

Scandal rocks Israel: Will Sharon be hit?

by Dean Andromidas

On April 22, Israeli police arrested Ofer Nimrodi, editor of the mass circulation Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*, as he was about to board a flight from Tel Aviv to Zurich following allegations implicating him in Israel's most spectacular illegal wiretapping scandal ever. Ofer Nimrodi is the son of Ya'acov Nimrodi, a former member of the Mossad, former Israeli emissary to Iran, and one of Israel's biggest arms dealers, who worked with George Bush and Oliver North in the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages operation.

The younger Nimrodi is accused of commissioning illegal wiretaps by private investigators, who were not only wiretapping *Ma'ariv*'s competitors, but politicians and government officials, including police, the secret services, the Defense Ministry, and even the office of the President of Israel. Both father and son have in the past been associated with Ariel Sharon, the agriculture, defense, and housing minister in previous Israeli governments under the leadership of the right-wing Likud Party.

Today, Sharon is spearheading the drive to wreck the Middle East peace process, and he has been coordinating this effort with circles in the United States, Britain, and France. He has been massively funded by these sources to, in turn, finance the provocative settlers movement, including the fanatic Kach movement which spawned Baruch Goldstein, who massacred Muslim worshippers in Hebron last year. Recently, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin accused the Likud of being "complicit" in the terror bombings by the Palestinian militant organization Hamas. Rabin's charges were bolstered a few weeks ago, when Israeli police broke a money-laundering ring which involved Jewish Yeshiva students and Palestinian money-changers who were suspected of transferring funds to the Hamas.

So far, the probe of the Nimrodi wiretapping scandal has not turned up any publicly released evidence linking it to the Sharon circle's efforts to bring down the Rabin government. Nevertheless, although under Israeli law, wiretapping is a misdemeanor punishable by no more than one year in jail (or three years for persons convicted of commissioning the taps), the case is being personally directed by Minister of National Police Moshe Shahal, and it is apparent that there is more involved here than a war between rival newspapers over circulation and advertising.

In 1992, Ya'acov Nimrodi purchased *Ma'ariv* for his son

following the death of its previous owner, British media mogul Robert Maxwell. The latter committed suicide or was killed following a lifetime of service to at least three intelligence services—the Soviet Union, Britain, and Israel's. It has also been alleged that he had ties to the Russian mafia. Nimrodi, as a former civil servant employed by the Mossad, apparently became a millionaire as a result of being the key intermediary in arms deals to Iran during the 1980s. He is currently partners with a Saudi arms dealer of Iran-Contra fame, Adnan Kashoggi, in an enterprise they claim wants to invest in Gaza and the West Bank, but has so far failed to build anything.

Nimrodi made his son, Ofer, editor of *Ma'ariv* soon after the latter graduated from Harvard University. The paper has expanded rapidly, now challenging *Yediot Aharanot* as the top circulation newspaper in Israel. According to Israeli sources, Ofer had been part of Ariel Sharon's legal team when the latter sued *Time* magazine for libel a few years ago.

An ongoing investigation

According to Raine Marcus, an investigative journalist with the Hollinger Corp.-owned *Jerusalem Post*, the probe into wiretapping has been ongoing for over a year. Wiretapping is a widespread abuse by private investigators.

Arrested along with Ofer was his lawyer, Motti Katz, who has close links to the Israeli Defense Forces. Also arrested was Ofer's personal security chief, David Ronen, who is a former senior official in the Shin Beth, Israel's internal security service. It was Ronen who commissioned the wiretappers, allegedly on behalf of Ofer Nimrodi.

The wiretappers themselves enjoy close links with the Israeli security establishment. Ya'acov Tsur, one of those indicted who turned government witness, giving authorities the evidence required to arrest Nimrodi and the others, through his Agam private investigation firm, was able to acquire a \$100,000 apparatus that could tap fax machines and cellular phones. That machine, which was too expensive for Israeli police agencies to purchase, was "loaned" to him by its manufacturer, ECI Telecom Ltd., which developed the machine for sale to government security agencies.

Another side of this case involves the other leading Israeli daily, *Yediot Aharanot*, whose chief editor, Moshe Vardi, is accused of ordering the wiretapping of Dov Yudkovsky, a former editor of both *Yediot Aharanot* and *Ma'ariv*. Yudkovsky was a close relative of Robert Maxwell. Although the publisher of *Yediot Aharanot*, Arnon Moses, is said to be close to the Labor Party, his wife is the sister of Silvan Shalom, deputy head of the Likud Party. According to testimony by one of the private investigators charged with wiretapping, Vardi hired a firm whose principals had been arrested last March for conspiring to kill three leading Russian mafia leaders living in Israel.

This byzantine story promises to have a significant impact on Israeli politics for years to come.