

Peres Attacks Israeli Defense Forces Officers

by Dean Andromidas

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres launched a broadside attack against Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe Yehonon, accusing him of plotting to assassinate Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, an act that would lead to a much wider regional war, in an interview with Israel's largest circulation daily, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, on Sept. 25 and 26. Peres went further, criticizing the hard-line policies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

In the interview, Peres said that he was advising Sharon that "Israel should retreat to the green line [the 1967 borders between Israel and what are now the Occupied Territories] and draw Israel's borders." He said that the "world will never accept that we stay in the Palestinian territories." Going further than any government minister has to date concerning Israeli settlements, Peres said, "Let it be clear: Nobody will give legitimacy to the settlements."

Peres' comments followed a short time after a meeting with Arafat on Sept. 25, the first by a high-level Israeli official since Sharon came to power, in order to arrange a cease-fire and begin implementation of the Mitchell peace plan. Peres hopes to use the crack opened by that meeting, to get full-scale peace negotiations back on track. Yet it is clear that the IDF, Sharon, and his right-wing allies are continuing their efforts to sabotage any possibility of a successful agreement. Within hours of the Arafat-Peres meeting, the IDF launched one of its bloodiest reprisals in Rafah, in the Gaza Strip, leaving seven Palestinians dead. This reprisal had its intended effect, of continuing the cycle of violence that has left the cease-fire in tatters.

Palestinian Preventive Security Chief Mohammed Dahlan charged that the IDF attack was "a message from the Army to Peres, stating that they will never accept the agreements reached by Peres."

The Peres-Arafat meeting came in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, and was the result of an international mobilization by the United States, Europe, and Russia. The primary motivation of the United States has been widely interpreted as to remove the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a stumbling block to winning Arab support for a "world coalition against terrorism." Nonetheless, the Europeans and the Russians were fully aware of the profound danger that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents; that in the context of a U.S. attack on Afghanistan or some other Islamic country, it threatens to explode into a "clash of civilizations" throughout the Middle East and Eurasia.

The initial pressure exerted so far by the Bush Administration on Sharon is neither sufficient, nor is it a substitute for a Middle East policy that seeks peace through regional economic development based on nation-building. Such a policy would require a radical change in the Bush Administration's geopolitical agenda, because it has not only refused to break with Sharon, but seeks to overthrow Arab governments, especially that of Iraq. The current "war on international terrorism" has made the Middle East a far more dangerous tinderbox for a "clash of civilizations."

The IDF And Sharon

In the interview with *Yedioth Aharonoth*, Peres warned of the consequences if the IDF were to assassinate Arafat. "Let's say we assassinate him. What happens after that?" Peres asked. "With all the criticism of Arafat, he is the only Palestinian who recognizes the map in which Jordan and Israel exist." Arafat's removal would pave the way for far more militant groups and a more radical leadership. "Instead of him there will be Hamas, Jihad, and Hezbollah. They will try to establish one country between Iraq and the sea."

In Israel, it is well known that Israeli Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz has consolidated around himself a military leadership of hard-liners. First appointed under the right-wing government of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Mofaz had his term extended for another year by Sharon. His deputy, the target of Peres' attack, General Yehonon, was formerly head of Israeli military intelligence, and is only one among several hard-liners who have been appointed to key posts. Others include Gen. Jerry Gershon, who was recently appointed commander of Israeli forces in the West Bank, and Gen. Doron Almog, head of the IDF's Southern Command, which is in charge of the Gaza Strip. Even more dangerous is a layer of middle-ranking officers, including those holding field commands at the brigade, battalion, and company levels who identify with the religious Zionist right wing and the settlers. Many of these officers, especially reserve officers, live in the settlements.

In a commentary in the Oct. 1 *Jerusalem Post*, David Kimche, former director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, backed Peres' charges. "It is an open secret that the chief of staff and his deputy are not happy with the latest cease-fire, which they feel, limits their freedom of action against the Palestinians. It is well known that they believe that more force should have been used to quell the Intifada," Kimche wrote.

Kimche said that even when the Labor Party's Ehud Barak was Prime Minister, he came into conflict with the IDF over its refusal to implement his directives concerning IDF rules of engagement in the territories.

Kimche accused the IDF of sabotaging the latest cease-fire. He wrote, "Within hours of Peres' meeting last Wednesday with Arafat, four Palestinians had been killed, including a 16-year-old boy, and some 30 wounded when the IDF entered Rafah and destroyed a number of houses. The action had been mounted in the wake of a Hamas attack on an IDF outpost



Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (right) accused Israeli Defense Forces Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe Yehalon of plotting to assassinate Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat (left), an act that would lead to a much wider regional war.

nearby. The army was acting according to previous decisions that every attack against an Israeli target should be answered in kind. Yet this was one of the fiercest and most deadly of IDF incursions into that sector, coming immediately in the wake of the Peres-Arafat agreement for which the Army makes no effort in hiding its dislike. Could it be that there was a link between the fierceness of the riposte and the dislike of the agreement?"

As of this writing, the IDF and Sharon continue a policy whose ultimate aim is to crush the Palestinian Authority. While it is true that Hamas and Islamic Jihad continue attacks on Israeli targets, the IDF counterattacks are nothing but ruthless reprisals, which constitute war crimes under the Geneva Accords. Furthermore, they are aimed at making it virtually impossible for Arafat to crack down on his own militants without losing his political credibility. When two Hamas militants attacked a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, killing two Israelis, the IDF response was to launch a bloody reprisal by cutting a kilometer-deep no-man's land into Palestinian-controlled territory bordering the settlement. They killed six Palestinians, including civilians, destroyed agricultural land, police outposts, and private homes, leaving hundreds of Palestinians homeless.

Fear Of Peace

In reaction to this reprisal, Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, speaking on the Voice of Palestine Radio, charged, "The Israelis did this because they feared there was progress toward a political breakthrough. That worried the gang that controls the occupation army and the government."

The IDF continues to engage in activities in the territories which are clearly preparations for large-scale military operations, as soon as Sharon gives the order. The IDF continues

to lay siege to important Palestinian cities, including Ramallah and Jenine. The term "siege" is no metaphor. What is involved are not just a few roadblocks and positioning of a few tanks, but the construction of siege works in the full, classical sense of the term, including building huge mounds of earth and stone, trenches, and firing positions. Drawing the obvious conclusion that the IDF is preparing a full-scale assault from such positions, the Palestinians have constructed their own makeshift tank traps and other defenses.

Without support from the United States, Peres will not break with Sharon, nor will he have any influence on Sharon's policies. The Israel peace camp is just too weak. The recent leaks in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, that the Bush Administration had been considering launching a peace initiative, but was deterred by the Sept. 11 attacks, caused nary a ripple in IDF policy. Even a statement by President George W. Bush himself, that "the idea of a Palestinian state has always been part of a vision" of a peace agreement, was seen in Israel as more of an attempt to appease the Arab states, than to put pressure on Sharon.

This is not surprising, for two reasons. The first is the continued disarray and internal fights within the Bush Administration since the Sept. 11 attacks. The second is the mobilization of the right-wing pro-Israel lobby in Washington following Bush's statement and the press leaks on proposed peace initiatives. This came in the form of an advertisement published by Tim Wuliger and Howard Kohr, leaders of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), attacking those who encouraged the President to meet with Arafat and declare his support for a Palestinian state as "sabotaging America's war against terrorism." The ad is an obvious threat levelled at the upcoming Congressional mid-term elections, because AIPAC is one of the leading contributors to Congressional campaigns.