

Israel's Sharon sets out militarist agenda in advance of talks with Colin Powell

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Prior to Sunday's meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon has outlined his hard-line military stance regarding the Palestinians.

On February 22, Sharon told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations that under former US President Bill Clinton "too much focus was placed on the peace process, which is very important, but as a result bilateral relations suffered." He argued instead for an emphasis on a "coordinated struggle against terrorism".

Sharon also urged American Jewish leaders to "raise your voices and to take every necessary step that Jerusalem will be united forever under Israel's sovereignty."

Sharon again insisted that there would be no negotiations with the Palestinians as long as protests continued on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He told a group of US senators that Arafat must also move against the infrastructure of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other anti-Israeli groups.

Likud spokesman Raanan Gissin said, "Both governments have a clean slate.... The Bush administration has discarded the Clinton approach."

In his most explicit interview to date, published last week by the *Haaretz* newspaper, Sharon insisted, "The basic guidelines [of his government] will be general, but they will exclude any reference to either a Palestinian state or Jewish settlements."

He continued, "We must force the other side to contend with constantly changing situations and, to that end, we must search out unconventional methods. For example, we should target the infrastructures of Palestinian terrorism."

Sharon continued: "Barak assigned secondary importance to military operations, giving instead top

priority to agreements that could never be implemented. Whoever said that the first item on Israel's national agenda should be peace? Do I attach supreme importance to security? Absolutely."

Sharon depends on the Labour Party to implement his political agenda, for without a government of national unity his chances of maintaining office would be slim. Labour's leaders are expected to finally endorse a coalition with Likud next Monday and put it to the party for ratification the same week. A major obstacle was removed last Tuesday when outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak withdrew from negotiations to become Sharon's defence minister. Barak's attempt to remain in politics was thwarted by his Labour Party rivals, most notably Shimon Peres.

The only remaining obstacle to a coalition agreement is Labour's horse trading over ministerial positions. Labour is asking for the finance ministry or the education ministry, instead of the proposal of Peres as defence minister. Likud has offered Labour eight ministerial posts, two of which would be held without portfolios. It finally agreed, with reservations, to Labour's demand for an eighth minister in the government, giving the two parties an equal number of cabinet posts.

The collective Labour leadership that took over from Barak has already decided not to object to entering a government with the far-right National Union-Israel Beitenu bloc. Barak had threatened to break off negotiations over this issue. The leaders of the two extreme-right parties, Rehavam Zeevi and Avigdor Lieberman, formally renounced their call for the expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to facilitate Labour's climbdown.

But this is for the record only. Zeevi, head of the National Union party, which has four parliamentary

seats, has compared Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat to Hitler, while Lieberman of the Russian immigrant-based Israel Beiteinu, also with four seats in parliament, has urged Israel to bomb Iran and Egypt if Arab nations attack Israel.

Zeevi, a retired general, said last week that he was in favour of seizing back areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Lieberman, a cabinet secretary under former Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, only last week called for military reprisals against Beirut if violence continued on the Israeli-Lebanese border.

As well as giving free rein to the most fascistic layers within the political establishment, Labour's decision to join Likud in government will give a green light to the Israeli Defence Force to step up its activities against both the Palestinians and the Hizbullah militia along Israel's border with Lebanon. Since the IDF pulled out of Lebanon last May, there have been 10 serious incidents on Mount Dov, including a Hizbullah missile attack on an army patrol that killed an IDF soldier.

Last week the IDF held a general assessment meeting on the constant border skirmishes with Hizbullah. An anonymous spokesman let it be known that the IDF was seeking to "change the policy on the northern border ... to create the necessary deterrence."

"We need to initiate strikes at Hizbullah on Mount Dov, and not just react when they attack. If there are attacks on [Israeli] civilians or soldiers [there should be] strikes on targets deep in Lebanon."

The IDF spokesman said that the Palestinian Authority was losing control of the intifada. "There are attempts by the PA to bring about restraint, but they are not being heeded by the populace." The IDF has asked for an immediate infusion of funds to allow a call-up of reservists and thereby free regular troops for war training.



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