

Sharon Attacks Syrian Positions, as War Nears

by Dean Andromidas

Despite a slap on the wrist by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's war plan continues in high gear. By ordering the April 16 bombing of Syrian radar positions in Lebanon, Sharon indicated his intent to attack Syria directly, thus spreading the conflict into a much wider war.

Within hours of acceding to Powell's demands to pull Israeli troops out from Palestinian-controlled areas in Gaza, the Israeli military launched another "surgical" operation, this time against a Palestinian police post a few meters from the Egyptian border. Sharon also signalled his intent to launch a religious war, meeting with his security officials on reopening to "tourists" the Al Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount, which has been closed since Sharon touched off riots last September, by visiting the area, where mosques are among Islam's most holy sites. Since tourism has collapsed by more than 90%, the only people interested in touring the site, believed to be the site of Solomon's Temple, are Jewish extremists and Christian fundamentalists.

Powell's expression of displeasure with Sharon in no way signals a change in U.S. policy, which has been to support Sharon. Quite the contrary, no sooner did Powell voice his dismay, than President George W. Bush talked to Sharon by a telephone, reassuring him of continued U.S. support for Israel.

As long as Sharon is in power, a Middle East war is inevitable, and Washington has made no sign of dropping its support. As of now, U.S. Middle East policy is programmed to lead to a wider war. On the one hand, there are the right-wing Zionist extremists and the Christian fundamentalists, Bush's political base, who are giving their full support to Sharon as a means of achieving religious redemption by bringing on Armageddon. On the other hand, there are the geopoliticians, who were the architects of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and of former President Bush's 1991 Gulf War against Iraq, who are trying to rebuild the "Allied Coalition" against Iraq. Both policies will lead to religious war throughout the Middle East-Central Asian region, on the model of Europe's Thirty Years War.

Even though Powell has done little to curb Sharon's excesses, he himself has become a target of attack, and rumors abound about his imminent resignation. A commentary in the April 19 London *Daily Telegraph*, the flagship of the media empire of Bush-allied Conrad Black, denounced Powell as

being "anything but a friend of Israel" and "out of step with the fundamental ethos of the Bush Administration." The commentary warned that Powell's policies are dangerous for Israel at a time when "Sharon is preparing for a war to defend Israel against Palestinian violence sponsored by Mr. Arafat and Hizbollah attacks sponsored by Syria."

Sharon on Peace Agreements: 'Never'

Sharon declared his intent never to sign peace agreements with his Arab neighbors, in interviews only days before ordering Israeli jet fighters to bomb Lebanon and ordering tanks into Gaza. In an interview with the April 13 Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, he stated that he would give the Palestinians only 42% of the West Bank (which is the area they now control), and would never dismantle any Jewish settlements in any of the Occupied Territories. When asked whether he would give up the Golan Heights in return for peace with Syria, he said, "No. We cannot leave the Golan Heights." Sharon declared that the Israeli occupation of the Golan puts Israel within reach of the outskirts of Damascus, the Syrian capital. "If we do not sit across from the outskirts of Damascus, I cannot conceive that the border with the Syrians will be quiet."

Such a position is obviously totally unacceptable to the Syrians, the Palestinians, and the rest of the Arab world. Sharon told his interviewer that he is not interested in peace agreements with Arab states, because he believes that "from the strategic point of view, I think that in another 10 or 15 years, the Arab world will have less ability to strike at Israel than it has today."

This interview should have sent alarm bells throughout the world's capitals, particularly Washington. In the interview, Sharon declared United Nations Resolution 242, which calls for Israel to exchange captured land for peace, null and void. Yet, in signing the Oslo Accords, Israel accepted that resolution. Furthermore, 242 is suppose to be the cornerstone of U.S. Middle East policy, yet Washington is silent. Despite the fact that this is also contrary to the coalition agreement Sharon signed with the Labor Party in order to frame a "unity" government, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres made no attempt to distance Israeli policy from Sharon's comments.

Washington's stony silence can only be seen as encouragement of Sharon. This was the view of Palestinian Authority Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, who said, "The United States . . . , through its policy of not frankly telling the Israeli government to stop its crimes and violations, is aiding indirectly the government of Ariel Sharon to continue its crimes against our people."

War with Syria

Make no mistake, the rocket attack against Israel along its northern border by the Lebanese guerrilla movement Hizbollah, was just a pretext for Israel's attack on a Syrian radar base. With this attack, Sharon has signalled his intent



With Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon becoming bolder in his war provocations, Secretary of State Colin Powell may wish he was back as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Above, with then Defense Secretary Richard Cheney.

to attack Syria itself.

The Israeli attack on Syrian forces in Lebanon was the first since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Israel bombed the entire Lebanese air defense system which was built and manned by the Syrian Army. The architect of the 1982 Lebanese war was Sharon, who held the post of Defense Minister, and earned the title “Butcher of Lebanon.” It is less well known that Sharon’s intent in 1982 was not a “surgical strike” to secure Israel’s northern border, but to attack Damascus, lying only 60 miles from the Lebanese border. In 1982, Sharon apparently did not get a U.S. green light for such an attack; nonetheless, it was not until Sharon was forced out of the Israeli government in 1983, that the danger of a wider war against Syria began to subside.

But, in 2001, the Bush Administration gave Sharon full backing for his attack on the Syrian positions, thus accepting Sharon’s view that Syria, not the Hizbollah, is the real enemy. According to senior Israeli intelligence sources, if Syria becomes the target of further attacks, not only Iran, which is one of Syria’s strategic allies, but Saudi Arabia, as well as the rest of the Arab world, will come to Syria’s defense.

The Jordanian-Egyptian Initiative

The Israeli attack occurred within hours of the arrival of Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdulilah Khatib, who came with an Egyptian-Jordanian initiative, which had the support of the Palestinians and the recent Arab summit, and had also been presented to Powell by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah.

On his arrival in Israel, Khatib declared that his visit was “a mission of peace,” an effort to lift the Israeli economic and military siege of the Palestinians, “to end confrontation, to create the right conditions that will allow Israel and the Palestinians to get back to the negotiating table to continue their

efforts for a comprehensive settlement that would guarantee the national rights and independence of the Palestinian people, establish an independent state in the Palestinian territories, and provide security for the Israeli people.”

Sharon rejected the proposal, and within hours of the Jordanian Foreign Minister’s departure, he launched “Operation Hot Pastel Colors” into Palestinian-controlled territory in the Gaza Strip. The official reason for the attack was the alleged targeting of Israeli settlements with home-made mortars by the Hamas Palestinian militants. But, this, too, was simply a pretext. After six hours of bombardment by Israeli gunboats, helicopter gunships, tanks, and rocket launchers, Israeli troops, backed by tanks and armored personnel carriers, set up positions inside the Gaza Strip. Contrary to statements by Israeli government spokesmen that it was a 24-hour operation to stop Palestinian attacks, Brig. Gen. Yair Naveh,

three hours before Israel acceded to Powell’s demands, gave a press conference in which he declared that Israeli troops would remain in their positions for “days, weeks, and even months,” and indicated that other operations were to follow. While he spoke, Israeli bulldozers levelled Palestinian homes and olive orchards, and Israeli soldiers erected fortifications. In addition, the Israelis cut the Gaza Strip into three sectors, making it impossible for the Palestinian population of 1.2 million people to travel from one sector to another, thus turning the Gaza Strip, which is only 27 miles long and three miles wide, into three Warsaw Ghetto-like entities.

Only after a massive international outcry from Western Europe, Russia, and the Arab world, did Powell demand that the Israeli troops pull out. Nonetheless, in his statement, Powell accused the Palestinians of provoking the attack, while declaring that the Israeli “response was excessive and disproportionate.” Although Sharon reluctantly complied, another Israeli attack occurred within hours of the withdrawal, this time against a Palestinian police station near the Refah border crossing with Egypt. Although no new territory was occupied by the Israelis, it clearly signalled that Israeli “excessive” military operations are not ebbing.

“Operation Hot Pastel Colors” also showed that Sharon is prepared to threaten Egypt’s interests as well. Within hours of launching the operation, President Mubarak appeared on Egyptian television, warning, “I’m telling him [Sharon]: Stop, stop. Do not go beyond the limit of what is acceptable. . . . This policy will lead to nothing, it will have terrible repercussions; and if they believe they are going to halt the violence this way, the violence will increase everywhere.”

Mubarak’s statement came after he had met Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Arafat called the Israeli actions an “unforgivable crime.”