Sharon offers nothing to Palestinian leadership

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A June 21 summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas ended with Israel making unrealistic demands of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and conceding virtually nothing.

The meeting, at Sharon's official residence in Jerusalem, opened with Sharon scolding Abbas. For 20 minutes of the two-hour summit, Sharon shouted and banged on the table, humiliating Abbas and denouncing him for not having done enough to rein in Palestinian militants.

Sharon ensured that security issues dominated the summit, and gave short shrift to the Palestinians' requests, countering each demand with unacceptable, if not impossible, conditions regarding the suppression and policing of Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

The Palestinian delegation had called for the easing of the roadblocks and border crossings that are crippling the Palestinian economy, the halting of both the construction of Israel's separation wall and the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank and the release of more political detainees.

All of these demands are long-standing. Without making some headway on them, the Palestinian leadership—and Abbas in particular—has no hope of maintaining credibility and preventing the growth of opposition to its capitulation to Israel. Sharon is well aware of this, but feels emboldened enough by the support he enjoys from the United States to undermine Abbas. This is despite the fact that Abbas was the Bush administration's chosen successor to Yasser Arafat and was seen as a pliant figure who could impose a rotten compromise on the Palestinians that would entirely favour Israel.

The Israeli daily *Maariv* cites Efraim Sneh, chairman of the Labour Party's parliamentary faction, warning that Sharon "has no intention of advancing the peace process after the pullout from Gaza and that's why he is not really trying to help Abu Mazen (Abbas) stay in power. If we don't do anything about his demands he will grow weaker."

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, who attended the meeting, complained, "On all basic issues for which we were expecting positive responses, there was none."

Mohammed Dahlan, Palestinian minister in charge of coordinating the withdrawal from Gaza, concurred, saying bitterly, "There was nothing, nothing."

After the summit, Sharon claimed in, "We want to make progress with the Palestinians so we can implement the roadmap, but that will not be possible until there is a complete end to terrorist attacks."

The only concessions agreed upon were all conditioned on an end to militant attacks; i.e., they are not going to be implemented.

Sharon gave permission to begin preparations for reopening Gaza's airport and constructing a deep-water port, and said that Israel will hand over Qalqiliya and Bethlehem to Palestinian control in two weeks, if the PA quells attacks. The February truce called for Israel to hand over five West Bank towns, but Sharon halted the process after handing back Ramallah and Jericho—again claiming that the PA had not disarmed militants in the areas concerned.

Sharon also offered to allow another 26,000 Palestinian labourers and 13,400 more merchants to work in Israel, and some security coordination was agreed upon, including the deployment of 5,000 Palestinian policemen in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli withdrawal. However, Sharon refused to allow them to be armed. Israel intends to keep control of the border crossing at Rafah between Gaza and Egypt, since it claims that arms will flood across the border otherwise.

Sharon's spokesman Raanan Gissin said that Israel would consider releasing more of the 7,000-plus prisoners and allowing the return of those deported for violence on condition that the PA "stop fugitives, put militants under control and prevent terrorist activity."

As the summit approached, thousands of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails went on hunger strike in protest at their continued detention. The largest detainees' rights group, the Prisoners Club, claimed that almost all of its 8,000 members were refusing food. They are urging Abbas

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to insist on a timetable for their release. Since the truce declaration, Israel has released some 900 prisoners, but most were about to complete their terms.

The Palestinian factions had all been encouraged to maintain a cease-fire following Abbas's and Sharon's agreement on a truce at February's meeting at Sharm El-Sheikh. But in the intervening four months, Israel has violated the truce on a number of occasions—intent on provoking Palestinian militants to retaliate and thereby giving Israel a pretext to renege on its commitments to a negotiated peace.

Hamas criticised Abbas for accepting Jerusalem as a venue: "This is a dangerous precedent which could lead to recognition of the Zionist allegations proclaiming Jerusalem as their capital."

Islamic Jihad's Khadr Adnan claimed that if the PA and Egypt, which brokered the truce, did not take action to ensure Israel's commitment to it "then we will consider ourselves to be outside [the agreement], and will call upon all Palestinian factions to do the same."

Islamic Jihad resumed attacks in the days leading up to the summit, killing two Israelis. Israeli forces arrested 52 suspected Islamic Jihad members in the West Bank early on the day of the meeting, in the biggest sweep since the truce was signed. Islamic Jihad urged Abbas to cancel the summit and Hamas too threatened a resumption of attacks on Israeli targets. Another 11 people were arrested the next day, and more arrests were promised.

In a sign of internal Palestinian unrest, shots were fired the day after the summit at Balata refugee camp in the northern West Bank where Qurei was meeting militants. An explosive device was also detonated as he and his entourage left. Many in Balata are frustrated at the PA leadership's lack of progress with Israel and also at its reported corruption and efforts to marginalise them.

Sharon is under enormous pressure from far-right settler and religious groups to retreat from even the handover of Gaza. And it is in his interests to continue provoking the militants into retaliation, since this means that he is not obliged to negotiate with Abbas and the PA and does not have to concede anything. His government issued a stark warning to Palestinians that it will launch air strikes if militants attack during the evacuation of Gaza, due to begin in August.

These official warnings make clear that the pullout could in fact be used as an excuse for a major military attack on the Palestinians. "We shall do it in a very intensive way. We shall do it in a very surgical way. We shall do it in a very accurate way. We want to do it on the basis of precise intelligence," explained Israeli pullout coordinator Eival Gilady. "But if we are compelled to use ... helicopters and planes, which cause more damage—severe collateral damage—with increased danger that people around a particular point of operations will be harmed, we shall have to do it. If there is a terror, we shall respond."

Sharon also warned, "There will be no pullout under fire. We will not stop the pullout. We will stop the terrorism."

Just hours after the summit, Tel Aviv confirmed the resumption of its assassination policy targeting Palestinian militants. Israeli officials confirmed that an unsuccessful missile strike in Gaza, aimed at Islamic Jihad targets, had taken place whilst Abbas and Sharon had been meeting in Jerusalem. The Bush administration has refused to criticise Israel's resumption of an assassination policy and called instead on the Palestinian leadership to rein in the "terrorists."

"There are terrorist organisations in the region that are determined to derail efforts toward the president's two-state vision of Palestine and Israel living side by side in peace and security," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan. "Some of these are terrorist organisations that have direct ties to Damascus [Syria's capital]. Our views on terrorist organisations are well known. They need to be dismantled."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with both the Israelis and the Palestinians in the days before the summit. She publicly insisted that the PA clamp down on militant opposition to Israel and told Israel to stop the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories.

Sharon took this with more than a pinch of salt. As Rice left Israel, the government announced that it will receive tender offers at the end of the year for the building of 700 new homes in the illegal settlements of Maale Adumin and Beitar Eilit. One week later, the US announced that it will give Israel $1 billion in additional aid after its Gaza withdrawal. This is seen in part as appeasing those who oppose the pullout, and partly to compensate Israel for its decision not to sell arms to China.

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