

Cheney and Netanyahu In New War Lunge

by Dean Andromidas

The dangerous escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be laid directly on the doorstep of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. As of this writing, and as *EIR* had warned June 30, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has opted to follow Cheney and Rumsfeld and their agent in Israel, Likud Party chairman Benjamin Netanyahu, into a new regional war.

Israeli troops have entered the Gaza strip en masse for the first time since the withdrawal of Israeli settlements in Gaza last September. Olmert claims that the purpose is to free Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit, who is being held by Palestinian militants inside the Gaza Strip. The Israelis bombed the Gaza power station June 28, cutting off electricity for more than 1.3 million people. They have also destroyed two bridges in the ongoing operation.

Olmert is implementing the same “hostage release” policy that Cheney and Rumsfeld have used in Iraq, a refusal to hold negotiations with “terrorists,” which always ends with the death of the prisoners. This should surprise no one, because just ten days prior to this dangerous escalation, Netanyahu held a not-so-secret meeting with Cheney and Rumsfeld at an American Enterprise Institute conference in Beaver Creek, Colo. Within 24 hours of his return from the United States, Netanyahu conferred with Olmert, and no doubt briefed him on his discussions with Cheney, which focussed on Iran and the region.

Less than a month ago, Olmert was in Washington, where he also met with the infamous duo, and only two days before the attack, it was revealed that Rumsfeld himself would arrive in Israel in a few weeks, his first visit to the country since becoming Defense Secretary.

Hours before Olmert ordered the attack on Gaza, Israel’s mass-circulation daily *Yediot Ahronot* published an op-ed by Netanyahu, demanding that the government reestablish its “deterrence” by unleashing the full force of Israel’s military power, “making the enemy internalize the fact that we mean what we say.” If this is carried out, Netanyahu said, he promised to support the government.

After Olmert took this advice, Netanyahu’s fellow Likud Knesset (Parliament) member Yuval Steinitz, spoke in the Knesset in praise of the operation, saying, “The decision to exert military pressure on the Palestinians to solve the crisis and return the captive home is right and worthy.” Netanyahu

himself conferred again with Olmert, on the day the latter ordered troops into the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli soldier Shalit was captured when three teams of Palestinian militants attacked three Israeli military positions on the Israeli side of the fence surrounding the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians entered Israel through an 800-meter tunnel dug under the fence. After carrying out the attacks, killing two Israeli soldiers and taking Shalit prisoner, the Palestinians escaped by blowing a hole in the border fence.

The militants demanded the release of all Palestinian women prisoners and those under the age of 18, in return for Shalit. This was a classic and sophisticated commando operation aimed at a military target, not a random act of terror.

Prisoner exchanges like the one proposed have been conducted by the Israelis over the last three decades. The first was in 1968, when prisoners were released in response to the hijacking of an Israeli airliner. The last was in 2004, when former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made a deal with the Hezbollah, releasing 400 Palestinian prisoners in return for a captured Israeli reserve officer, Colonel Tennenbaum, and the bodies of three soldiers killed by the Hezbollah.

Negotiation: The Only Real Option

The only exit from this crisis is to transform it into a opportunity to wage peace through a principled prisoner exchange, just as Israeli commentator Benziman Uzi wrote in the daily *Ha'aretz* on the day of the Gaza invasion. He asks of Olmert: "Will he deal with the crisis as an isolated issue, or will he strive to turn it into a lever for extensive dialogue with the Palestinian leadership?"

Only a few hours before the Israeli attack, the national dialogue among Palestinian factions including Hamas and Palestinian Authority President Abu Mazen's Fatah, announced that they had come to an agreement to accept the "Prisoners' Document," drafted by imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti and leading Hamas prisoner Abdul Khaleq Natshe. That document calls for a two-state solution for resolving the conflict. The only difference is that Hamas has inserted a clause referring to the non-recognition of the legitimacy of the occupation. Although the document has not yet been signed, an official linked to the "national dialogue" revealed to the press that Fatah and Hamas will begin negotiating the formation of a unity government within the next two weeks. This development has the potential of opening the way for serious Israeli-Palestinian discussions.

Ha'aretz commentator Akiva Eldar wrote on the day of the attack that if Prime Minister Olmert were serious about wanting peace, he should "offer to trade Shalit for the signatories of the Prisoners' Document, Marwan Barghouti of Fatah and Abdul Khaleq Natshe of Hamas. Their release would be the decisive blow to Khaled Meshal (the Damascus-based Hamas hardliner), who is ready to fight Jewish children down to the last drop of Palestinian children's blood. There could

not be any clearer signal of Israeli intent to effect a real change in relations with the large Palestinian population that is also tired of fighting."

Similarly, Batya Melamed, writing in *Yediot Ahronot* under the headline "No Chance To Win War," calls for Israel to make a prisoner exchange. "Palestinian prisoners should be released—men and women, young and old, those with blood on their hands and those without. . . . Just let us avoid this war. It is doomed to failure from the start."

Unilateral March to War

Olmert is now pursuing the opposite policy, using this crisis to carry out a frontal assault on the political wing of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. On June 29, Olmert ordered the arrest of 64 Hamas officials, including four Hamas-affiliated Cabinet ministers, and parliamentarians, a local mayor, and other civilian officials. Israeli government officials have threatened to assassinate Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, and Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshal. Palestinian officials denounced the arrests as a "declaration of war."

On the same day, Israeli Air Force jets flew low altitude flights over the palace of Syrian President Bashar Assad, creating sonic booms while the President was in residence. This provocation occurred just as Egyptian President Mubarak was requesting the aid of the Syrian President in seeking the release of the captive Israeli soldier. This move confirms Olmert's reckless arrogance, and will likely lead to the death of the Israeli captive.

Advising caution, the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* warned Olmert that "experience has taught that such military measures have not been successful," and that a diplomatic approach must be followed.

Another hostage, an 18-year-old civilian settler held by another group of Palestinian militants on the West Bank, was executed after being held for a few days. In that case, the Israeli government refused even to acknowledge his kidnapping, despite public announcements by the militants.

Far more deafening than the bombs and artillery shells being fired by the Israeli military, is the response from both Washington and Western Europe. The Bush Administration has issued its usual statement, "Israel has the right to defend itself . . . avoid unnecessary harm to civilians . . . maintain restraint. . . ." This has been the policy since 2001, and has been responsible for the death of more than 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians.

Cheney and Rumsfeld intend this escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians to spread more chaos in the region, and thus undermine the stability of Jordan and Egypt, and at the same time, undermine efforts by more sane elements in Washington to resolve the Iraq war and the Iran nuclear conflict.

The only hope to stop this march to disaster is the ouster of Cheney as soon as possible.