

Is Sharon's Visit the Calm Before the Storm?

by Michele Steinberg

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to the U.S. April 10 with a "wish list" which includes: a U.S. action against Iran which permanently removes *any* nuclear technology—including production of energy for civilian purposes; President George W. Bush's blessing for the creation of "Greater Jerusalem," including a massive expansion of Israeli settlements around the city; and the desire that the Administration begin condemning Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), so that after the unilateral Gaza withdrawal, Sharon could return to his insistence that Israel "has no partner for peace negotiations."

Forget the thousands of articles that played up the "rift" between the U.S. Administration and Sharon over the expansion of the illegal settlements. If there was any real "rift" between parties during Sharon's visit to the United States, it was between Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, not between Bush and Sharon. Indeed, Sharon got almost everything he wanted.

While it was clearly a setback for Sharon to stand beside the little man who is President of the United States, and hear him say, "I told the Prime Minister of my concern that Israel not undertake any activity that contravenes 'road map' obligations or prejudices final-status negotiations. . . . Israel should remove unauthorized outposts and meet its road map obligations regarding settlements in the West Bank," Sharon was unfazed. Bush's statement was completely pro-forma, and for those who know Dubya, he never "really got going" about shutting down Israel's vast West Bank settlements, compared to, say, Social Security privatization, or Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. What he said was only "for the record," and for now.

Sharon immediately said the opposite, telling reporters, "We are very much interested [in] the contiguity between Maaleh Adumim [settlement] and Jerusalem." Bush didn't say a word.

In order to understand what actually went on, observers should ask: where was Condi? Secretary of State Rice was somewhat invisible at the main Bush-Sharon meetings. Was it because Sharon was so displeased with her statement of March 25 that Israel's announced expansion of 3,500 new housing units that would unite Jerusalem and Maaleh Adumin, was "at odds" with U.S. policy? Rice told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We will continue to note that this is at odds with American policy."

But whether Rice is nothing more than the designated

"hard cop" against Israel for the edification of Arab world, is a question frequently asked by international leaders. Condi and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley (her former deputy) met with Sharon for more than two hours on April 10 at a Waco, Texas "bar and rib joint," and they emerged "grim-faced," said the Cleveland *Jewish News* in an April 15 article. But were the tough words against Sharon genuine? And even if they are, will Rice be overridden by Dick Cheney, who can call upon both the neo-con Likudnik sympathizers, and the Christian fundamentalist fanatics in the Bush-Cheney coalition?

The answer lies not in the bilateral U.S.-Israeli relationship, but in the general malaise of the Bush Administration. Bush is a "lame duck," stuck with an Iraq quagmire, with uncontrollable national deficit and rising national debt, and unable to sell his cherished "privatization" of Social Security to the population. But, a weakened Bush Administration is a dangerous one (see preceding article). The Cheney crowd knows only one way to achieve unity, and that is through fear, and Cheney's office and the new Administration is stacked with adherents to the "Clean Break" war plan of the neo-cons. That war plan, spelled out in a neo-con document presented to then-incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, says that after Iraq, the United States must force regime change in Iran and Syria: i.e., more wars.

An Attack on Iran Coming?

One surprise feature of the Sharon-Bush summit is that Sharon brought along his top military advisor, Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant, who is scheduled for a major promotion in June—probably to become commander of the Northern Territory. Galant came armed with satellite photos of Iranian nuclear installations, and with the report that Iran is just "one technological step away" from enriching uranium, a step that would give Iran the capability for nuclear weapons.

Sharon discussed Iran twice with Vice President Dick Cheney—once in Crawford, with Bush present, and then on April 12 in Washington, D.C., where the "real meetings" took place.

After the Cheney meeting, in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Sharon laid out his marching orders to the United States on Iran: "We have to make preparations to bring Iran to the [UN] Security Council. . . . The Iranians should be limited in time. And . . . all the preparations would be done in order to be able to make—to create a major pressure."

Asked if Israel will launch a unilateral strike as it did against Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981, Sharon boasted of how proud he was to have been part of the 1981 attack. In language which is music to Cheney's ears, Sharon said, "Just imagine what could have happened if . . . Iraq under Saddam Hussein would have had atomic weapons."

"Have you ruled out a unilateral military strike on Iran?" asked Blitzer again.

"We don't think *that's what we have to do* . . . the danger

is so great that it should be an international effort . . . we exchange intelligence . . . but it's not that we are planning any military attack on Iran."

That is, *if*, as Vice President Cheney said on Jan. 20, the United States takes care of the Iran nuclear "problem" first.

However, the Sharon-Galant stunt with satellite photos and hysterical warnings that Iran was about to reach a "point of no return," met with icy rejection from Condoleezza Rice, who told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 14 that the Israelis had provided "no new revelation" on Iran's nuclear program. Nor did she agree to Sharon's demand for a deadline.

Forecasts of Provocations To Come

Sharon is planning major provocations against the Palestinians, right after the scheduled Gaza Strip withdrawal in July, warned a prominent analyst with close ties to Egyptian military circles, in a discussion with *EIR*. In fact, these are designed precisely to stop a Palestinian state from being created. Behind the scenes at the Crawford meeting on April 11, the sources noted, was a full campaign by Sharon of verbal attacks against Palestine National Authority President Abu Mazen, while here in the United States. The attack is aimed at demonizing Abu Mazen—i.e., giving him the Arafat treatment. This would weaken Abu Mazen, and boost the showing of Hamas, the militant guerrilla group which does not accept an Israeli state, in the July elections for the Palestinian legislative assembly.

Sharon would use a significant vote for Hamas to justify cutting off the peace process, on the grounds that there is still no "peace partner" in the Palestinian camp. Once Israeli troops have withdrawn from Gaza, the source added, Sharon will claim that Israel is now more vulnerable to mortar and other attacks, and will retaliate with provocations in both the West Bank and Gaza. This is all in line with the boasting by Sharon's top advisor and envoy to the United States, Dov Weisglass, that the Gaza pullout is aimed at blocking a final settlement, and finishing off the Road Map.

A Washington-based diplomat expressed similar concern, forecasting that there would be a period of calm leading up to the Gaza pullout, at which point he expected all hell to break loose. He said that senior Bush Administration officials had formally assured certain Arab governments that Bush would express "U.S. anger" at the Israeli settlement expansions in the West Bank, but beyond that, there are no guarantees of what will happen.

Even more bluntly, Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestinian legislature, in an April 11 briefing in Washington, declared that Abu Mazen is being undermined, as he was in 2003.

"We are seeing a repetition, unfortunately, of a very serious mistake made earlier when there was a previous ceasefire when Abu Mazen was Prime Minister," she said. "There was no recognition, no cooperation. We're seeing now, again, Sharon coming to Washington with a list of grievances and

gripes and complaining and repeating the same mantra there is no Palestinian partner, the Palestinians cannot deliver security to Israel. . . ."

All of the praise for the Gaza withdrawal is nothing but a means to "circumvent the Road Map with all its problems," she added. "And it is by definition unilateral . . . it gets rid of what Sharon calls a demographic threat and a security threat in Gaza. It gets rid of 1.3 million Palestinians. . . . But at the same time, he transformed Gaza into a massive collective prison, because you are going to have Israelis controlling the air space, the territorial waters, and the land crossing point, which means an instant transformation of Gaza into a prison, a pressure cooker that's liable to blow up, particularly if it's isolated from the rest of the world."

Greater Jerusalem

Before his trip to Crawford, Sharon played up the threats to his life by Jewish extremists. "All my life, I have defended Israel," Sharon repeated several times before his meeting with Bush; "now, I have to have security to protect myself from Jews." It was a bit of melodrama to demonstrate that Sharon was taking tremendous risks in order to give Palestinians a bit of land. Nonetheless, the threat is real, and so violent from Jewish settlers in Gaza and the West Bank, that they are being called a "threat of civil war" in the Israeli press.

But, in return, Sharon demanded many concessions, especially the approval of the settlement expansions of "Greater Jerusalem," which is synonymous with the "arabesque" of the apartheid wall that is being built, turning West Bank Palestinians cities into open air prisons. According to a briefing given by an Israeli attorney, Sharon has *always* had a view that Jerusalem must absorb hundreds of square kilometers of territory in the West Bank. Today, this amounts to a "clover leaf pattern" that shoots northeast to absorb one settlement, southeast to absorb another, and eastward to connect the settlement of Maaleh Adumin to East Jerusalem. The building of 3,500 new homes in the "corridor" from Maaleh Adumin to Jerusalem, as proposed, would likely cause an eruption of a new Palestinian war against Israel. The Palestinian people simply would not stand for the permanent separation of the major areas of Ramallah and Bethlehem from one another, into isolated cantons.

Sharon and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was also in the United States to promote Greater Jerusalem, say the expansion is allowed according to the April 14, 2004 letter to Sharon signed by Bush. And Bush did not deny it.

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