

# Is the Mideast being set up for a new war?

by Dean Andromidas

The Middle East is, as one observer put it, “being set up, slowly,” for something big. Is that something a new war?

Recent developments, including the suspension of Syria-Israel peace talks and the impasse in talks between the Palestinians and Israel, have heightened tensions among all the parties. Now, adding to this volatile chemistry, is an escalation of the destabilization of the Israeli government, through a sex scandal. A close look at the situation points to the conclusion that indeed, something is being “set up.”

At the end of January, Syria broke off peace talks with Israel, with the demand that Israel make a firm commitment to withdraw from the Golan Heights to a new border, defined by the so-called “June 4 lines” that have formed the cease-fire line between the two countries since the June 1967 war. Since January, fighting has escalated in the so-called Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon. It is feared that if Israel suffers more casualties, it will widen its area of reprisal attacks, and even strike at Syrian military positions in Lebanon.

As we reported last week, a well-connected British strategist told *EIR* that “there is a very real threat of war between Israel and Syria, within the next months, in my view. If Syria doesn’t come to terms with Israel, and Israel has to pull out of Lebanon without any deal, Israel will first waste Lebanon, and then take Syria out.” He predicted that the Americans “will tolerate” such an Israeli military action, especially as the “pro-Israeli sentiment is getting stronger in the administration, since Al Gore is more pro-Israeli than Clinton.” He added that the consensus in London and among European Union circles, is that Prime Minister Ehud Barak should drop the pursuit of an early peace deal with Syria and instead concentrate on a final settlement with the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, a vote by the Israeli Cabinet to withdraw from Lebanon by July 2000, whether or not an agreement between Israel and Syria has been concluded, was viewed by the Arabs states as a move aimed at domestic Israeli politics, and not as a sign of willingness to make concessions on territorial issues with Syria.

## The Syrian referendum bill

More important was a vote in the Israeli Knesset, or Parliament, supporting the first reading of a bill submitted by the opposition Likud Party, which would require a larger than

normal majority for passage, if a referendum were held to approve a Syria-Israel treaty. The aim of this bill is to negate the Israeli Arab vote. In addition, the bill stipulates that if registered voters do not cast a ballot, it is automatically counted as a vote against the treaty!

In addition to the opposition Likud, three government parties voted in favor of the bill, giving it a substantial majority in the Knesset. These included the Shas Party, the National Religious Party, and the Russian Yisrael B’Aliyah Party. All three parties had been in the previous government, with the head of Yisrael B’Aliyah, Nathan Sharansky, having been very close to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The vote does not mean that the bill will become law. But it has been authorized to be put before the relevant committees for a second and third reading, wherein it could be defeated. Nonetheless, the bill’s first-reading passage—especially with the votes of three parties in the governing coalition—sent a bad signal to Syria.

The stalling in January of efforts on the Syrian track, all but derailed any progress on negotiations with the Palestinians. Only after the intervention of President Bill Clinton and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did Israeli Prime Minister Barak and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat hold two days of talks, on March 7-8. The resulting “Ramallah agreement” stipulated that bilateral talks will resume in Washington by the third week in March. It also opened the way for implementing another handover, this time of 6.1%, of West Bank territory to Palestinian control. The Sept. 13 deadline for the completion of the final settlement agreement was reaffirmed by both sides.

Any rescue of the Palestinian-Israeli peace efforts must be seen in the context of the explosive situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Both Palestinian and Israeli observers were predicting that a new Intifada would be launched by disaffected Palestinians, particularly among the youth—but this time without the endorsement of Arafat.

A terror alert has been called in Israel. Israeli and Palestinian authorities have launched several operations against terror networks allegedly planning a major bombing campaign inside Israel. Israeli security forces killed three militants linked to the Palestinian Hamas organization, having traced them to their hideout, in an Israeli Arab village. Other arrests have been made by Palestinian authorities in West Bank towns under their control.

## Scandal-mongering destabilizes Israel

In the midst of this building tension, the destabilization of Israel has escalated with a sex scandal that has cost the Barak government one of its key ministers. On March 7, the Israeli mass-circulation daily *Yedioth Aharonoth* reported that a Cabinet minister was being investigated for sexually assaulting an employee of the Transport Ministry. Within hours, the minister was identified as Transport Minis-

ter Yitzhak Mordechai, the leader of the Center Party. By the end of the day, Mordechai, after having issued a public denial of the charges, announced that he would suspend himself from his ministry until after the conclusion of the police investigation.

Mordechai was a member of the Security Cabinet and Deputy Prime Minister. Still more important, as Defense Minister in Benjamin Netanyahu's government (1996-99), he was among the three individuals who pulled the plug on that disastrous regime.

The scandal hitting Mordechai has uncanny echoes of the Whitewater/Monica Lewinsky attack to bring down President Clinton. As in the case of Clinton, rumors had been circulating for years that Mordechai allegedly had a "problem." But even the attorney for the Transport Ministry employee expressed amazement at how the media exploited the case. The plaintiff's attorney said that the authorities had promised confidentiality: Yet within 24 hours, the affair had become front-page news, and the government found itself a minister short. Although the plaintiff's name was not released to the press, the results of the lie detector test, complete with its explicit questions, have been made public.

According to a report in the daily *Ha'aretz*, Mordechai had already been the object of a criminal investigation by the National Fraud Unit. That case was prompted by a complaint filed by Hannah Ziv, the author of a book that was supposed to be distributed among Israeli Defense Forces personnel. Ziv claimed that Mordechai, while Defense Minister in 1998, for corrupt reasons, cancelled the Defense Ministry's order for her book. In addition, Ziv presented the police with sexual harassment allegations against Mordechai from women who had spoken to her, but had never filed complaints, allegedly for fear of losing their jobs. The police decided to open an investigation a month ago.

Meanwhile, two other women have brought sexual harassment charges against Mordechai, which allegedly occurred in the 1980s. Shockingly, the *Ha'aretz* article reports that the police investigators have purposely put these various plaintiffs in touch with the plaintiff from the Transport Ministry, in order to bolster her determination to follow through with her charges against Mordechai.

### **A pattern in the scandals**

Whether or not Mordechai is guilty, the case fits a pattern of scandals which have beset the other two individuals who helped bring down Netanyahu. These included the cash gifts scandal against President Ezer Weizman, and the campaign finance scandal which has made Prime Minister Barak a target of criminal investigation.

As has happened in western Europe and the United States, the cumulative effect of such scandals is to breed apathy and disgust among voters. Such a negative effect occurs at a crucial turning point in Israel, since the approval of final agree-

ments between Israel and the Palestinians and Syrians, may be determined by a national referendum in which failure to vote is construed as voting against.

One must keep in mind *EIR*'s previous reports concerning the dirty-trick operations of Ya'akov Nimrodi, the former Mossad agent who had been a key player in George Bush's Iran-Contra weapons deals of the 1980s (*EIR*, Feb. 4, 2000). Nimrodi was under suspicion of having been behind the cash gifts scandal that targeted President Weizman. It was also alleged that Nimrodi had directly threatened not only Weizman, but other senior government officials. Since our report, Weizman has been officially exonerated of any wrongdoing, but Barak and the Labor Party have been hit with an election campaign financing scandal, and that in turn has led to a criminal investigation which is targeting Barak himself.

The ostensible reason for Nimrodi's vendetta is the refusal of government leaders to prevent the indictment of his son, Ofer Nimrodi, for attempted murder and corruption. (That case has revealed that the Nimrodis controlled agents of influence throughout Israel's security and criminal justice establishment, including in the police department, Justice Ministry, and State Prosecutor's Office.) It is obvious that Nimrodi's vendetta, and his connections to the Bush networks, have potentially vast strategic implications.

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