

Sharon Talks Peace, But Prepares for War

by Dean Andromidas

The government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Feb. 20 approved the so-called disengagement plan, thereby setting in motion Israeli military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, as well as evacuation of all Jewish settlements in Gaza, a process which is to begin July 21. The decision is being hailed as possibly the first step in an overall peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, anti-government incitement by Israeli right-wing settlers in Gaza has reached its highest level since Sharon first announced the plan to evacuate. On Feb. 14, several thousand settlers held aggressive, at times violent, demonstrations at major highway intersections throughout the country. These demonstrations are reportedly being led by a new extremist organization called the “Jewish Tanzim” (after the Tanzim, the militant youth movement of the Palestinian Fatah organization). The group is secretly led by members of the outlawed Kach Organization, which remains on the U.S. State Department’s list of terrorist organizations, as well as by the fascist National Jewish Front, among other organizations. The *Jerusalem Post* of Feb. 16 quoted Kach member Noam Federman as saying that the Jewish Tanzim will be taking over leadership in the fight against disengagement. Previously, leadership lay with the Yesha Council, which represents all the Jewish settlers on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—but, because it is financed by the establishment, Federman said the Yesha Council cannot handle the fight: “We expect [Yesha] to clear the way for good Jews who can handle a real struggle against these tyrannical laws,” referring to disengagement.

Federman and the extreme right wing have been making threats against Israeli politicians, including leaders of Sharon’s own Likud Party, like Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Transport Minister Meir Sheerit, and Sharon himself, with the result that more than 84 officials have been given extra security.

Meanwhile, within the Likud Party, a group of rebels led by former Cabinet ministers Uzi Landau and Natan Sharansky threatens to bring down Sharon’s government unless he holds a national referendum on the disengagement.

Sharon’s ‘Maskirovka’

Has Sharon become the new Yitzhak Rabin (the Israeli Prime Minister slain in 1995 by a Jewish fanatic because he



Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon greets U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Jerusalem on Feb. 6. Sharon is consolidating Israel's military and security forces under his control, as a preface to war against Syria or Iran.

had signed the Oslo Accords)? Hardly. Amidst all the turmoil, and not so far beneath the surface, there is another process under way.

Sharon is preparing for the next war.

The same Cabinet meeting that approved the Gaza withdrawal, also approved the new route for Sharon's "separation wall," which now includes in Israeli territory the very large settlements of Gush Etzion and Ma'aleh Adumin. Sharon also ordered a further expansion of the Wall to include the settlements of Ariel (which extends deep into the West Bank), Beit Aryah, and Ofarim. With these additions, the route of the Wall will mean Israel is grabbing over 10% of the West Bank, not including the land occupied by Jewish settlements on the Palestinian side of the Wall. If Sharon's new government of national unity (with the Labor Party in the ruling coalition with Likud), is really preparing for peace, why extend the Wall, which will cost well over a billion dollars when its first stage is completed?

Although Sharon promised Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) will begin turning over control of West Bank cities to the Palestinian security forces, so far not one city has been transferred, because Sharon refuses to lift the state of siege that is maintained around the cities, by removing the checkpoints that stand at the entrances to the cities.

This is all part of the *Maskirovka* of Sharon's so-called disengagement plan (*Maskirovka* was the Russian name for Soviet-era deception operations). Unlike the Jewish Tanzim and the other fanatics who cannot see beyond the "land of

Israel," Sharon is looking to the future, preparing for Israel's next war, against Syria and/or Iran. His disengagement plan is the *Maskirovka* to cover his war plans. A withdrawal from Gaza, if it ever takes place, will serve to shorten his lines of communication for a future war. His Wall will protect Israel and most of the West Bank settlements from the social explosion that would occur in the Palestinian territories if Sharon were to launch war against Syria or Iran.

With the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Syria is in the gunsights of the Bush Administration, more squarely than ever. Sharon is preparing to become the possible instrument of any attack that might result.

The Purges

The development that most dramatically underscores Sharon's war intentions, is the purge of the top echelon of the Israeli security establishment. On

Feb. 16, some 48 hours after the Hariri assassination, Sharon and his hardline Minister of Defense, Shaul Mofaz, announced that the term of service of the current Chief of Staff, Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, which expires July 9, will not be extended the customary six months to a year. The announcement, seen as an "ouster" by several senior General Staff officers, took the political and military establishment by surprise, since it is in July that the disengagement and evacuation of the settlers from Gaza is to begin, and since Ya'alon has been involved in the planning. His departure is seen by many as jeopardizing the whole operation.

Sharon has put out the word that Ya'alon opposed the disengagement, a charge widely seen as groundless. In any case, the Feb. 23 announcement of the choice to replace him—Gen. Dan Halutz, currently Deputy Chief of Staff—should leave no doubt that Sharon is readying his next war. Pressure has been put on Ya'alon to retire even earlier than the official date of July 9, so Halutz can take command early and settle into his new post—and, not coincidentally, help push through a number of new Sharon military and security appointments, as we discuss below. Indeed, as of Feb. 25, the *Jerusalem Post* was reporting that Ya'alon would step down in May, to make way for Halutz.

Halutz is better known as "bomber Halutz": As commander of the Israeli Air Force, he ordered the dropping of a one-ton bomb on a house in Gaza filled with children, in order to kill one Hamas leader. Fourteen children died. In an interview at the time, Halutz said the only thing he "feels" when he drops a bomb is a little jerk in the aircraft. Halutz is

particularly a hardliner when it comes to Iran and Syria. He is personally very close to the Sharon family, including Ariel and his son Omri, who serves as his father's top political advisor.

An Israeli Air Force Reserve officer who knows Halutz personally called his appointment a "disaster"—to have as Chief of Staff a man with his "perception of using force is frightening," and, contrary to what others might say, "He will do exactly what Sharon expects him to do."

A similar comment came from Yossi Sarid of the peace activist Yahad Party; Sarid, a journalist and member of the Knesset (parliament), said of what is, in effect, the cashiering of Ya'alon, that "the Defense Minister's timing for the decision is more than peculiar and raises suspicions and fears."

Sarid is right. Although Ya'alon has acted brutally against the Palestinians, he nonetheless often criticized Sharon's policies. Last year he stated that Sharon's government should have cooperated with Abu Mazen, who as Palestinian Prime Minister had arranged a cease-fire with Hamas and other militant groups. Ya'alon also urged that Israel take up offers for peace talks proposed by Syrian President Bashar Assad. He went so far as to say that if Israel returned the Golan Heights to Syria in the context of a peace agreement, Israel would still be militarily defensible.

Halutz is the first Air Force general to become Chief of Staff, and will take command at a time when the bulk of Israel's 100 new F-16s will have been delivered. These aircraft, the most sophisticated F-16s in commission anywhere in the world, are capable of flying long distances. They will complement Israel's new and even more powerful F-15I, which can carry out bombing runs over Iran without having to refuel.

A General Staff for a New War

Sharon's claim that Ya'alon had to go because he opposed the disengagement is not only specious—the reality is that over his term of office, Ya'alon systematically blocked Sharon's attempt to put his own loyalists in key positions in the military/security establishment. With Ya'alon out of the way, Sharon can consolidate control over the military and security.

In July, new commanders will be named for the three most crucial commands for any war against Syria: the Northern Command along the Lebanese-Syrian border, the Ground Forces commander, and a new commander for Military Intelligence. With Halutz moving up, a new Deputy Chief of Staff will have to be chosen. Other Sharon favorites are expected to be promoted, including Maj. Gen. Yoav Kaplinsky, who could become Deputy Chief of Staff and heir apparent to Halutz, or could get the equally important Military Intelligence posting. When Sharon became Prime Minister, Kaplinsky served as his military liaison officer, thereby becoming Sharon's key contact man with the Bush White House and the Pentagon neo-conservatives. Three years ago, Sharon

wanted Kaplinsky to take command of Military Intelligence, but was blocked by Ya'alon. Two of Sharon's other former military liaisons, Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant and Gen. Eival Galidi, are expected to move into key positions.

In the Israeli military security system, the chiefs of the Shin Bet internal security service and the Mossad foreign security service sit at the table with the IDF General Staff. On Feb. 10, Sharon announced the naming of Yuval Diskin as new Shin Bet director. Another Sharon favorite, and the architect of Israel's targeted assassination policy, he coordinated no fewer than 200 such operations. Since many of these assassinations were carried out by helicopter gunships and F-16 fighter bombers, Diskin cooperated closely with Halutz when the latter was commander of the Air Force.

According to an article by Yossi Melman in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* of Feb. 17, prior to his appointment as Shin Bet director, Diskin served in a sort of kitchen cabinet of unofficial advisors to Sharon flunky and mass murderer Meir Dagan, chief of the Mossad. Diskin aided Dagan in the latter's efforts to turn the Mossad into a Murder, Inc. that would concentrate on special operations against particularly Iran, Syria, and Lebanon.

Another member of this kitchen cabinet is Gen. (res.) Amiram Levine, who had been named Deputy Director of the Mossad in 1997 by then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Like Dagan, Levine is a wild man. In 1993, when Levine was operational commander of the Northern Command, then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin criticized him for escalating tensions along the border at a time when Rabin was trying to engage the Syrians in peace negotiations. Three years later, in 1996, Levine was responsible for the Qana massacre, in which Israeli artillery shells hit a position near a United Nations post that had become a temporary refugee camp. Over 100 men, women, and children were killed. Levine ignored reports from Israeli Military Intelligence warning of the presence of 800 civilians. (The commander of Military Intelligence at the time was Gen. Moshe Ya'alon.)

As operational commander of the Northern Command in the early 1990s, Levine founded the "Egoz Unit," a hunter-killer squad which tracked down Hezbollah militants in southern Lebanon. Although vicious, with two "successful" assassination-scalps hanging from his belt, one in Lebanon and one in Syria, Levine is not especially competent; not long ago, his cell phone, with all his secret telephone numbers, was stolen out of his car, where he had left it overnight.

In any case, by the end of the Summer, all of the top commanders of Israel's military/security establishment will have been handpicked by Sharon, and ready to follow him into war. Even if Sharon's government falls in the course of the next months—which is a real possibility—the appointments which will set the tone for the Israeli military/security establishment, have been made and will be in place for the next three to four years. To undo them would require a very strong leader indeed, and no such figure is on the horizon.