

Sharon's 'Peace' Speech Raises Threat of War Against Syria

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On Dec. 18, 2003, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon delivered a major policy address at the annual Herzliya Conference of the Institute for Policy and Strategy, in which he announced that Israel would soon take unilateral action, permanently to annex a major portion of the West Bank. While wrapping his virtual declaration of war around a hypocritical "reaffirmation of support for the Road Map," Sharon also made other statements widely read by U.S., Egyptian, and Israeli military specialists as a signal that he intends to launch a war against Syria and Lebanon, perhaps as soon as the Spring of 2004. While some skeptical observers claim that Sharon is too much of a pragmatist to risk his "special relationship" with U.S. President George W. Bush by starting a new Mideast war before the November 2004 U.S. Presidential elections, others point to the Suez crisis of election-eve 1956, and ask: Does George W. Bush have the leadership qualities demonstrated in that earlier crisis by then-President Dwight Eisenhower, to stand down Israel by forceful action? Few in their right minds believe that a Dick Cheney-dominated G.W. Bush would even contemplate stopping Sharon from exploiting the U.S. electoral distraction to fulfill his lifelong "Greater Israel" fantasies.

This war drive against Syria and Lebanon is in perfect synch with Bush Administration neo-conservatives, centered in the office of Vice President Dick Cheney and the Pentagon civilian bureaucracy of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith, and Defense Policy Board members Richard Perle and Newt Gingrich. In September 2003, Cheney engineered a shift in Administration policy towards Syria, reversing a longstanding opposition to the Syria Accountability Act, which quickly passed through Congress and was signed by President Bush. The targetting of Syria coincided with inflammatory Congressional testimony about Syria's purported "weapons of mass

destruction," by State Department arms control negotiator John Bolton; and the appointment of ultra-right-wing Jabotinskyite David Wurmser as Cheney's chief Mideast aide (Wurmser was part of the rogue Pentagon intelligence unit that fabricated intelligence assessments about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction and terror ties, and later was Bolton's chief deputy).

At the end of December, the *Los Angeles Times* published a two-part series of articles, based on leaked government documents, accusing Syria of playing a major role in the arming of Saddam Hussein. Right after his Herzliya speech, Ariel Sharon announced the expansion of Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights, the territory seized from Syria during the 1967 war.

Sharon at Herzliya

In his Herzliya speech, Sharon gave the Palestinian Authority an impossible two-month deadline to crack down on the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian terrorist groups. It is well known in Israel, in Washington, and throughout the Arab world, that the Israeli Defense Force siege of the West Bank and Gaza, over the past two years, destroyed the Palestinian Authority's security services and infrastructure, boosting the relative strength of the radicals, and making any so-called Palestinian Authority "crackdown" a losing venture, and a sure-fire recipe for a Palestinian civil war that would spell the death-knell for the PA itself.

Sharon, who was a prime sponsor of Hamas (as a counter to the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat), during his 1980s tenure as Agriculture and Defense Minister, is dedicated to the destruction of the Palestinian Authority. A takeover of the Palestinian territories by militants would provide Sharon the perfect excuse to launch a mass-expulsion "final solution" to the Palestinian problem—a scheme that

Sharon and his ultra-rightwing allies call “Jordan is Palestine.” Sharon’s immediate scheme, as mooted in the Herzliya speech, is to grab control over more than half of the West Bank, through the accelerated construction of what Lyndon LaRouche has labeled “the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial Wall,” and to cede the Palestinians a string of isolated “bantustans,” which he would label an “interim Palestinian state.”

According to one longtime Israeli “Sharon-watcher,” the Prime Minister’s idea of an appropriate timetable for establishing permanent borders and settling the remaining disputed issues, is ten years. “Sharon wants to wipe out the entire Palestinian leadership and replace them with a bunch of Quisling gangsters, who would turn the Palestinian homeland into a gambling and prostitution center, under the control of the Israeli-Russian Mafiya. They want this Palestinian crime Mecca to be their bridge into the Arab world,” the source declared.

Sharon told the Herzliya audience: “We hope the Palestinian Authority will carry out its part. However, if in a few months the Palestinians still continue to disregard their part in implementing the Road Map—then Israel will initiate the unilateral security step of disengagement from the Palestinians. . . . The ‘Disengagement Plan’ will include the redeployment of IDF forces along new security lines and a change in the deployment of settlements, which will reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population.” While Sharon refused to provide a detailed map of the specific territories he would annex under the “Disengagement Plan,” he added bluntly, “Obviously, through the ‘Disengagement Plan,’ the Palestinians will receive much less than they would have received through direct negotiations as set out in the Road Map.”

Sharon paid lip service to his “partners” in Washington, assuring the audience that “the unilateral steps which Israel will take in the framework of the ‘Disengagement Plan’ will be fully coordinated with the United States. We must not harm our strategic coordination with the United States.”

But Israeli and U.S. sources tell *EIR* that the recent appointment of former Secretary of State James Baker III as President Bush’s personal representative for Iraqi debt renegotiation has sent shockwaves through the Israeli right wing, as well as among Washington Beltway neo-conservatives. During the “Bush 41” Administration, Baker was the arch-rival of then-Defense Secretary Cheney.

“Baker is one of the few people around who could take on Cheney in a bureaucratic brawl and come out on top,” reported one former senior intelligence official, who served with both men.

Baker’s re-emergence is another factor driving Sharon’s timetable for confrontation.

The Occupation Quagmire

According to one Israeli military source, a prime motive for Sharon’s February deadline for the “Disengagement Plan”

is the need to withdraw troops from the occupation, to put them through rigorous training, in preparation for a possible war against Syria. The source said that, with the dismantling of the Iraqi Army and the American and British occupation of Iraq, and the recent announcement by Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi that he will dismantle his country’s weapons of mass destruction, Syria is the only remaining Arab military with any capability of threatening Israel. Sharon wants to wipe out the Syrian Armed Forces, to firmly establish Israel as the regional military hegemon.

For the same reasons, the Israeli source warned that Sharon could launch a missile strike against the Iranian nuclear reactor, before it goes on line. The source claimed that Israel has been secretly working for years on its own “mini-nuke” weapons, and could attempt to use low-yield nuclear “bunker busters” on the Bushehr site in Iran—this, despite the fact that secret tests revealed that the deep penetration weapons did not limit the spread of radioactive fallout.

At the same Herzliya conference where Sharon announced his “Disengagement Plan,” Mossad chief Meir Dagan, a longtime Sharon thug-ally, had ranted about the existential threat to Israel posed by Iran’s nuclear reactor program, which, he charged, was aimed at producing nuclear bombs to destroy the Jewish state. Iran maintains that its nuclear program is for the peaceful production of energy.

Frantic Diplomacy

The embedded threats in Sharon’s Herzliya speech did not go unnoticed in the Arab world. Following a meeting between Syrian President Bashar Assad and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian Foreign Minister was dispatched to Jerusalem for talks with Sharon and top Israeli Cabinet ministers. According to one Egyptian source, while the efforts to reach a “hand-shake” cease-fire agreement between Israel and all the Palestinian factions was one topic of the talks, the primary issue on the table was an effort to resurrect the frozen talks between Israel and Syria. The source indicated that Sharon rejected, outright, Assad’s proposal to resume the talks that had been under way between his father, the late President Hafez Assad, and the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, where they left off. Those talks, according to the source, had resolved “95% of the issues between Israel and Syria.” However, just before the New Year, Sharon dispatched a Druze member of the Israeli Knesset, a longtime friend, to Damascus for back-channel talks, the content and outcome of which are unknown at this moment.

The simple, and unchanged reality remains: Unless and until U.S. President Bush “pulls an Eisenhower” and puts the full weight of the Presidency behind his claimed commitments to a just, two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the dark clouds of war will hover over the region, and Sharon, as isolated and discredited as he is in the eyes of the international community and a majority of Israelis, will be the person calling the shots.