

# Israel: Sharon has not changed his spots

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29 May 2003

When the inveterate war criminal Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is being portrayed as a born-again advocate of peace and the creation of a Palestinian state, one knows that something truly despicable is being planned.

For a lie of such obvious transparency to be propagated so widely, it must serve powerful material interests. And for it to be taken as good coin requires either a degree of complicity or a level of desperation that means any straw of comfort is eagerly seized on.

The material interests this particular fiction serves are not hard to discern—they reside above all in the geo-political aims of American imperialism to consolidate its grip on the Middle East in the aftermath of the war against Iraq.

The terrible tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has claimed hundreds of lives and ruined tens of thousands more, gives ample cause for hope of its final resolution. Unfortunately any self-deception on the part of Palestinians or Jews that Sharon and the interests he represents can bring about such an outcome would prove disastrous.

To anyone who has followed Sharon's long and bloody career, his aims are clear and unchanged. Uri Avnery, a prominent leader of the Israeli peace group Gush Shalom, wrote recently, "The Sharon government is now engaged in an all-out struggle to destroy the Palestinian people as a national entity. The re-conquest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the enlargement of the settlements at a frantic pace, the building of the 'separation walls' that will cut off about half of the area of the West Bank, the daily assassinations and other killings, the starving of the population, the wholesale demolition of homes and the building of bypass roads—all these are meant to beat the Palestinian people into submission and to break their will to resist."

He concluded, "Let there be no illusions: Sharon's final goal is turning the whole country, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, into an exclusively Jewish state. In this vision there is no place for Arabs, whether in the occupied territories or in Israel proper. Whoever opposes this vision is an enemy (if an Arab) or a traitor (if a Jew)."

Yet Sharon is now being portrayed as the best hope for peace, after he narrowly secured a cabinet vote conditionally endorsing the so-called "Road Map" for peace being advanced by the Bush administration in the United States along with the European Union, the United Nations and Russia (the "quartet").

Avnery himself, though still critical of Sharon, called the decision, "important... 50 years ago, there weren't 50 people in the entire world who supported the two-state vision. What happened yesterday, was that this vision was accepted by the entire world, the United States, the Arab world, the Palestinian people, and the government of Israel. This is a step of supreme importance, and it is irreversible."

The opposition Labour Party and Meretz went further, offering

Sharon a "safety net" if he was opposed by his own right-wing allies. Meretz MK (Member of the Knesset) Avshalom Vilan said that Sharon could count on more than 30 opposition MKs to support the road map, while Labour leader Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said he was not about to join the government (an interesting denial in itself), "but we say to Ariel Sharon, 'Don't fear. Continue to the end. We are behind you.'"

So what exactly did Sharon do to earn such support? He secured an extremely narrow majority endorsing the road map—which pledges the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005—after the ministers of the right-wing secular Shinui Party decided to back him. In total 12 ministers supported Sharon and seven objected, while four abstained. The most prominent objectors were the ministers from the far-right National Union and the National Religious Party. The four abstentions were Sharon's main rival within Likud, Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Education Minister Limor Livnat, Health Minister Dan Naveh and Public Security Minister Tsahi Hanegbi.

And the rhetoric of the objectors and dissenters was often blood-curdling. Molodet MK Aryeh Eldar pushed for leaving the coalition, asking, "What will we tell our children when they ask how we sat in the government and aided in handing over the Land of Israel for the creation of a Palestinian state?"

In total three of the seven legislators of Sharon's National Union coalition partner, including Uri Ariel and Zvi Hendel, urged the party to quit the government.

In Likud, MK David Levy called the road map "the document containing the worst things ever faced by the government of Israel," while MK Michael Ratzon called the road map "hell" and said it was a sign that Israel had surrendered to Palestinian terrorism.

Amongst the fascistic layers of Zionist settlers in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza, Sharon is being denounced as a traitor. Bentzi Lieberman, chairman of the settlers' leadership Yesha Council, promised to turn out "tens of thousands of demonstrators" while Yesha Council official and former MK Elyakim Haetzni denounced the cabinet for an act of "national treason".

But all the coalition partners stayed and did so because they were convinced by Sharon that he would do nothing that would undermine their shared goal of delivering a crushing defeat to the Palestinians and extending the borders of Israel to include the best lands in the Occupied Territories.

Sharon's primary argument is that the road map is the creature of Washington and therefore will not materially threaten Israel's interests.

The pledge to create a Palestinian state already translates into a plan for a truncated entity, bereft of even a semblance of independence, to be policed by a combination of Israeli and US forces and in all likelihood is not to include East Jerusalem as its capital.

Sharon would have argued that the US is anxious to secure Israel's

backing for its road map in order to better press its interests in the Middle East by providing a political cover for its Arab allies—who all face public hostility for backing Bush's war. Aiding America to bring the more pliant Arab regimes into line would benefit Israel, which would be officially recognised at some point and thus gain access to Arab markets. It could also expect action to be taken against Syria and possibly Iran and thus see its own regional standing strengthened.

He warned his cabinet that failure to approve the plan would lead to a crisis with Washington. And in any case the type of Palestinian state being planned was not too difficult to swallow given the ongoing cost of the war on the Israeli economy. He stressed, "There is a direct link between the diplomatic and economic issues; the more progress we make in the peace process, the more our economic situation will improve."

Immediately after the vote was secured, Sharon was challenged at a Jerusalem rally by Likud activist Yoram Karr who demanded of him, "Does the need to curry the favor of this temporary president of the United States, and the desire to reach an accord which is also supported by the Labour Party, justify the danger to the lives of the nation and of its residents?"

Clearly, the majority within the cabinet decided that currying favour with Bush was worth the candle. But they did so only after Sharon outlined fully 14 reservations about the plan that Israel has presented to the Bush administration as constituting a "red line" that will be binding on future Israeli governments. The US, he said, has promised to "fully and seriously" address these concerns which are not negotiable.

The 14 points were not immediately made public, but even before the vote was taken the cabinet passed a motion rejecting the Palestinian demand of the right of refugees to return to their former homes in Israel vacated during the 1948-49 war.

Since then the scope of the 14 points has become clear after being leaked to the media. They amount to a demand that the Palestinians unconditionally surrender to what could only be seen as a victorious Israeli state.

They include a demand for a "complete cessation of terror" before Israel begins implementing the road map—a direct contradiction of the plan's nominal insistence on reciprocal action by both sides; that the Palestinians waive any right of return to Israel for refugees; the dismantling of Hamas and other "terrorist" organisations; a bar on any discussion of the fate of established Jewish settlements or of Jerusalem until final status talks; and the acceptance before negotiations begin that Israel will control the borders, airspace and other aspects of a provisional Palestinian state.

On top of this the agreement must be policed exclusively by US forces, as opposed to the United Nations or any other body.

As far as the Palestinians are concerned, Sharon's document states, "There will be no progress to the second phase without the fulfillment of all above-mentioned conditions relating to the war against terror." In contrast, "The road map will not state that Israel must halt violence, incitement against the Palestinians," the document continues.

Further to Sharon's real intentions, he responded to a query by Knesset member for the Zionist settlement at Ariel, Yehiel Hazan, by promising that the plan as revised by him allows the continued building of settlements. "It certainly allows the unlimited building for your children and grandchildren, and I hope even for your great-grandchildren," he said.

He said on May 27 that he had reached an understanding with the US that settlements, including illegal outposts, would be dealt with on

a "separate track," from the road map.

It was with justification, therefore, that Likud's Minister for Education Limor Livnat could proclaim, "In fact, the government did not accept the road map at all," while Herb Keinon writing in the pro-Sharon *Jerusalem Post* entitled his May 26 op-ed piece, "Saying 'yes' while meaning 'no'" and defined Sharon's argument as being a call to "Vote 'yes,' because practically it doesn't really mean a whole lot".

Sharon is making absolutely clear that the only party he will entrust with Israel's interests is Washington. Bush responded to the cabinet vote by announcing plans to visit the Middle East in early June for talks with Sharon and newly elected Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen)—who is Washington's favoured alternative to Yasser Arafat. But Sharon has rejected any broader summit that included either the EU or the UN. (Even this limited summit has been thrown into question by Arafat's insistence that he, not Abbas, should represent the Palestinians.)

In a pointed expression of contempt and hostility towards Europe, Israeli Defence Forces opened fire on a Swiss consulate armoured car in the Gaza Strip on Monday May 23. The car held a diplomatic mission made up of representatives from Switzerland, Britain, Greece, Sweden, and Austria.

Sharon will also not hold talks with French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin during his visit to the region next week. De Villepin will meet with Arafat, whom Israel and the US have both declared persona non grata. Last week, Sharon refused to see EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana because of his meeting with Arafat.

The US has formally said that it will "address" the demands of the Israeli government, but is not prepared to amend the plan. But government officials have said they could add "annexes or side-letters"—a revision by any other name. In any event Washington's assurances would only be accepted by either the desperate or the politically corrupt. Fortunately for the Bush administration, in the person of Mahmoud Abbas they have both.

He and a host of Palestinian spokesmen have combined welcoming noises regarding Israel's formal backing for the road map with warnings that it must be implemented without preconditions and changes. "This plan should be implemented from A to Z, and we will not accept any changes in it," Abbas told reporters. Thus the Palestinian Authority's answer to Sharon boils down to unconditional acceptance of a plan drawn up by US imperialism that will turn its citizens into prisoners of a ghetto patrolled by their enemies.



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