

Sharon Victory, Plus Bush, Threaten Religious War

by Dean Andromidas

What once appeared as the beginning of a “doomsday scenario” has now come to pass: Ariel Sharon, the “Butcher of Lebanon,” has become Prime Minister of Israel, while George W. Bush, whose father brought the world the Gulf War, is President of the United States. To say that this latest development brings us closer to religious war, trivializes the grave potential for catastrophe that lies ahead.

Sharon, defeating Israel Prime Minister Ehud Barak by winning 62% in elections on Feb. 6, not only put a dramatic end to the political career of Barak, but also shut tight the window of opportunity for an effective Middle East peace agreement, which had been opened by the 1993 Oslo Accords. Sharon gave his victory speech in front of the Western Wall, what remains of Solomon’s Temple, in the Old City of Jerusalem, and proclaimed that Jerusalem will remain united under Israeli rule, “with the Temple Mount at its center for all eternity.” On Sept. 28, 2000, Sharon touched off the Palestinians’ “Al Aqsa Intifada,” when he took his infamous walk onto the Temple Mount (Al Haram Al Sharif in Arabic), Islam’s third-holiest site. Now, the man who unleashed a process that threatens to engulf the region in religious war, is Prime Minister of Israel.

On Feb. 8, two days after the election, a powerful car-bomb exploded in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem. An unknown group, the Popular Palestinian Resistance Force for Sabra and Shatila, took responsibility.

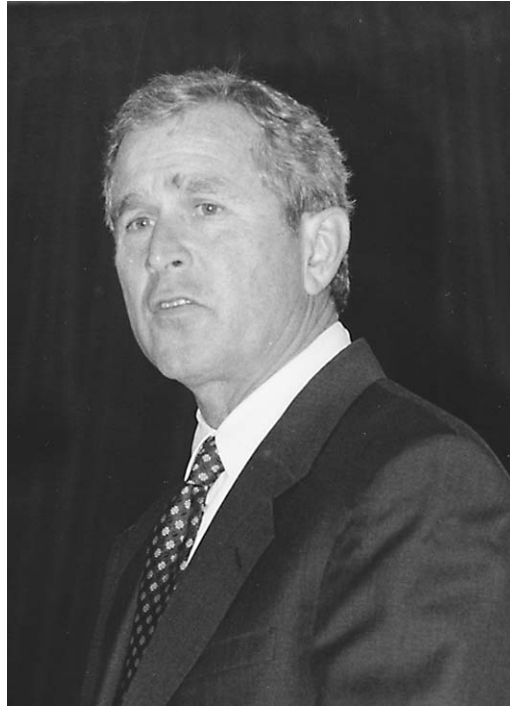
The only way to prevent a religious war from tearing apart the Middle East, U.S. statesman Lyndon LaRouche has said, is through the implementation of a policy modelled on the Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the religious wars which ravaged 17th-Century Europe. Such a perspective would envision laying to rest bitter religious differences in the service

of establishing a policy of economic development to benefit all the populations among the former adversaries. LaRouche has consistently put forth his Oasis Plan for Middle East Peace, which envisions regional development centered around a massive program of water desalination projections and building a regional infrastructure network.

It remains to be seen when Sharon will shed the sheep’s clothing he donned during his campaign, so as to appear to be a “peace candidate.” A commentary in the Labor Party-oriented daily *Ha’aretz* on Feb. 8, gave him the benefit of the doubt, and described his peace policy: “His concept of peace is to create strategic stability and no more. He does not have an exciting vision of a new Middle East with man-made rivers, trains, multinational manufacturing plants, and kisses from [Egyptian President] Hosni Mubarak. Neither does he care particularly for ceremonies on the White House lawn, nor dream of a Nobel Peace Prize for putting an ‘end to the conflict.’ . . . So there will be no expectation that during Sharon’s administration there will be any new agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.”

Sharon’s Ally: Bush

The idea, bandied about among certain Middle East circles, that the Bush Administration will be “even-handed,” or even “anti-Sharon,” because of its interests in Arab oil, is proving to be yet another illusion. Following Sharon’s victory, Bush went way beyond simply congratulating the Prime Minister-elect, and committed his administration to opening doors to Sharon, within the international community, and especially among the Arabs, that might otherwise have been shut tight. Speaking to reporters at the White House on Feb. 7, Bush said he will give Sharon “a chance to do what he



President George W. Bush's green light to Israel's new Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon (left), in the latter's bid to form a government of national unity, undercuts the peace camp in Israel.

said he was going to do, which was to try to form a unity government and reach out to the parties to promote peace in the region. . . . We're going to play the hand we've been dealt. And we're going to play it well."

Bush, along with Secretary of State Sir Colin Powell, then proceeded to work the phones, calling up the region's Arab leaders, including President Mubarak, King Abdullah of Jordan, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa. Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat was last on the list. The Bush Administration's message was clear: Do not "provoke" or isolate Sharon. These rounds of calls have managed to hold off the potential for organizing a united Arab "boycott" of any diplomatic contact with a Sharon government that was being discussed, particularly in Egypt.

Bush's de facto support for Sharon's call for a government of national unity with the Labor Party, had a similar effect in Israel. Prior to the elections, the peace camp in the Labor Party resisted moves for a unity government. These forces received support from President Bill Clinton while he was still in office. In fact, it is said that Clinton told Barak that he found a national unity government with Sharon to be "unacceptable." Bush's green light, fully undercuts the peace camp. As of this writing, talks between the Labor Party and Sharon's Likud have already begun. They will be led by Barak and Labor leader Shimon Peres, and are very likely to succeed.

The significance of Bush's endorsement becomes clear, once one considers the fact that it is widely believed in Israel, that without the support of the Labor Party, the life expectancy of Sharon's government could be the shortest in Israeli his-

tory. Sharon's first order of business, once he forms a government, will be to get the government's budget through the Knesset (Parliament) by March 31, and for this he needs the support of the Labor Party. Without Labor's support, it would be voted down, and under Israeli law, new elections for Prime Minister and the Knesset would then have to be held. Thus, it seems clear that Sharon will most likely stay in office for at least a year, if not until the 2003 general elections.

In another gift to Sharon, the Bush Administration announced that it was not bound by any of the proposals or understandings that former President Clinton had initiated, in his efforts to negotiate a peace agreement. This is precisely Sharon's position, and counters the Palestinian position, which is supported by Egypt, that talks should begin where they left off under Barak.

While the above are worrying enough, they are only the most superficial aspects of the danger.

Bush's Gulf War Policy Team

There has been much chatter in Middle East circles that because Bush supposedly represents American oil interests, he will be more "even-handed" in his dealing with the Arab countries and Israel. Nonetheless, a look at his foreign policy and defense team reveals the exact same team that President Sir George Bush used to launch the 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq.

This includes Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Powell, who were, respectively, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War. Others include Paul Wolfowitz, who has been named as

Undersecretary of Defense. A strong supporter of Israel's right wing, he held this same position in the first Bush Administration, and spent the Gulf War in Israel, as Bush's chief liaison to the Israeli government. Then there is Richard Armitage, who is tipped for the position as Deputy Secretary of State. A veteran of the murderous Operation Phoenix in the Vietnam War, in the 1980s Armitage was one of the leading players in the Iran-Contra Affair. During the Gulf War, he functioned as President Bush's special liaison to King Hussein of Jordan. Richard Haass, a former adviser for Middle East Affairs to the elder Bush, has been named to head the policy planning section of the State Department. Haass is a devotee of the step-by-step approach in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, and not the Oslo approach.

Another significant appointment is that of John Hannah as adviser on Middle East affairs to Vice President Cheney. Hannah formerly worked for the notorious Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which is the leading think-tank associated with the right-wing American Zionist lobby.

The idea of identifying these advisers as "pro-Arab" or "pro-Israel," is absurd. They all share the same geopolitical policy outlook of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, in which manipulating Arab-Israeli "religious war" is a powerful tool for U.S. superpower interests.

Israel: Moving Toward Civil War

The Israeli elections saw only 60% of the electorate going to the polls, the lowest voter turnout in the nation's history. This compares with a 79% turnout in the 1999 elections. Sharon's 62% of the vote represents only 36% of the electorate. The massive absenteeism has been attributed to a population enraged over the failures of consecutive governments, not only to come to a peace agreement with the Palestinians, but also their failure to deal with the erosion of the standard of living and social conditions now affecting broad sections of the population. This 40% of the electorate represents the demoralized peace camp and the traditional "swing voters," many of whom voted for Barak in the 1999 elections. It also represents the Israeli Arab vote, which accounts for 12% of the electorate. The Israeli Arabs totally boycotted the election, which is a reflection of their rage at the Labor-led government, including over the fact that during last year's riots, 13 Arab Israelis were killed by police.

Thus, the only mandate Sharon won, was from the extreme right wing, which includes the settlers, the ultra-nationalist and right-wing ultra-Orthodox parties, and the religious Zionists. Although representing a minority of the population, these layers coming out to vote for Sharon demonstrates a political cohesion that is lacking among more moderate elements of the population.

Prime Minister Barak has announced that he will resign as head of Labor, and resign his Knesset seat as well. This has left the party deeply divided between the party's right wing and pragmatists who want to enter a national unity govern-

ment with Sharon, and a left wing which wants to lead a Knesset opposition with the strategy of bringing down the Sharon government as soon as possible. In between are a number of "Young Turks," who are more interested in seizing the leadership of the Labor Party, than in stopping Sharon.

One development that could considerably strengthen the peace camp and forces of moderation, is reportedly that Yossi Beilin, one of the framers of the Oslo Accords and leader of the Labor Party's peace camp, is considering forming a new, social democratic type of party. Beilin is said to be considering leaving Labor, with as many as nine Labor Party Knesset members, to form a new faction which would merge with the pro-peace and secular Meretz party and several other Knesset members. Such a faction would immediately become the largest in the Knesset, and would not only work for a peace agreement with the Palestinians, but also constitute a political formation dedicated to social reform aimed at countering the growing power of the radical nationalists and religious right wing.

The 120-seat Knesset has become a kaleidoscope of political factions. Although the Labor Party (One Israel) is the largest faction, it has only 24 seats. Sharon's Likud is the second-largest with only 19 seats, the ultra-Orthodox Shas party is the third-largest with 17 seats, and the pro-peace Meretz is fourth with 10 seats. The rest of the seats are shared among 14 parties of various stripes, ranging from right-wing secular, ethnic-Russian, to ultra-Orthodox religious parties. Any coalition, with or without Labor, would be highly unstable and subject not only to the demands of the nationalist lunatics, who are among the biggest supporters of Sharon, but other, more narrow interests. This instability is a danger in itself.

In *Ha'aretz* on Feb. 1, Israeli Prof. Gabriel Sheffer warned that because of this political instability under a Sharon-led government, a "non-democratic" future could await Israel. "Unstable democratic regimes usually collapse during times of severe crisis. In the case of Israel, that crisis is partly connected to relations with the Palestinians. According to Arik Sharon, a very long war of attrition awaits us; according to some of his supporters on the extreme right wing, Israel can expect a continuation of the difficult war with the Palestinians, perhaps with the addition of the Arab countries. According to this logic, it will be necessary to enact emergency regulations here that do not necessarily conform to normal democratic procedures." This development, Gabriel said, is occurring while the internal political situation is in a "severe crisis," and points to the danger posed by the fact that the "three main rifts in society—between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews; between the ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews; and between proponents and opponents of far-reaching compromise with the Palestinians, are deeper than ever before."

In this context, a growing political disillusionment in the Israeli population could create a "yearning" for a "strong leader." Will Sharon be that "strong leader"?