

Akiva Eldar Stresses: Third Party Help Is Vital to Mideast Peace

by Carl Osgood

Akiva Eldar, senior political correspondent for Israel's leading daily *Ha'aretz*, warned a Washington forum that President George Bush has to keep the pressure on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to stick to the Road Map for peace, because as long as Sharon has cabinet ministers like Avigdor Lieberman and Effi Eitam—whose sole agenda is to effect the forcible transfer of the Palestinians out of the West Bank and Gaza—there will be no peace. *EIR* attended the June 16 forum, co-sponsored by the Foundation for Middle East Peace and Americans for Peace Now, in order to cover Eldar's assessment—one which he might not have been able to provide from inside Israel, because of the censorship regulations there, and which has received scant coverage inside the United States, in any case.

Eldar's coverage from the Aqaba summit had taken note of President Bush's irritation with Sharon (see *EIR*, June 20). In Washington, Eldar gave much more insight into what he had reported from Aqaba, about how Sharon's mind works, and what it will take to make Bush's Road Map work. He also emphasized that the Palestinian radical group Hamas is only half of the problem; the other half is the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, for which Lieberman and Eitam are two of the chief spokesmen.

Eldar began his briefing by noting, that for the first time, a leader of the right-wing Likud party, Ariel Sharon, is characterizing Israel's presence in the Palestinian territories as an "occupation," and is talking about a Palestinian state. Even Labor Party leader Shimon Peres "was very careful not to talk about a Palestinian state," he said. To explain why Sharon would speak this way, Eldar provided some history, going back to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, when Israel first seized the West Bank from Jordan, and Gaza from Egypt. Actually, Eldar clarified, having Israel withdraw from the occupied territories—what he referred to as "Two for Two"—was first suggested in the 1978 Camp David accord, again at Madrid in 1991, and it is also in the Mitchell Plan. "Two for Two is clearly occupation, so there is nothing new in this," he said.

The Bantustan Model for Palestine

Eldar outlined the history dating to the Alon and Dayan plans, which were variations with the same goal of permanent Israeli control of the West Bank, after the 1967 war. Yigal

Alon, who became Deputy Prime Minister in 1968 in the government led by Mapai (now Labor Party), proposed making the Jordan River the eastern border of Israel with Jordan; annexing parts of the West Bank, including the entire area of Hebron and part of the Judea Desert; the construction of settlements and security outposts in the West Bank; and building Jewish neighborhoods in Arab East Jerusalem. Moshe Dayan, who was then Defense Minister, proffered his own plan to build five blocs of settlements from north to south in the West Bank.

Eldar explained, "Now, what Sharon did, is combining those two plans—the Alon and Dayan plan. And actually, at a certain point, Alon said, 'If the Palestinians would like to call it a state, and even have a foreign minister and will be accepted as ambassadors to the UN, that's fine with me. So, you want to call your dog a cat, that's fine with me, but that doesn't make it a cat.' So, what Sharon is suggesting is, yes, a Palestinian state and an end to the occupation; not because he thinks this is a solution to the Palestinian problem. This is his solution for the Jewish problem. So, occupation means responsibilities. If you occupy territories—well, Israel was not always very strict with the Geneva Convention—but still, I mean, we don't want people—it's not nice, it doesn't show very well on television that people are starving in the territories. And, you know, this is happening . . . how the annual income per capita is \$800. So, you offer the Palestinians to take responsibility. We, of course, take the responsibility for security, and, on top of this, what Sharon is adding now is a fence; so it will be, according to [Defense Minister Gen. Shaul] Mofaz. And this is still debated, because now they know that Tony Blair, and even President Bush, are occupied with this issue, and they don't like it so much. What Mofaz is suggesting, is to build the fence all along the enclave, which will complete the circle around the so-called Palestinian state."

Sharon's model is not that of a nation-state, but, as Eldar makes unambiguous, is the South African bantustan model of *apartheid* days. "A few weeks ago, we had a guest in Jerusalem," Eldar said, "the former Prime Minister of Italy, D'Alema, and he met with a group of Israelis for dinner. And Ambassador Avi Posner, he was the spokesman of [former Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak] Shamir, has insisted that Sharon means business, that he is willing to go along with this Road Map and give the Palestinians proof of that Palestinian state. And the guest said, 'Well, you know, I remember when Sharon visited Rome, when I was Prime Minister and he was the leader of the opposition'—this was when [the Labor Party's Ehud] Barak was Prime Minister, at the end of the '90's or the beginning of 2000, I guess. 'Sharon explained to me . . . to convince me that the best solution for the Palestinian problem is bantustans,' which means an enclave with no foreign relations; with security—of course, no army—it'll be demilitarized; and with no contiguity. There were, remember, the South African 'homelands.' There was no contiguity, and those people who stayed in South Africa, the blacks who



Ariel Sharon's "bantustan" policy for the Palestinians: Here, Israeli armored vehicles at the entrance of Jericho, on the West Bank, where Israeli bulldozers destroyed the main water pipeline supplying agriculture in the area.

stayed in Africa, were actually accepted, not as full citizens, but as foreign workers. . . . And Avi Posner was quite irritated. He said, 'Mr. Prime Minister, I'm sure, this is your own interpretation,' and D'Almeida turned to him, and he said, 'No, it's an exact quote.' And I know from a friend of mine in the Foreign Ministry who is an expert on Africa, South Africa, that . . . Sharon was obsessed with asking him, 'Tell me more and more about the bantustan model.' "

Expect the Unexpected

Eldar noted that the current cliché in Israel for Sharon's offer, is to compare it to President Nixon's going to China: It means something different coming from Sharon, than it would be from any other Israeli political leader, including the Labor Party's Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, or Haifa Mayor Amram Mitzna.

So, the question is: What is Sharon's real intent, given that he has Eitam, from the National Religious Party, and Lieberman from the National Union, both sitting at the table of government—the same government that (with 14 reservations) had accepted the Road Map? "Actually, Effi Eitam and a Palestinian state is an oxymoron," Eldar said. "As long as they are there, for me, it's an indication that someone is not telling the truth: Either people from the left who feel comfortable with deceiving themselves; or it's people from the right, who have been told by Sharon, 'You know, don't take it too seriously. At the end of the day, the Palestinians will do the dirty job. We can trust the Palestinians that they will make the mistakes.' "

The mistakes that right-wingers expected the Palestinians to make, would apparently justify Israeli crackdowns. But, as Eldar explained, the right-wingers have a habit of making miscalculations, which he illustrated: At Madrid in 1991, then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir apparently did not ex-

pect Syria to be open to negotiating in the peace process. Shamir had based his strategy on having Syria refuse to negotiate, but the opposite occurred. Eldar said, "And one day—when I was on speaking terms with Sharon, or he was on speaking terms with me—he told me that this day, when it was reported that [Syrian President Hafez] Assad is willing to start the process, join the peace process, this was when Shamir lost control over the developments, and this was actually the beginning of the end of the Likud's regime; and this is what led then to the '92 elections, as well," which brought in the Labor Party government, with Yitzhak Rabin as Prime Minister. It was Rabin who concluded the Oslo Peace Accords with the Palestinians—and then was assassinated by an Israeli fanatic.

Ironically, Eldar said, what happened to Shamir, with his miscalculation, is also happening to Sharon: The moment that Palestinian President Yasser Arafat appointed a prime minister, was the moment Sharon lost full control over events, because he did not believe it would happen. "It is much more difficult to deal with Abu Mazen," Eldar explained, "who wears a jacket and a tie and shaves, than with Arafat. And, on top of this, [Palestinian] Minister of Finance Salom Fayad was invited to the White House—which I think was in the [time] slot left open by Sharon, who decided to skip a visit. And he made, as you saw in the *New York Times*, a great impression, and now, the image of the Palestinians has changed dramatically" in the United States. It is no longer the case, Eldar pointed out, that the Israelis are 100% white and the Palestinians are 100% black. "Now, all of a sudden, you have different colors. Israel's assassinations sometimes don't look so good. And the President found himself also aiming at Aqaba, but I'm not sure of whether he was actually aware of what was happening, when this whole thing started, when he said, 'I want to see a new [Palestinian] Prime Minister. I want to see reforms,' and he got it. I'm not sure if he was prepared for that."

Sharon's next mistake, said Eldar, was to try to play the White House against the State Department, believing that the good guys were in the White House. And so, "the spin that came out of the Prime Minister's office—in the last few months since the Road Map was presented to the President, here, on Dec. 20 of last year—whenever there were reports from Washington that the President is about to submit the Road Map to both sides, the spin was, 'Don't pay attention, this is only the State Department. Condoleezza Rice is under control.' [Sharon's chief of cabinet] Dov Weisglas knows better. The impression that people are getting from Weisglas when he spoke about Condoleezza Rice, is that she really hypnotized him. . . . He was hypnotized by her eyes; and probably, what she did was, she outsmarted him—Sharon and Weisglas—and this was not in the cards: The Road Map, with

a clear timetable that leads us to a final settlement by the end of 2005? In the best case, Sharon had in mind 2015 for final status settlement.”

Buffer Zone Needed

Eldar believes that no peace effort will work without a third-party intervention, involving a troop presence, because there are those on both sides—the settlers’ movement in Israel, and Hamas in Palestine—that will use the inability to establish security as a means to sabotage any peace agreement. He warned against any notion of turning security over to the Palestinians, because “it will not work, and it will be used, or abused, by people who are not interested in a political settlement. They’ll say, ‘Hey, we told you so. You can’t trust them,’ because [Palestinian Authority Security Minister Mohammed] Dahlan is not ready. He will not be ready to do this unless he will get unanimous support—American support.

“Unless there will be a buffer zone, then we’re going to repeat all the mistakes that we’ve done in Oslo. . . . When I was here in ’93, after the signing of the Oslo agreement, we wanted to believe that the Israelis and the Palestinians will learn to live together, to co-exist, and peace will emerge from this co-existence.

“Now, it turned out to be wrong, because you have on both sides, elements that are not interested in getting to the end game, which is a final settlement, which is a withdrawal—an Israeli withdrawal—which is the end to the all-or-nothing approach. There is a minority on both sides, people who don’t believe in co-existence, who believe in transfer: Israelis who want to transfer the Palestinians, and Palestinians who want to transfer the Jews, who don’t believe there is a place for us there. And what you give them, is actually the veto, because of the drama of terrorism and the drama of settlements. That is putting everything else in the shade.

“And, it sounds very reasonable when the Prime Minister is saying, ‘Well, we have tried to negotiate under fire. Rabin made a mistake when he said, I will pursue the peace process as if there is no terrorism, and fight terrorism as if there is no peace process going on.’ For some people, including some people who are in the government, this phrase was distorted, because when you say, ‘I will negotiate with the Palestinians as if there were no terrorism,’ you’re not negotiating with the same people who are conducting the terrorism. The formula is very clear. We negotiate with those who are not involved with terrorism, and are doing their best to stop terrorism, and this is now the name of the game.”

Eldar reported on the efforts to organize a third-party intervention. He had asked UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, whom he had just interviewed in New York, about a putting a buffer zone between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Annan had said, “Yes, this is the only way we can do this.” He also said he was happy that Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had also endorsed the same idea. Eldar said that there

were two tracks working on the subject, one involving the British government, and a second involving Canada. Furthermore, in the last Israeli election, the two left-wing parties, Meretz and Labor, “spoke to varying degrees of the need for intervention,” Eldar said. Some in Israel are calling on the United States to lead an international force that would take responsibility for security in the Palestinian territories, and thus enable the Israeli Army to withdraw. He reported, “Through unofficial channels, Israel has suggested to the U.S. to do something, and I do know that a force of 50,000 troops will be necessary in order to allow Israel to disengage, which in prevailing diplomatic code would not entail full withdrawal from the Palestinian territories.” That may be unrealistic, but, Eldar added, there are other proposals in the works as well.

In Eldar’s view, however, an effective third-party intervention has to go further. “I think that the Road Map—first, I believe that this should be the case with the Mitchell Plan—has to be turned into a UN resolution, Security Council resolution, connected to a Chapter Seven resolution to send troops to Israel. . . . What’s happening right now in Iraq reminds me of the West Bank, and, if we don’t do it, now, we’re going to regret it in a few years, [or] in a few months,” he said.

He quoted a friend of his, speaking recently to a forum at Hebrew University: “‘Whenever I hear on the news, or I read in the newspaper, that the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] eliminated a prominent leader of the Hamas, I’m not sure if I have to laugh or to cry, because,’ he said, ‘in the best case, a prominent leader in the Hamas is someone who controls a dozen people,’ because the territories are covered with militias, and, according to the rules of underground, they are very careful not to communicate, and because, as I said before, there is no central command.” And so, the strategy of using overwhelming military force to retaliate against Hamas for terrorist attacks simply will not work.

Summing up, Eldar said, “I think that what we need to do, is help the Palestinians to reconstruct the infrastructure of security, and you don’t do it just with giving them weapons. You do this by giving them motivation, by showing them a bright horizon, and telling them that this will lead them sooner [rather] than later to a full-fledged state. Now, it’s very clear to me that you can’t offer this to them, because it will be suicidal for both sides. Because, if it doesn’t work, as I said before, then Sharon is going to be there forever—or maybe not Sharon, it will be Effi Eitam or Lieberman. Then we’ll say, ‘We really miss Sharon. . . .’

“We can’t take more chances. It has to be, first of all, full elimination of terrorism, and we have to help the Palestinians do that. Hopefully, they will be able to work out something with the Hamas, if the [U.S.] President will make it very clear to Sharon that he should give them the chance, and whether, and if the Americans and the UN or NATO will provide them with the instruments that are necessary, vital, to change the balance of powers, together with changing the atmosphere.”