

Sharon's "Mortal Blow"

The Future of Israel, Part Two

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Israeli Prime Minister **Ariel Sharon** has had quite an energetic last two weeks. On the cusp of Passover as well as Easter, it is especially appropriate to consider the potentially catastrophic impacts of his recent tough words and actions on the future of Israel, as well as the Palestinians.



IN YOUR FACE

On March 23, reportedly on Sharon's direct orders, the [IDF assassinated 66-year-old Sheik Ahmed Yassin](#), the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, igniting huge protests throughout the Arab world and also contributing significantly to the cancellation of last week's [Arab League meetings](#) in **Tunisia**.

Next, Sharon spent a full day answering questions from Israeli prosecutors, who are reportedly on the verge of [charging him with bribery](#), in connection with a **corruption-ridden real estate**



development project in Greece. According to Israeli political analysts, the chance

that Sharon will be charged with at least one of three possible corruption charges in the next few months is "95 percent." And that, in turn might make it very difficult for him to continue to serve as Prime Minister.

This short fuse and the risk of prosecution may account for part of Sharon's recent behavioral imbalances. Just yesterday, he became embroiled in an incredible shouting match with right-wing members of his Cabinet over his plans to unilaterally withdraw from all 21 Israeli settlements in Gaza, plus 4 minor settlements in the northern West Bank.

To placate these opponents, he also repeated the threats that he made last October, that Israel reserves the right to assassinate Yasser Arafat and Hez'Bollah chief Hassan Nasrallah as well. The comments provoked a sharp response from **US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.** But they received no comment at all from other senior Bush administration officials, much less **President Bush,** who is under a great deal of stress himself, and is probably afraid to alienate Israel's US-based supporters in the midst of this year's tight Presidential election.

Nor, for that matter, did we hear any condemnation of the threats from **Senator John Kerry,** who, depending on the day of the week and the issue, has been running wide-right and wide-left at the same time, trying to be all things to all people.



"ENDING THEIR DREAMS"

Finally, just today, in interviews in Hebrew with leading Israeli newspapers, Sharon made it very clear just how far from President Bush's "road map" he has wandered. If he is to be taken seriously, his "unilateral" plan for disengaging from Gaza is the death knell of the two-state solution. In the interview, Sharon openly proclaimed what many critics of his "apartheid security barrier" have accused him of believing all along:

"In the unilateral plan, there is no Palestinian state. This situation could continue for many years...It will bring their [the Palestinians'] dreams to an end....When you fence areas and communities in the West Bank, you end a lot of their dreams...My plan is tough on the Palestinians. A mortal blow."

What are we to make of this belligerence? Some pundits may argue that Sharon is just be grandstanding for a domestic audience. Others may say that all his threats are just calculated to scare the Palestinians back to the bargaining table. After all, the Bush Administration, obsessed with mounting anarchy in Iraq, is now just making very faint noises about a "two-state solution." and has otherwise dropped the ball. And the Palestinians have so far not responded to Sharon's other threats, so what else can he do but escalate?

If Sharon were really sincere about pursuing a two-state solution, however, why did he choose precisely this moment, on the verge of a trip to Washington to defend his "unilateral" plan, to assassinate Sheikh Yassin. After all, the 66-year old clerical paraplegic made the same wheelchair ride to the mosque five times a day, and most observers agree that he played no operational role in planning Hamas' terrorism. The move that did nothing to weaken Hamas, but it did infuriate the Palestinian street and probably made Hamas more popular than ever. So why did Sharon bother, just now? And why has Sharon (and the US) continued to ostracize and humiliate the hapless **Arafat**, one of the few Palestinian leaders who still supports a two-state solution?

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One suspects that there are darker motives at work here. We are witnessing the frustrated outbursts of an aging warhorse, who has lost much of his popularity and may be about to be prosecuted for bribery. He never has had much time for diplomacy, much less his old nemesis Arafat, who Sharon is reported to have always regretted not terminating with extreme prejudice back in Beirut. We recall that Sharon was also the *only member of the Israeli Cabinet who voted against the 1979 Peace Accord with Egypt*. Nor has he ever really had much time for a "Palestinian state" anywhere on his side of the Jordan River. And with his own era in Israel coming to an end, he probably could not *abide* the thought that, but for IDF hits, old enemies like Arafat and younger, far more dangerous ones like **Nasrallah** might actually survive him in power.

Sharon also probably cannot abide the thought that whoever succeeds him as Prime Minister may be tempted to sit down with the Palestinians -- *perhaps* with the strong support of the newly-elected President Kerry -- and try to undo all the damage that

Sharon has wrought since he first set foot on the **Temple Mount** in September 2000.

THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL?

So Sharon is probably just up to his old tricks. First and foremost, the objective is to create "facts on the ground" that will make a negotiated two-state solution virtually impossible. In his view, it is far better to carve the West Bank into pieces that will effectively undermine the viability of an independent state, and, over time, lead the Palestinians to conclude that their only future as a people lies in Jordan.

The main risk to Israelis and Palestinians alike is that Sharon may actually achieve this objective, in the waning moments of his long career. And then the future could look something like this:

- Slowly but steadily the rest of the world -- especially the EU, but also Latin America, Africa, and even Asia, will disconnect from Israel, even more so than it has done already -- perhaps even more so than it eventually did with South Africa in the 1980s.
- Israel's relations with "moderate" Middle Eastern countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, will also become much more problematic.
- The West Bank and Gaza will become a "population bomb," filled with millions of impoverished, hopeless, angry people, whose numbers will continue to grow at 4-5 percent a year as far as the eye can see, even while Israel's own population tends to stagnate. After all, the Palestinians have no place else to go -- Arab "solidarity" notwithstanding. That's hardly true of Israelis, a growing share of whom now spend living abroad.
- The Palestinian people, long among the most enlightened and secularized in the Arab world, may turn to radical Islam in far larger numbers than ever before. Over time, they will gradually integrate with Jordan and perhaps Syria. But this victory for "Islamic democracy" will hardly be a victory for Israel. The Hashemite dynasty in Jordan and perhaps the secular Ba'athist regime in Syria may topple, to be replaced by a Palestinian version of the Islamic state. Egypt's corrupt regime and Saudi Arabia's family dictatorship will also feel the tremors. Israel's only response to all this will be try and keep the entire collection of enemies off balance.

- **By 2010-2015**, Israel may still have its wall and powerful military. Just like the South African apartheid regime, which was outnumbered 10 to 1, it retains confidence that from a purely military standpoint, it can hang on forever, so long as it avoids being entangled in foreign wars, and is willing to kill enough enemies back home. It may indeed be able to survive for quite some time as a kind of Spartan democracy, engaged in a permanent state of war, and even to reduce the level of terrorism.
- However, many young Israelis are already complaining **this is not a very enjoyable way to live or raise a family**. . Over time, unless one is a refugee, a religious fanatic, or -- oddly enough -- a Palestinian, **Israel may simply not be the kind of place that anyone wants to live for very long**. . Like white South Africans, it is likely that unless there is a peace settlement, more and more secular Jews will simply find it "more convenient" to resettle in New York or LA or Florida, where they are not obsessed with security, compelled to subsidize true believers, and tortured by confused feelings about the impoverished people around them. And since the big pools of oppressed Jews living in the Diaspora, like the former Soviet Union, have by now basically dried up (except France's 500,000, most of whom have absolutely no interest in living in Israel), **this means that Israel's own population -- contrary to its own projections -- may begin to stagnate**.
- From this standpoint, one gains a somewhat different perspective on the many US-based "loyal supporters" of Israel who vehemently proclaim their fealty to the country of their ancient ancestors. No doubt they contribute heavily to the cause, and are delighted that **some other Jews -- increasingly, the Sephardic Jews of Middle Eastern origins** are willing to live there. But what rational person would seriously consider abandoning the security and comforts of Cambridge, New York, Washington DC., or LA to live in such a hostile environment?

In short, even if Israeli is able to wall the Palestinians out forever, it will never be able to wall *the Israelis in*.

Already it appears that they are quietly leaving in droves. US law makes it relatively easy for Israelis to reside in the US and move back and forth to Israel, or even hold dual citizenship. Official data on the volume of emigration since the al-Aqsa intifada began is sketchy, but informal evidence suggests that the number of Israelis living "temporarily" in the US has skyrocketed.

In the US, the evidence also suggests that Jews are vulnerable to much higher rates of intermarriage and assimilation than those who live in Israel, though this is partly a matter of self-selection. (In the US, for example, from 1990 to 2002, the Jewish population in the US, which now accounts for nearly 40 percent of world Jewry, **actually declined** from 5.5 million to 5.2 million, mainly because of low birth rates and high assimilation.)

Ironically enough, therefore, it may be Sharon's very own policies that will constitute one of the most serious threats to world Jewry. Those non-Jews who have always cherished this great people's profound contributions to enlightenment can only contemplate this flickering flame with sadness.

At a certain point, then, Israel may recognize these trends, and look around for a Mandela among the Palestinians, someone who is willing try reconciliation one more time. But by then, unlike South Africa, it may be too late. The short-sighted, vindictive policies that were pursued by Sharon and his supporters, supposedly in the interests of "Israeli security," have already eliminated many of these figures, and the Islamic radicals are taking care of the rest.

Indeed, the situation is as if, in a South African context, **the crazy, anti-white PAC** had managed to acquire a huge popular following before Mandela were freed from prison. In that context, it would not have mattered very much whether Mandela lived or died.

In 2002, **Ronnie Kasrils, South Africa's Minister of Water Affairs**, who participated actively in the struggle against apartheid during the 1980s, and who also happens to be Jewish, was asked about the comparison between Israel and South Africa by the leading Egyptian newspaper, al-Ahram. He replied as follows:

"Personally, I do not think it fair to compare what is happening now to the Palestinians and any excesses going on in the world. Nor is it fair to compare apartheid rule in South Africa with the conduct of Israel and those who support it. **The South African apartheid regime never engaged in the sort of repression Israel is inflicting on the Palestinians.** For all the evils and atrocities of apartheid, the government never sent tanks into black towns. It never used gunships, bombers, or missiles against the black towns or Bantustans. The apartheid regime used to impose sieges on black towns, but these sieges were lifted within days. Soldiers used to search homes and

conduct a variety of punitive measures, but none of these can be compared with Israel's repressive actions, and its siege of entire towns and villages for months on end....." 1

Those who genuinely care about Israel's future, as well as those who care about the Palestinians, have a solemn duty to **speak out now**, to reexamine these issues carefully, and to consider rejecting the path that Sharon is taking before it is too late. Israel itself needs to listen carefully to those voices, and understand that not all its critics are enemies, and not all its "loyal supporters" and aging generals are true friends.



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1 Ronnis Kastrils, interview with Cairo's Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 28 March - 3 April 2002, Issue No.579