

'Dark Clouds' Gather Over Sharon's Regime

by Dean Andromidas

The Israeli mass-circulation daily *Ma'ariv* on March 3 launched yet another scandal against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, one that could finally lead to his early demise. The affair involves Elhanan Tennenbaum, the reputed drug trafficker whose release from captivity by the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah was secured by Sharon through a highly controversial prisoner swap. *Ma'ariv* revealed that Sharon was business partners with Tennenbaum's family, a vital piece of information Sharon kept from his government, the security services, and all the relevant authorities in order to ensure the deal's approval.

The new scandal arrives on Sharon's doorstep when no fewer than three criminal investigations involving bribery, breach of trust, and corruption could lead to his indictment within a few months. Already simmering, are the accusations that he took bribes from Israeli contractor and Likud party kingmaker David Appel; the so-called Cyril Kern affair, where millions of dollars were transferred to the bank accounts of Sharon's son Gilad; and the so-called "Greek island" affair, which also involves bribe-taking from David Appel.

Israeli intelligence sources report that Sharon's political position is starting to appear very shaky in the eyes of his great ally, the Bush Administration. Sharon is no longer being seen as an "asset" but a "very heavy weight" around Bush's neck. Certain Israeli factions are trying to use these scandals to oust Sharon, but they are not yet strong enough, one source said. Either Sharon's health or developments in Washington will lead to his downfall. "Sharon's fate," the source said, "is linked to that of Vice President Dick Cheney and his neo-cons." The source suggests that once Cheney's top ally, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, is out, Sharon will soon follow. "When the first domino falls, they will all fall."

Old Business Partners

Early last month, Sharon's government announced a spectacular prisoner swap with Hezbollah, an organization that is not only seen by Israelis as their great enemy, but is high on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Israel released 436 prisoners, including Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians, and other Arab prisoners, and 59 bodies of slain Lebanese guerrillas. In return, Israel received the bodies of three Israeli soldiers who died as a result of wounds they received when Hezbollah abducted them on the Israeli-Leba-



Elhanan Tennenbaum's release is Sharon's latest disgrace.

nese border in October 2000. Also released was Elhanan Tennenbaum, a reserve colonel in the Israeli Defense Forces, who was kidnapped by Hezbollah only a few days after the attack on the other three soldiers.

The deal caused outrage because even before Tennenbaum's release, it was being reported in the press that he was kidnapped while attempting to negotiate a drug deal with Lebanese drug traffickers. Furthermore, it was asked why Sharon was willing to release so many Palestinian prisoners in a deal with Hezbollah, building up the prestige of its spiritual leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah; yet Sharon refused to release even one prisoner to former Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Abbas. This refusal contributed to the latter's downfall and the collapse of the Road Map for a Middle East peace. When Sharon's government gave Tennenbaum a plea bargain that would prevent him from standing trial and going to prison, in return for telling the truth of what he revealed to the Hezbollah, cries of outrage, for a public inquest, were raised across the political spectrum.

Then on March 3, *Ma'ariv* revealed that the 89-year-old Shimon Cohen, father of Tennenbaum's estranged wife, Esther, had been a business partner with Sharon for almost two decades, beginning when Cohen was a shareholder in the company that Sharon formed to manage his Sycamore Ranch in 1975.

Sharon immediately affirmed, "I did not know of the former family ties of Mr. Shimon Cohen, whom I have not seen nor spoken with for decades."

'Sharon Must Resign'

In launching the Tennenbaum scandal, *Ma'ariv's* senior political commentator, Ben Kaspi, wrote, "It is hard to know if his personal acquaintance with Tennenbaum influenced the prime minister when he decided on the steep price that he was willing to pay for the prisoner exchange. One thing is certain. He did not tell the government ministers, senior defense officials, or the public about the nature of his family's relationship with Tennenbaum. For weeks, Israeli citizens have been trying to figure out why Ariel Sharon worked so hard to have Elhanan Tennenbaum released from captivity. Why did he

release hundreds of terrorists for a drug dealer? Why did he pursue minister after minister in order to obtain a majority? Why did he tell investigators to treat him gently? Now, there may be an answer.”

Calling for Sharon’s resignation, Ben Kaspi declared, “Please put the keys to the state on the table and vacate your position . . . not tomorrow, not the day after, not next week. Today, now.”

The political storm turned into a hurricane after the *Ma’ariv* revelations, with opposition politicians calling for Sharon’s resignation.

Meretz party faction leader Zahava Gal-On tabled a “no-confidence” motion to be voted on in the Knesset. Gal-On said, “The Prime Minister had a lot of information and chose to keep quiet. He must resign immediately.” After Sharon claimed he was unaware of the family connection to Tennenbaum, Gal-On said, “It seems a little odd that the Prime Minister didn’t know. He didn’t know about the Tennenbaum affair, he didn’t know about the affair of Appel and his son, he didn’t know about Cyril Kern. There’s so much that he didn’t know, that the quantity creates the quality. . . . There’s a very dark cloud now hovering over the Prime Minister.”

The Labor Party’s Ophir Pines Paz, commenting on Sharon’s claims that he was not aware of the family connection, said, “His story is an offense to normal intelligence; just like his reactions to previous revelations, he sounds so shallow, so fallacious, so unbelievable; only a lie detector can substantiate his claims.”

Yossi Sarid of Meretz compared Sharon to the three monkeys: “See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil,” saying, “The new findings demand an additional two monkeys be added: Know no evil and remember no evil.”

In an emergency meeting held in the offices of leader of the opposition Shimon Peres, the Knesset members of the Labor Party decided to call for an independent inquest by Israel’s State Comptroller, the same Comptroller who discovered that Sharon had illegally financed his 1999 primary campaign and other acts that are now at the center of criminal investigations.

Peres declared to the press, “A most serious crisis of trust has been created in the Israeli public, surrounding the Prime Minister, due to a string of events that has peaked with the Tennenbaum release scandal.”

Who Is Tennenbaum, Really?

In 1984, U.S. CIA station chief William Buckley was kidnapped by Shi’ite militants in West Beirut. Tortured to death, his decomposed body was not found until years later. By contrast, Tennenbaum, with the rank of lieutenant colonel, was not only the most senior Israeli officer ever captured by Hezbollah, or any Arab army, but was the only one to come away alive. After three years of captivity, Tennenbaum returned with every hair on his head, all his fingernails, and even a few extra pounds under his belt.

These facts have raised quite a few eyebrows in Israel. There is obviously something more behind the Tennenbaum scandal than Sharon using his power to help a the son-in-law of an old business partner.

Senior Israeli and European security sources who are very familiar with Lebanon and Israel, pointed out that Tennenbaum has all the makings of a high-level intelligence operative, and not a desperate businessman looking for quick cash to pay off gambling debts, as alleged in the press. Not only was Tennenbaum a lieutenant colonel in the reserves, but he worked as a consultant for Tadiran Communications, one of Israel’s most important manufacturers of military communications equipment. If anything, the drug story was only a cover. One source pointed out that no Israeli drug dealer would go to an Arab country to close a drug deal, especially if he was an officer in the Israeli army.

“Israeli and Lebanese drug trafficking is a highly structured business,” said an European security source who has worked in both Israel and Lebanon. “It’s just not done that way. Tennenbaum was on an intelligence mission, not a drug deal. What that mission was, we just do not know. Nonetheless, the drug story is just a cover.”

Furthermore, his drug-dealing partners-turned-kidnappers had, in fact, been Israeli agents. Kais Obeid was a Shin Bet agent-informant up until the time he “turned bad” and allegedly plotted to kidnap Tennenbaum for Hezbollah. The other kidnapper, Kayeedy Biro, was linked to Israeli Military Intelligence’s Unit 504, which runs Arab agents-collaborators who are drawn from drug-smuggling networks operating between Israel and Lebanon.

Before he left Israel in October 2000, Tennenbaum left several boxes of documents at the home of his mistress. This source pointed out that this is exactly what an intelligence operative does before leaving on a highly controversial mission: “He leaves a box of documents as his ‘life insurance policy.’ They are usually left with a lawyer with instructions on when and to whom to reveal them. But he could also leave them with a friend.”

One source even suggested that this could have been an operation by Sharon to establish some sort of back channel to Hezbollah, as a way to making contact with Iran. Such back channels, which have existed in the past, would require an agent of Tennenbaum’s credentials—i.e., a senior reserve officer with a connection to Sharon. “Whatever the truth,” the source said, “this is going to end up having been a very dirty affair.”

Another factor is that *Ma’ariv* is owned by the infamous Jacob Nimrodi, the former Mossad agent and arms dealer who, in the 1980s, worked with then-Vice President George H.W. Bush during the Iran-Contra affair. He is no friend of Sharon, and would have access to the type of information that could sink the Israeli Prime Minister. In fact, the editors of *Ma’ariv* have promised to come out with even more damaging revelations over the next days.