort to curb the violence, and force Israel to the negotiating table. Since July, several agreements have been reached, particularly among the Fatah-linked Tanzim militia, but they have been undermined by Sharon's military operations. Crooke, who is a former British MI6 agent, has won the confidence of many of the Palestinians in this effort.

When this round of talks ended, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak dispatched his intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, to Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Suleiman met with Israeli President Moshe Katzav and Sharon, whom he reportedly told to stop targeted assassinations of wanted Palestinians, so as not to undermine the talks. Sharon, who has driven Israeli-Egyptian relations down to their lowest point in two decades, answered the call by announcing that Israeli troops would remain in the West Bank city of Nablus for weeks, in order to "root out terror." Sharon has made it clear, he views these talks as a "waste of time." Suleiman also met with Arafat in Ramallah, who called the talks "very important."

Sharon Escalates Military Operations

On the first day of the Cairo meeting, Nov. 9, an Israeli army hit squad killed Iyad Sawalha, an operative of Islamic Jihad. An Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that the assassination was part of Sharon's sabotage of the Cairo talks. "Sharon is acting as if in a chess game," the source said. Sharon knows that the armed groups, both the Islamic Jihad and Al Aqsa Brigades, will avenge those who are assassinated.

On Nov. 11, Sharon's generals launched a massive military operation against Nablus, the second largest city in the West Bank. As of this writing, the entire city is still under curfew, with Israeli troops conducting house-to-house searches for the second time in three months. Similar operations were held in Jenin and Tul Karm. The claim that these were retaliation for a Palestinian attack on Kibbutz Metzger on the night of Nov. 10, is simply false; the Israeli military admitted that the operations were planned before that attack.

These operations are part of Sharon's ongoing policy of "slow transfer," to rid Gaza and the West Bank of Palestinians. The fact that these operations caused death and injury to tens of Palestinians, with tens of thousands suffering under the curfews, closures, and poverty, is spurring more and more Palestinians to leave the territories. Meanwhile, Sharon unleashed Israeli settlers throughout the West Bank to attack Palestinian farmers harvesting their olive trees. Thousands of settlers on a daily basis, deploy into the orchards, under the Israeli army's eyes, assaulting farmers and stealing their harvest on an unprecedented scale. The attacks in many cases lead to "ethnic cleansing," as the Palestinians have been forced to flee their homes.

Not the Attack Sharon Expected

Sharon's pressure cooker exploded with a Palestinian attack in the West Bank city of Hebron on Nov. 16, in which Hamas gunmen killed 12 Israelis and wounded 14 others. The attack took place near the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the burial site of Abraham, while Israeli soldiers were escorting Jewish settlers back to the nearby Kiryat Arba settlement. Among those killed was the commander of the Shomron Brigade, Col. Dror Weinberg; and also two soldiers, four border policemen, and three members of the settlers' militia. Three Palestinians were killed. Islamic Jihad took responsibility. Its representative, Ramadan Shallah, told Al-Jazeera TV that the attack was in revenge for the assassination of Iyad Sawalha.

This response was not quite the one Sharon was expecting. The Palestinian attack was highly professional, and did not target civilians. According to Israeli military sources, the soldiers on the scene reacted incompetently, including the commander killed, Colonel Weinberg, who had been one of the more extreme Israeli military officers, had close ties to the settlers, and who was being groomed for high command.

Sharon was banking on some attack in Hebron as part of his chess play. *EIR* reported on Oct. 18 ("Is Sharon Preparing a New Hebron Massacre?") a warning by *Ha'aretz* commentator Amir Oren, that a massive attack by settlers against the Palestinians in Hebron, on the scale of Baruch Goldstein's murder of 30 Muslim worshippers in 1994—a provocation with regionwide consequences—could take place in reaction to an Hamas attack as above. Oren warned this could take place during the (current) holy month of Ramadan. *EIR's* article documented that these settlers are under the direct control of Prime Minister Sharon.



The delay in the Iraq war which Sharon's government desperately needed, is leading it to seek to provoke increased violence in the territories. That, plus loose planning and actions by Israeli Defense Forces, produced the ambush killing of 12 soldiers on Nov. 16 in Hebron.

Sharon's answer to the Islamic Jihad attack has been to launch massive military operations throughout Hebron, a city of 200,000, intending to search every house in the city. Sharon has ordered the creation of "territorial continuity" between the settlement of Kiryat Arba, outside of Hebron, the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and the lunatic settlements inside the old city.

The plan is nothing more than "ethnic cleansing." The military have already begun demolishing Palestinian homes within this corridor, on the pretext that these were the houses of the "terrorists": *Ha'aretz* correspondent Amira Hess has shown this to be false. Sharon has now deployed the fascist settlers to harass Palestinian resistance in this corridor in an attempt to force Palestinians into a "voluntary transfer." The settlers have set up caravans and tents, and announced the intention to build 1,000 housing units. The Israeli Housing Ministry has already sent people to the area, to take over plots of land, build houses, and move in more settlers. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz announced that the Jewish settlement in Hebron's old city would be expanded as well.

The Palestinian Governor of Hebron, Arif Jabari, denounced these moves as planned to provoke more violence, and has blasted Sharon's plans as "horrific." "This is an extremely dangerous matter if it is implemented," Jabari said. "This is the plan which Israeli extremists have been talking about for a long time."

Israel's political leaders are competing in harsh provocations of the Palestinians. A new Baruch Goldstein hasn't appeared yet in Hebron; but Ramadan is not over.