

Sharm el-Sheikh Summit: The Calm Before a New War?

by Dean Andromidas

If the conference of Middle Eastern leaders held at Sharm el-Sheikh on the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula on Feb. 7 does not herald the dawning of a new era of peace, it could be the calm before a new war. Statements by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) vowing an end to violence, do not make for a peace conference.

Sharon was clearly the big winner. First, his plan for disengagement from Gaza was fully endorsed by those present. Sharon initially had proposed his plan—which called for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the dismantling of four small settlements on the West Bank—more than a year ago, in an effort to counter growing international demands to stop the bloodshed and get Israel to the negotiating table.

The diplomatic correspondent of the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, Aluf Benn, wrote of the summit: “The main show is Israel’s disengagement from Gaza. . . . Israel and the Palestinian Authority are resuming negotiations, but about relatively minor issues like the release of a few more prisoners and the timetable to hand over the West Bank cities. This is important, makes headlines, but does not touch the core issues of the conflict: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders. . . .”

Until now, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians were critical of Sharon’s plan because it was a unilateral move outside of the “Road Map” for a Middle East peace, which had the backing of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—none of which were invited to the Sharm el-Sheikh summit.

At the summit, Sharon was less than decisive on the question. In his speech he said: “Now, *if* new change does emerge on the Palestinian side, the disengagement can . . . become a new starting point for a coordinated, successful process . . .

[which] can pave the way to implementation of the Road Map” (emphasis added).

The second plus for Sharon is the return of the Egyptian and Jordanian Ambassadors to Israel. They were withdrawn three years ago in reaction to Sharon’s brutal policies against the Palestinians.

Third, Sharon’s promise to implement confidence-building measures doesn’t deal with a return to the status quo in the occupied territories that existed before Sharon came to power.

Otherwise, at the summit: Abu Mazen called for ending all violence against Israel, and Sharon promised to “cease all its military activity against all Palestinians anywhere.” Nonetheless, according to *Ha'aretz*, the Israeli army has not been given new orders. It is still operating on orders given two weeks ago, which called for a reduction of military operations by 80%, including targeted assassinations. But if “intelligence” warning of an attack is given, the Israeli military will act to arrest or kill the Palestinians in question.

Israel will withdraw from several major cities and remove certain road blocks, but will not completely leave “area A,” the area under the Oslo accords which had been entirely under Palestinian control, until Sharon reoccupied it.

The release of prisoners was not resolved to the liking of the Palestinians, in that Israel will release only a few hundred of the 10,000 prisoners, only those whose terms of imprisonment end in a few months. Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti certainly will not be released.

Rice Endorses Sharon’s Policy

This summit could prove to be the calm before another war—one against Iran, or Syria, or both. The appearance of great progress between Israel and Palestinians towards peace is seen as a requirement in order to try to sell the world a new

war. This was all but confirmed by the trip to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice just one day before the summit, when she met with both Sharon and Abu Mazen. Rice fully endorsed Sharon's phony disengagement plan; after all, it gives the appearance of peace-making while preparations are being made for a new war.

As for her meeting with Abu Mazen, Fadoura Koures, a Palestinian cabinet minister, said that Rice was just conducting "public relations," because she failed to address the most important Palestinian issues, including the apartheid wall, settlement expansion, and the shutdown of illegal settlements.

More important, Rice met Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, in a talk where Iran was at the top of the agenda. Mofaz said: "I think we see eye to eye [with the U.S.] that the diplomatic path is the correct one at this time. We did not speak of other options." In an interview with Army radio, Mofaz repeated that a strike on Iran "was not on the agenda at *this moment*" (emphasis added).

Meanwhile, Sharon continues to lay land mines that could blow up the entire region at any moment.

Well-informed Middle East intelligence sources went one step further, telling *EIR* that Sharon has been saying that his disengagement plan is a new version of his old "Jordan is Palestine" policy, now called "three countries for two peoples." The three countries include the Gaza Strip and Jordan, which will become the two Palestinian states, and Israel, with control of at least 60% of the West Bank and all of Jerusalem. Thus Sharon's disengagement plan will be Gaza first and Gaza only.

Two days after the summit, Israeli commentator Sefi Rachlevsky, wrote in *Ha'aretz*, "At most there is exploitation of the Israeli-American dominance to achieve some short-term quiet. Quiet not as a prologue or introduction, but as a replacement for a real arrangement."

The Land-Grab Land-Mine

The most dangerous of Sharon's land-mines was the government's decision to grab hundreds of millions of dollars of Palestinian property in East Jerusalem, as reported in *EIR* (Feb.4, 2005, "Will Sharon Heed God's Warning to Jezebel?") The scheme involved implementation of Israel's Absentee Property Law of 1950, whereby Israel would confiscate, without compensation, all property in East Jerusalem owned by Palestinians living in the West Bank. This involves hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars of property. Israel's leading daily, *Ha'aretz*, created a major scandal when it exposed the fact that the law would lead to the confiscation of "half of East Jerusalem," and would mark the beginning of emptying East Jerusalem of its 250,000 Palestinians.

Shortly after the *Ha'aretz* exposé of Sharon's land grab, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel made an official request to the Israeli Attorney General, Menachem Mazuz, demanding that he immediately rescind the decision. On Jan. 31, the Mazuz told the group that he had never been informed

about the decision, and on Feb. 1, he issued a ruling rescinding the decision, and rebuking the government.

In a letter he sent to Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose ministry has been responsible for implementing the decision for the last six months, Mazuz declared, "This decision cannot stand," citing "many legal difficulties," including "Israel's obligations according to the rules of customary and international law." Referencing the international denunciation of Sharon's "Berlin Wall" on the West Bank, Mazuz said that the decision "could also have grave diplomatic repercussions on the separation fence, which has drawn strong criticism from the International Court of Justice at the Hague. This is an issue where clearly Israel's interest would be to avoid opening new fronts in the world and in international law."

Mazuz particularly criticized Likud Minister of Jerusalem Affairs Natan Sharansky who, as a member of the Jerusalem Ministerial Committee, had initiated the decision.

'Like Thieves in the Night'

In an editorial titled "Like Thieves in the Night," *Ha'aretz* welcomed the decision by Mazuz, but asked the question of whether this is a case of corruption whose proportions are beyond anything yet seen in Israel. The editorial stated: "The possibility cannot be ruled out that the decision to expropriate thousands of dunams [4 dunams equal one acre] without compensation to their rightful owners, as the absentee property law allows, was the result of an economic plot by people on the political right who regarded those properties as a tempting real estate treasure."

After criticizing the role of Sharansky, *Ha'aretz* also referred to another committee member, Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Although Netanyahu claims he was not in the committee meeting that made the decision, he fully supported it.

The role of Sharansky exposes the duplicity of the neo-cons in the Bush Administration, especially Vice President Dick Cheney. Sharansky is close to National Security Council staffer Elliot Abrams, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the notorious Richard Perle, and other neo-cons, for which he is sort of an icon from the days when he was a Soviet dissident. But his most important relationship is with Cheney himself. Every time Sharansky travels to the U.S., which is often, he meets Cheney, who finds the time for hours-long meetings. It was Sharansky, for example, who convinced both Cheney and Bush to cut off any contact with the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

Sharansky, who is even more hard-line than Sharon, and openly opposes Sharon's disengagement plan, has been touted as the spiritual author of President Bush's psychobabble about a "new vision for U.S. foreign policy" in his Jan. 23 inaugural address. Bush was reportedly inspired by reading Sharansky's latest book, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*.