

# Mubarak Organizes Against Bush-Sharon 'Green Light for War' in Mideast

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

No one is more acutely aware of the danger of general war sparked by the Middle East conflict, than Hosni Mubarak, and it is for this reason that the Egyptian President has personally launched a desperate effort to prevent it. Mubarak visited Washington at the beginning of April, followed by Jordanian King Abdallah II, and presented a joint Egyptian-Jordanian peace initiative. President Bush did not take it up, and instead made clear he would continue backing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and his drive for war.

The plan calls for implementation of the Sharm el Sheikh agreements of October 2000, and the restoration of the status quo as of September 2000. This means Israel must lift the military, financial, and economic blockade as well as the blockade of trade and food supply to the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza. It specifies that the "use of internationally forbidden weapons must be excluded," and that Israel must withdraw, "troops, tanks, armored vehicles, and weapons from the positions in Palestinians' cities, villages, and refugee camps," to return to their September 2000 positions. It calls for confidence-building measures already in treaties signed by both sides to be implemented: for example, freezing settlements, protecting Islamic and Christian holy sites, and implementing security duties on both sides. Finally, the plan foresees a revival of negotiations, to address all the agenda items not yet solved. The joint proposal calls on the European Union (EU) and the General Secretariat of the UN, to join Egypt and Jordan in promoting the initiative.

Who is going to force it through? On April 23, Mubarak decided to travel personally to Europe and Russia, instead of sending his foreign minister as planned: This was a direct reaction to the Egyptian President's deep disappointment, with his talks in Washington. In remarks to *Der Spiegel* magazine of Germany prior to his departure, Mubarak appealed to the U.S.: "America has huge self-interests in the Middle East and the Arab world to protect. If Washington gave Sharon a free hand, then Bush would damage his own interests and his friends. In the end, Israel would be damaged." The Egyptian leader added, "I have the impression that [Sharon] is counting only on violence. He wants to force the Palestinians to bend to his demands."

As to the possibility that Israel might assassinate Arafat, "That would be a crime with unforeseeable consequences—far more than a political error. Yasser Arafat is still the most

popular Palestinian. His assassination would lead to bloody chaos and push the entire region into catastrophe."

## To Europe and Russia

In Berlin, Mubarak was received by current and former foreign ministers, Joschka Fischer and Hans-Dietrich Genscher (now head of the German-Egyptian Society), and had lengthy, private talks with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. As he had indicated in his interview, there were no bilateral problems to discuss, but "I consider it necessary, to discuss with him the burning situation in the Middle East. For, were it to come to an explosion, we would all be affected—Israelis and Arabs as well as Germans, other Europeans, and Americans." His demand was unequivocal: Germany, which has a special relationship to Israel, and represents a motor force in Europe, should use its influence to return the Middle East to a peace perspective. Mubarak asked Schröder to mediate in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The German response, predictably, was "*Nein, danke*." As Fischer told the press following the talks, "the powers of the Federal Republic should not be overestimated." He added, routinely, that Germany would be prepared, however, to contribute in the context of the EU.

But the EU then began to give signals of growing irritation with Sharon's "excessive force" against the Palestinians. Reports indicate that, at a May 21 meeting, the EU could decide to respond, by cancelling various trade agreements with Israel, and suspending the Association Agreement. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, part of the EU troika, travelled to the region in an attempt to break some ground, and, after viewing the destruction wrought at the Palestinian refugee camp at Han Yunis, expressed his view that such Israeli actions were utterly unacceptable, especially considering that they were perpetrated by the same people who had been victims of such violence 50 years ago. Michel was virtually saying, that the Sharon regime was acting like the Nazis.

Mubarak's next stop was Bucharest, where he met Romanian President Ion Iliescu. Romania enjoys good relations with Israel. Iliescu told a press conference following the talks, that the two countries "have good relations with both sides involved in the conflict and expressed his determination to convince them to find a negotiated solution."

Finally, on April 26, the Egyptian President arrived in Moscow, for three days of extensive talks with several gov-



*Former Sen. George Mitchell's Commission, formed by Israeli and Palestinian agreement last year, has made recommendations that the Sharon government refuses to accept.*

ernment representatives, beginning with President Vladimir Putin. The talks concentrated on the Middle East conflict, and how Russia can intervene to unblock the crisis. It was not only the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that was discussed, but also Iraq; Russia is leading initiatives to lift the sanctions against the country. Furthermore, the agenda included the signing of a Declaration of Friendship and Cooperation, involving “big projects,” in trade, economy, and scientific research and technology. Furthermore, they were to discuss that Russia would upgrade arms and military hardware used by the Egyptian army, since the times of the Soviet Union.

Following his meeting with Mubarak, Putin signalled approval of the Jordanian-Egyptian peace initiative, and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov reiterated, that Moscow supported the initiative fully. Most significant was the fact that the two sides signed a memorandum of understanding on economic and technological cooperation, at the center of which, was a Russian commitment to help Egypt develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

### **Peres's Fancy Footwork**

The significant momentum achieved through Mubarak's travels, signalled also to Israel, that it risked being isolated internationally, if Russia and the EU consolidated support for the Cairo-Amman initiative. The Sharon government dispatched Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Cairo, ostensibly to discuss Israeli “suggested amendments” to the initiative. Peres was then to go on to the United States. Peres's mission

was to play the “soft cop” to Sharon's “hard cop”: reiterating Israel's willingness to seek peace, but, in fact, dictating such conditions as to ensure that no progress would be made.

Sharon had immediately responded to the Jordanian-Egyptian peace initiative, negatively. Israel does not want the Jewish settlements in Gaza and the West Bank to be part of any cease-fire agreement or part of the diplomatic negotiation, and they do not want to engage in any final status talks. Tel Aviv's desire is to deflect mounting international pressure, and place the onus on the Palestinians, with the mantra: no negotiations until the violence ceases.

Even the Israeli press admitted that this was the tactic behind the “diplomacy” of Peres. In a commentary in Israel's major daily, *Ha'aretz*, on May 1, Akiva Eldar wrote sarcastically, “Prime Minister Sharon has sent his Nobel Peace prize-winning side-kick to Egypt to inform Mubarak that Israel is adopting the Egyptian President's initiative. Only a few minor—negligible, in fact—details remain to be ironed out, such as, for instance, the perpetuation of Israel's colonial rule in the territories. Another insignificant adjustment in the initiative calls for the Palestinians to adopt the principle that peace talks cannot be conducted while shots are being fired. At the same time, of course, the Israelis have every right to ignite the flames fueled by the presence of the Jewish settlements while peace talks are being conducted.”

The Israeli press reported on May 1 that Peres had lied to Mubarak, that an agreement had been struck between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, for a cease-fire. An angry Mubarak said that Peres “begged” him to make an announcement that a cease-fire had been agreed on. Mubarak later delivered a televised speech, in which he said, “The Israelis told us that they met with two Palestinian officials and agreed on the principles to halt all kinds of violence. I was surprised to hear from Arafat that there had been no agreement. . . . They [the Israelis] begged me to make a statement saying they reached an agreement.”

While Peres then travelled to Washington, Sharon added further fuel to the fire, indirectly referencing Israel's “preemptive” assassination policy: “There are things we will tell the public about, there are things we will deny, and there are things that will remain hidden forever.” On the settlements, he said he would never evacuate any of them. Concerning the Jordan Valley settlements, in the middle of the West Bank, near the Jordanian border, and farthest from the actual Israeli border, he said they would remain under Israeli sovereignty forever, and defined the highway that goes to the settlements as the main traffic artery between Jerusalem and Tiberias (which lies inside Israel), thus defining a highway that goes through the occupied territories as a principal Israel transportation route.

Peres, in Washington, spoke at the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and made several provocative statements, including comments on the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Peres said, that the U.S. needs “to help Lebanon

regain its independence . . . retain its territorial integrity.” He then said, “Today, Lebanon does not exist” because of Syrian occupation. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the statement contradicted the long-standing policy of the Israeli Foreign Ministry not to take a position on Syrian troops in Lebanon. But it faithfully reflected Sharon’s policy of targetting Syria, in the context of a regional war.

Meanwhile, on the ground, Israeli tanks were entering a refugee camp in Gaza, in the first of a series of illegal interventions, into areas officially under Palestinian Authority sovereignty. Their May 2 “military engineering operation” left 150 people homeless, one 17-year-old Palestinian dead, and 16 wounded. Such events continued through May 10, with the death toll rising on both sides.

### **Mitchell’s Report a Factor**

Another important international initiative was shaping up, simultaneous with Mubarak’s peace mission, which increased the political pressure on Israel. On May 4, the Commission on Mideast Violence, headed by former U.S. Senator and Northern Ireland peacemaker George Mitchell, gave its report to the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority for their comments. It has certain similarities to the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative.

According to initial reports in the London *Independent* on May 5, the report stated that all building of new settlements should be halted; Israel should stop firing rubber bullets at unarmed demonstrators, as they have contributed to the toll of *Intifada* deaths—510 to date, many of them “avoidable.” Israel should “refrain from the destruction of homes, roads, trees, and farmland,” and “lift closures, transfer to the PA all revenues owed, and permit Palestinians who have been employed in Israel to return to their jobs.” At the same time, the report called on the Palestinian Authority to exert greater control, to prevent violence, including through preventive arrests.

Regarding the causes of the violence, since Sharon’s visit to the Islamic holy sites on the Temple Mount/Al Haram Al Sharif in East Jerusalem on Sept. 28, the report said that both the Palestinians and the U.S. officials urged then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to stop Sharon’s visit to the Haram al-Sharif, but Barak allowed Sharon to go forward. Although the Mitchell Commission report did not explicitly blame Sharon’s visit as the cause for the *Intifada*, it did state that the visit “was poorly timed and the provocative effect should have been foreseen; indeed, it was foreseen by those who urged that the visit be prohibited. More significant were the events that followed: the decision of the Israeli police on Sept. 29 to use lethal means against the Palestinian demonstrators; and the subsequent failure . . . of either party to exercise restraint.”

The report was highly critical of the Israeli settlement activity, closures, and use of excessive force, while criticizing the Palestinians for not effectively restraining violence from

their side. It underscored the necessity for final status negotiations to begin as soon as possible if any cease-fire is to be effective.

In an interview with the U.S. Public Broadcasting System television network on May 7, Mitchell countered the assertion that the report is viewed by “a large part in the Israeli community, as unfairly harsh on Israel,” and told the interviewer, “Well, I don’t know where you get your figure, ‘large part of the Israeli community.’ I don’t believe that to be the case. . . . The fact is, that according to the polls published just this week, two-thirds of the people of Israel, by a margin of 62% to 36%, support the recommendations we’ve made. So, I think it’s just the opposite. I think a large part of the people of Israel agree with the recommendations that we’ve made.”

Mitchell implied it is Sharon who is out of step on freezing the settlements, since even “*Ha’aretz*, has editorially urged that there be a freeze on settlement construction.” He said there are doubts that expansion of settlements is really due to “so-called natural growth.”

Of great importance is Mitchell’s clarification on why the report doesn’t recommend the International Observer Force. He revealed indirectly that Sharon’s government had basically warned that any international force could be attacked. He said this issue was “the principal point of dispute,” in the commission’s discussions in Israel, but “in the end,” the commission “accepted” Israel’s stand that it would not support such a force, leaving a danger that the force would “become too deeply embroiled . . . and create a new point of friction.”

### **Underestimating the Problem of Bush**

Both the Israelis and the Palestinians had agreed to the formation of the Mitchell Commission during the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in October 2000.

Further support for the Mitchell Commission, and for the Jordanian-Egyptian initiative, has come from the EU. Most outspoken has been the French government. Following talks in Paris between Jordanian King Abdallah and French President Jacques Chirac on May 9, Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine stated full support for the Mitchell Commission report. “Regarding the Settlements,” he said, “the report is right,” and added that he had raised the issue repeatedly: Israeli settlements policy “is a major element of the crisis, and the total exasperation of the Palestinians.” Védrine went on to say, “I find that the commission, which was totally balanced, composed of many personalities, rather closer in sympathy to Israel, came to conclusions with which one can only agree.”

Védrine stressed in his remarks, that the main problem blocking peace in the Middle East is the Bush Administration. Although not stated in those terms, he lamented the fact that “the Americans have withdrawn from the process,” and reiterated the need for reversing this. Pressure from a united Europe is required, in Védrine’s view, to force the U.S. back into the arena.

Védrine does not openly face the fact, that the Bush Administration and its fanatical “religious fundamentalist” base is fully committed to war, and thus totally supports Sharon’s policy. Both Mubarak and King Abdallah were confronted with this frightening reality in Washington. Nothing short of a fully coordinated initiative, of the Europeans and Russia, to force through a change, by totally exposing both Sharon and Bush, and putting the Jordanian-Egyptian initiative on the negotiating table, will yield any results.

The recent votes in the United Nations, divesting the United States of its seats on the Human Rights Commission and the Narcotics Commission, indicate the increasing rage building up internationally at the Bush Administration’s arrogant attempt to play the world dictator; now, the power behind those votes must be wielded, through political action, to avert war in the Middle East, while there may still be time.

## President Bush Takes Aim at Sudan, Africa

by Lawrence K. Freeman

If Africans have had illusions about what America’s attitude towards Africa will be, under the administration of President George W. Bush, one only has to look carefully at his speech to the American Jewish Committee (AJC) on May 3, in Washington, D.C. The President’s belligerent, threatening remarks against Sudan do not bode well for the entire African continent. After reaffirming full support to the government of Israel in “Biblical” terms, President Bush launched into a vicious attack on Sudan, in a manner reminiscent of his father’s rhetorical venom toward Iraq, before he initiated the bombing of that nation over a decade ago.

Immediately after citing Teddy Roosevelt’s 1903 denunciation of Russia’s pogroms against the Jews, President Bush lied that “such crimes are being committed today by the government of Sudan.” He accused the Sudanese government of waging war against its own “Christian and traditionalist” populations. Referring to the Biblical Exodus of the Jewish people, he said, “no society in all of history can be justly built on the back of slaves. Sudan is a disaster area for human rights. We must turn the eyes of the world upon the atrocities in the Sudan.” With that, Bush announced the appointment of a special “humanitarian coordinator” for aid to Sudanese rebel groups, Agency for International Development (AID) Administrator Andrew Natios, and proclaimed, “This is the first step. More will follow.”

These remarks, delivered in this context, represented a propaganda escalation, in preparation for a potential military intervention. This is no mere veiled threat, but culminates

months of activity in the United States by Baroness Caroline Cox and her Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), to whip up support for the overthrow of the government of Sudan.

### Reading from the Same Script

On April 30, only days prior to President Bush’s provocative Sudan-bashing, Elliott Abrams, Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), released its second Annual Report, which virulently condemns Sudan. The USCIRF report specifically recommended against appointing a new ambassador for Sudan; but instead, urged the appointment of someone trusted by the President and Secretary of State Colin Powell, who would carry out—precisely the duties assigned to Andrew Natios. Other recommendations include: increased assistance to those forces trying to overthrow the government of Sudan in the South, and in the North, the National Democratic Alliance; the strengthening of economic sanctions; and pressuring oil companies not based in the United States which are developing Sudan’s oil industry.

African-American personalities Joe Madison and Walter Fauntroy have returned from territories militarily controlled by John Garang’s Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), reporting on a mass “slave redemption” organized by Cox’s CSW. There are many unanswered questions regarding how thousands of alleged slaves are rounded up and sold in a matter of hours to witting, or unwitting African-Americans for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Where do these alleged slaves come from?—how do they all arrive at the same destination, at the same time of day in the desert?—who gets all the money?—where do they go after they are “freed,” and where is the proof of the involvement of the government of Sudan?

Sudan’s small but growing oil industry has also come under heavy assault: Diane de Guzman, who worked for UNICEF and Operation Lifeline Sudan, gave a briefing at the Washington headquarters of U.S. Committee on Refugees in early May, alleging that the government of Sudan is wiping out dozens of villages and carrying out a “scorched earth policy” against its own people in order to build new “oil roads.” While Guzman passionately painted a picture of gross human rights abuses by the government in the construction of these new roads, she admitted that she, personally had *not a shred of concrete evidence* of the existence of these villages before the roads were built. The U.S. Refugee Committee is headed up by Roger Winter, who in 1997 publicly supported violently bringing down the Sudanese government, no matter what the terrible consequences would be for the population.

Of course the great irony is that, at precisely the point the U.S. government is beating the drums for war against Sudan, it was voted off the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and Sudan voted on. No doubt, this move reflects a growing awareness by the rest of the world, of the danger represented by this new American administration.