

Israel's Sharon Forms Government: Waiting for the War To Begin

by Dean Andromidas

With the March 7 swearing-in of Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel, the official countdown for a new Middle East war has begun. On the same day, President George W. Bush telephoned to personally congratulate Sharon and invite him to Washington for consultations on March 20.

Comprising no fewer than 26 ministers and 13 deputy ministers, Sharon's is the largest Cabinet in Israel's history, requiring carpenters to be brought in to add an additional section to the traditional Cabinet table. At that table one finds extremely strange partners, from the left to the right. The only notable pro-peace elements are those who know the real danger of war, with Sharon at the helm, and delude themselves that they can conduct damage-control from within his government. With almost one-third of the members of the 120-member Knesset (Parliament) in the Cabinet, there are not enough MKs to man the various Knesset committees. This doesn't matter, since this is a government prepared to wage a war; therefore, Knesset committees dealing with domestic issues will not be important.

The coalition government, led by Sharon's Likud party, includes the Labor Party, and a mish-mash of right-wing religious and ultra-nationalist parties. More alarming is the fact that it is designed to ensure that the government will last until the next general elections, which will not be held for another three years. A few highlights will demonstrate the unusual nature of this government.

'Unity' for What?

Sitting next to Sharon will be Shimon Peres as Foreign Minister. From this position, Peres will not be able to determine Israeli foreign policy, since foreign policy has always been handled directly by the Prime Minister. Peres's presence in the government is seen by the peace camp as a betrayal. In fact, the unity government would not have been possible without the role played by Peres.

The defense portfolio, which is the second most important in the Israeli system, was given to the Labor Party's Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, a former senior military officer who considers himself a very close friend of Sharon and was the chief proponent for a unity government within the Labor Party.

Ben-Eliezer's deputy will be Dalia Rabin-Pelossof, the daughter of slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. She now finds herself sitting at the same table with political leaders

whose incitement against her father was considered to have contributed to his assassination. These leaders include Avigdor Lieberman and Rehavam Ze'evi of the ultra-right-wing Israel Beiteinu/National Union faction. The former, who started his political career as former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-hand man, was quoted during the election campaign as calling for the bombing of Tehran and the Aswan Dam, if Iran or Egypt caused Israel too much trouble. As Infrastructure Minister, Lieberman will have a budget that he can deploy to build infrastructure for his main constituency, the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Lieberman's partner, Ze'evi, a former military officer also known as "Gandhi," has been named Minister of Tourism. Since the tourist industry has collapsed with the outbreak of the "Al Aqsa Intifada" uprising last Fall, Ze'evi will have time to concentrate on his other interests. These include the forcible transfer of the Israeli Arabs and the Palestinians out of "the land of Israel."

The Finance Ministry, which is the third most important portfolio, because it controls the purse strings of the government, went to Silvan Shalom, a staunch Sharon supporter in the Likud. While the Labor Party received six other portfolios, none of them includes the choice social portfolios, which enjoy large budgets and can exert considerable political influence. These went to the Likud and the extreme right wing.

For example, the crucial Education Ministry, whose budget is second only to that of the Defense Ministry, went to Limor Livnat, the "dragon lady" of the Likud. Livnat is the sister of the notorious Noam Livnat, one of the most dangerous of the Temple Mount fanatics who has openly advocated the blowing up of the mosques on Jerusalem's Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount in order to rebuild Solomon's Temple there. Millions of shekels from the education budget are known to have financed the most radical yeshivas (religious schools), which are at the center of such terrorist organizations as Kach, founded by the late Meir Kahane, and the Ateret Cohanim and other organizations dedicated to building the Third Temple, and thereby igniting religious war in the Middle East.

Another crucial portfolio useful for expanding the settlements, Housing and Construction, went to Natan Sharansky of the ethnic-Russian Israel B'Aliya Party. A former Soviet dissident and well-known right-winger, Sharansky advocates

retaining and expanding the settlements on the Golan Heights and the West Bank.

In a move to ensure the loyalty of the ultra-Orthodox parties, Sharon gave the Shas party literally everything they wanted. This includes the Interior, Religious Affairs, Health, and Labor portfolios, in addition to that of Deputy Education Minister. These portfolios command considerable budgets and therefore political influence. On top of this, Sharon ensured a two-year postponement of various pieces of legislation, including one calling for drafting yeshiva students into the military. This is designed to guarantee the loyalty of the large right-wing ultra-Orthodox bloc within the Knesset. Sharon also ensured the rescission of the law that allowed for the direct election of the Prime Minister, a law which has prevented the political comeback of Sharon's chief rival in Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Peace Camp in Disarray

The fact that Peres and other members of the Labor Party are now in the government, has left the peace camp in disarray. This is reflected in the fact that Uri Savir and Amnon Lipkin Shahak of the Center Party resigned their Knesset seats and are leaving the political stage. Savir, a protégé of Peres, was the architect of the 1994 Oslo peace accords, while Lipkin Shahak, a retired Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, had been a leading peace negotiator for the Labor government of Ehud Barak. In fact, Shahak was among the few Israeli negotiators who had won the trust of the Palestinians.

A minority faction in the Labor Party, and others in the opposition Meretz Party, are still committed to bringing this government down as soon as possible. Former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, one of the top leaders of the peace camp, has launched a campaign to become the temporary chairman of the Labor Party, as a bid to end this unity government. Shlomo Ben-Ami, the Foreign Minister in the previous, Labor-led government and another opponent of the unity government within the Labor Party, is considering forming a new party, dedicated to peace and social issues. The latter idea has support within minority elements of the Labor Party and on the left. Nonetheless, these are rearguard actions, which will not influence the war danger over the next weeks or months.

Countdown to War

When Sharon tells the press, "I am ready to conduct negotiations with Arafat, but it requires there being quiet and security," he is simply lying. Who will stop the violence? Every informed person knows that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat could not do so. The fact of the matter is, that the economic closure that Israel has imposed on the Palestinian-controlled enclaves in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is not only leading to the inevitable collapse of the Palestinian National Authority, but is leading to a humanitarian disaster.

Palestinian Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Ahmed



Shimon Peres holding the Foreign Ministry in Ariel Sharon's huge Cabinet, cannot change the fact that the Clinton Administration's opportunity for peace was lost, and the Bush team is accelerating the push toward war.

Qurei told the *Jerusalem Post* of March 8 that the Palestinian Authority is prepared to reopen security cooperation and negotiations with Israel, in exchange for easing the economic restrictions, the closure, and the punitive measures imposed on the Palestinians.

What is now being openly discussed in Israel, is a "post-Arafat" Palestinian movement. But everyone knows that after Arafat, will come chaos, and the most extreme elements of the Palestinian movement such as Hamas. In the first week of March, the latter conducted two suicide bombings deep inside Israel, within 48 hours of one another.

A senior Israeli source told *EIR*, that not only is the situation within Israel extremely tense because of the suicide bombings, but he expected a war to break out along three possible avenues. One would be to crush the Palestinian National Authority. Already, Israeli tanks have been stationed in parts of Area A, which is supposed to be under exclusive Palestinian control. In addition, massive amounts of territory surrounding the settlements have been seized and are being fortified, while Palestinian communities are being forcibly separated and isolated.

A second avenue of war would be along the Lebanon-Syria axis, and a third would be a "chain-reaction" war, involving attacks on Iraq and Iran, which could force Egypt into the conflict. Although Egypt does not at this point contemplate going to war, it has started to retrain its military reserves.

Which course toward war, may depend on what provocations are unleashed as pretexts: whether further violence inside Israel, or military operations attributed to Hezbollah from southern Lebanon, or "new" revelations of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and/or Iran. But the cause of the threatened war, lies not in any local or regional reality: rather, it is the policy option of the Bush Administration, to go for war. Ariel Sharon is their willing and witting ally in this venture.