

Time for an Israel Accountability Act

by Carl Osgood

The March 22 assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin by the Israeli Defense Force, under orders from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, puts a sharp point on a growing irony in Washington, D.C. The irony is that, while the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza continues to spawn more violence, a rising chorus is being heard in Washington demanding that the Bush Administration impose sanctions on Syria under the provisions of the Syria Accountability Act. Sharon's latest atrocity came in the wake of a week-long visit by U.S. Middle East envoy William Burns, along with National Security Council members Stephen Hadley and Elliott Abrams, who were told by Sharon that he would never negotiate with the Palestinian leadership. The Yassin assassination can, therefore, only be seen as calculated to increase the level of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, rather than as an act of self-defense, as the Israelis are claiming.

The contradiction between the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the attacks emanating from Washington against Syria was the subject of a forum of the Council for the National Interest (CNI) held in Washington, D.C. on March 17, featuring Syria's Ambassador to Washington. Speakers at the forum challenged the Syria Accountability Act, and proposed that if the United States is going to hold other nations accountable for their actions, it should include Israel, as well. Eugene Bird, the president of CNI, threw down the gauntlet to the Israeli lobby in his opening remarks, challenging the American-Israel Political Action Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the Zionist Organization of America, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy to a series of debates on any subject germane to the withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian territories and the withdrawal of the United States from Iraq. He indicated that he doubted that any of those organizations would accept CNI's challenge, especially considering that one of CNI's conditions is that the debates be broadcast nationally via C-SPAN or some other national network.

Bird reported that CNI had tried to have the forum on Capitol Hill, but a forum including a discussion of draft legislation to hold Israel accountable for its actions was such a hot potato in the Congress, that none of the offices CNI spoke to would sponsor a room, so the event wound up being held at the National Press Club. Bird told *EIR*, later, that the offices they spoke to were "a little embarrassed" that they were not able to sponsor the forum and expressed "astonishment" that

CNI would be presenting such a discussion on Israel. "You'd think that you'd be able to bring all of the parties onto the same stage in terms of accountability," he said, but, apparently, that is not the case in the U.S. Congress.

The Syria Accountability Act, signed by President Bush last year, was modeled on the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, and continues the pattern established in the now-infamous "Clean Break" document, written by neo-cons Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser, and Wurmser's wife, Meyrav Wurmser, in 1996 as an election campaign document for Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel's Likud Party. It demanded repudiation of the 1993 Oslo peace accord, and its underlying premise of land for peace. It also called on Israel to advocate regime change in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The first of those has now been done, and Syria is being set up as the second target, first for economic warfare, under the sanctions provisions of the Syria Accountability Act, and then for military action. The neo-cons are so hot for war against Syria, that last Spring, they floated the lie that the reason Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction could not be found was because he had hidden them in Syria. When the White House buried that story, the neo-cons turned to the Congress as a fall-back option.

The fraud and the dangers of the Syria act and the soon-to-follow Saudi Arabia Accountability Act also did not escape the notice of the CNI at its March 17 forum. Grant Smith, research director of the Institute for Research: Middle Eastern Policy, told the forum that the evidence cited in both bills "relies substantially on allegations, unsubstantiated data" from a "research house with questionable attributes." That research house is, of course, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), of the above-named Meyrav Wurmser and former Israeli intelligence chief Yigal Carmon. Smith noted that MEMRI is considered by many "to be a selective news retrieval organization whose primary objective is to portray Arabs in the worst possible light."

Speaking most eloquently against the Syria Accountability Act was Dr. Imad Moustapha, Syria's ambassador to Washington. He said that the core reason for the Syria act was to further penalize Syria for its position in the Middle East conflict. He noted that Israel is still occupying Syrian territory in the Golan Heights, and that there are 500,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria. "Those who designed this act," he said, "want to see Syria further weakened while it is facing an intransigent, bullying Israel." While not directly naming the designers of the bill, leaving that for other speakers, he said their intent is to use U.S. foreign policy for the benefit of the war camp in Israel. He called it the "embodiment of how a special interest group has made U.S. foreign policy hostage to their intent."

Moustapha described how the act is bad, not only for Syria, but also Israel and the United States. He said that if the United States really wants peace in the Middle East, it must be seen as an honest broker, which means "it must engage with all parties." He warned that the Syria act will not help

the U.S. public diplomacy campaign in the Arab world nor will it help gain cooperation in fighting terrorism. "If the United States wants to engage in a public diplomacy initiative towards the peoples of the Arab world, then it really has to reconsider the actual acts and deeds it is adopting on the ground." When Moustapha was challenged on the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon, also taken up in the Syria Accountability Act, he pointed out that there is no comparison between that and Israel's violent occupation of the Palestinian territories. The 12,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon have not even fired a shot in ten years and Lebanese criticism of Syria does not elicit any reaction remotely comparable to the Israeli response to Palestinian resistance to that occupation.

The Israel Accountability Act is a draft legislative proposal being circulated by CNI. It was presented to the forum by retired U.S. Ambassador Robert Keely, who said, "The U.S. is supposed to be acting as an honest broker, a mediator. . . It's elemental that a diplomat has to be even-handed, and can't take sides, or they won't be successful." The proof of that, Keely said, is that the United States has not been successful as an honest broker for more than 50 years. The draft bill, he said, is "part of an effort to make the playing field more even, to deal with the parties in the Middle East in an evenhanded way and not take sides, because if we're going to have accountability acts about certain countries, then we need to have them about other countries that have also allegedly violated certain principles."

The purpose of the act, as set out in the beginning, is "to create conditions for enhancing the security of all of the Middle East, including Israelis, and to create the basis for a permanent reconciliation between Israel and all her neighbors." Under "Findings," the draft declares that "the Policies of the present Government of Israel endanger both American security interests in the Middle East and the long-term security of Israel itself." Sixteen more numbered paragraphs follow, identifying Israel's long-standing violations of UN Security Council resolutions regarding its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the suffering it has imposed on the Palestinian population, including the use of collective punishment, the building of the so-called security wall, the continuous expansion of settlement activity since the early 1970s, the policy of extra-legal assassinations, its refusal to comply with the demands of the Road Map peace plan, and Israel's own programs for weapons of mass destruction. The sanctions in the bill would prohibit the export of arms and equipment and withhold any economic aid that would facilitate Israel's activities in the Palestinian territories.

Keely concluded by noting that peace "would not threaten Israel's security, its economy, or its place in the world." On the contrary, Keely argued, these things would be enhanced. On the other hand, if the U.S. continues to support "a country and a government that doesn't follow the democratic principles which we hold so dear, that would hinder our efforts to stop terrorism," which requires the trust and cooperation of all of the countries of the region.