

Gaza Evacuation Will Expand the Conflict

by Dean Andromidas

Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announcement that he intends to evacuate most of the Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip, will only expand the conflict. Israelis and Palestinians alike see Sharon's latest gambit as, first, a means of political survival at a time of various criminal investigations against him; and second, an attempt to counteract growing Israeli public sentiment for a negotiated settlement. Sharon's war goals have not changed. He remains strategically committed to his "greater Israel."

"Sharon has started to talk about these plans because of changes in Israeli public opinion," Brig. Gen. (res.) Shlomo Brom of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies told *EIR*. "The public, seeing that the government is not taking the initiative, is supporting non-government peace initiatives." This refers to support for the Geneva Accord peace initiative, of which General Brom is a signer; Sharon is moving to undermine it. Brom cautioned that at this point, Sharon is only talking, and that the real problem is not the settlements in the Gaza Strip but those in the West Bank. He warned that Sharon, at best, will accept only a tiny Palestinian state on the West Bank, which will be unacceptable to the Palestinians. "The conflict will just continue."

Yossi Sarid of the Meretz party said, "The Prime Minister is simply not credible. We know how Sharon gives instructions and what their real value on the ground is. After every instruction for an evacuation, another outpost pops out of the ground." Palestinian President Yasser Arafat told reporters, "Tomorrow, they'll evacuate 17 mobile homes, and the next day another 170 will go up. Israel's policy is to swallow more Palestinian land and prevent any possible solution."

Even right-wing Deputy Education Minister Zvi Hendel linked Sharon's plan to the criminal investigations, declaring that "the depth of the investigation will determine the depth of withdrawal. . . . Sharon's plan will bring down the government." Indeed, on Feb. 5, only three days after the Prime Minister's announcement, police investigators interrogated him at his official residence in regard to allegations that he had taken bribes from Israeli contractor David Appel.

A senior Israeli intelligence source warned not to be deceived by the "shadows on the wall of the cave," as to what Sharon and his faction of the Israeli military-security establishment are really up to. Sharon's "evacuation" announcement is a ploy to create a sense of uncertainty, behind which

his policy will continue to be the destruction of the Palestinian National Authority, the construction of the new Berlin Wall of the Middle East, and the expansion of the settlements. When the opportunity presents itself, Sharon and this faction will launch a new regional war enabling him to "ethnically cleanse" the land of Israel, the source said.

Sharon's 'Master Plan'

This assessment is shared by many Palestinians and Israelis alike. Jamal Zakout, a Palestinian signer of the Geneva Accord, told *Ha'aretz* on Feb. 9 that Sharon's latest gambit is part of his "master plan to wipe out the Palestinian national plan for independence and sovereignty. . . . Sharon is not interested in a Palestinian leadership that has a logical plan for peace with Israel." Zakout is a close colleague of Geneva Accord initiator Yasser Abed Rabbo, and both are members of Palestinian Democratic Union, part of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. "An Israeli exit from the settlements in the Gaza Strip," Zakout added, "is a strengthening of Sharon's colonialist settlement project." If he removes the Gaza settlements then he "will say that now the Palestinians do have a state, in Gaza. The process of expanding settlements is proceeding energetically in the West Bank, together with the separation fence to the west, and the separation fence to the east that will cut the Jordan Valley off from the rest of the West Bank. He will annex about half of the Palestinian lands in the West Bank to Israel. . . . And the truth is that there is not, and there will not be any Palestinian leadership that will be partner to Sharon's plan."

Zakout warned that "in the end, Sharon's plan . . . will be dangerous to the people in Israel." A victory of the the Palestinian extremists suits Sharon, since he is not interested in a "partner" for peace.

Within days of his Gaza announcement, Sharon let it be known that his evacuation plan is a scorched earth policy: "The whole idea of disengagement is that the Palestinians should not profit by the process: Accordingly, the current tendency is to leave nothing intact, not a greenhouse, not a house and not even the grass." It should be remembered that at the withdrawal of the settlements in the Sinai Peninsula in 1980, Sharon sent in the bulldozers to destroy every structure in the settlements, so nothing would be left for the Egyptians, with whom Israel had just signed a peace treaty. But Sharon has no intention of following in the footsteps of Menachem Begin, who signed that treaty. Sharon is planning for his war.

Simultaneous with talk of withdrawal, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched major incursions into the Gaza Strip with the explicit purpose of expanding the conflict. Over 20 Palestinians were killed, including the son of the head of Arafat's Fatah faction in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has already vowed revenge. On Feb. 7, Sharon and his ultra-hardline Defense Minister, Shaul Mofaz, named the commander of the Israeli Air Force, Gen. Dan Halutz, to be deputy chief

of staff of the IDF, a position which is a stepping stone to that of chief of staff. As commander of the Air Force, Halutz, the architect of Israel's infamous targeted assassinations policy, has been drafting operational plans and conducting training for long-range strikes against targets in Iran. If he becomes chief of staff in 2005, his appointment will mark clearly that Sharon's military and security faction is preparing for a future expansion of the conflict well beyond the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Uncertainty of Cheney's Future

In creating a sense of uncertainty, Sharon is also reacting to the uncertain future of his main allies in Washington: Vice President Dick Cheney and the neo-cons, according to the Israeli intelligence source cited above. Without continued support from factions in Washington, Sharon's circle will not be able to sustain their current policy. They are likely seeking to reposition themselves now.

The reality of the situation within Israel is unsustainable. Israeli political commentator Akiva Eldar wrote in *Ha'aretz* on Feb. 9 that Sharon's Gaza announcement "stems from the collapse of the defense establishment. Over the last few months, IDF, Shin Bet and Border Police field commanders have been reporting that their forces are stretched to the limit. They say that officers and soldiers, policemen and Shin Bet agents have all reached the point of exhaustion. The high command is complaining that training days have been reduced to a minimum, and officers are warning that friction with Palestinian civilians at roadblocks and settlement outposts is eroding motivation and destroying the soldiers' morale."

The Israeli economy also continues to collapse. The same week Sharon announced his evacuation plan, garbage was piling up and schools were closed throughout Israel as municipal workers, along with the municipal authorities for which they worked, staged a nationwide strike because the government refuses to finance their deficits. These municipalities are so bankrupt that workers have not been paid for up to five months. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being transferred to building Sharon's Berlin Wall of the Middle East, the cost of which will reach \$4 billion. In fact, the wall is being built with American taxpayers' money. The Israeli economy would have collapsed long ago, were it not for the \$9 billion in loan guarantees given to it by the Bush Administration. Already, \$3 billion of these guarantees have been used to plug the huge hole in the Israeli budget, mostly created by military expenses and the construction of Sharon's wall.

The Israeli intelligence source warned that while there are other factions within the military and security establishment who understand that the current policy is unsustainable, Sharon's faction will remain undeterred by these realities as long as they are in power. The departure of Cheney and the neo-cons will deter, but will not stop them, until they are removed from power within Israel.