

Sharon May Kill Arafat, To Cling to Power

by Dean Andromidas

There are dangerous indications that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is preparing the assassination of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Faced with a growing international outcry against his “Operation Warsaw Ghetto”—dealing with the Palestinian Authority as the Nazis did with Warsaw’s Jewish Resistance—and with a collapsing Israeli economy, Sharon must maintain the momentum of his war drive, or soon fall from power.

Sharon could also be sensing that his backers in the United States and Britain might opt for Benjamin Netanyahu, who, while sharing Sharon’s extreme views, would be more pliable to play Washington’s tune, as the Bush Administration prepares for a war against Iraq.

The killing of Arafat would have catastrophic consequences for the Middle East. U.S. State Department officials were quoted in the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, saying that the killing of Arafat, even if accidental, would be “likely to lead to a catastrophe of unimaginable dimensions.” But it is precisely that, that will further the “Clash of Civilizations” policies being promoted by hard-liners in Washington.

This very real possibility was signalled in the Israeli press, which has revealed a debate within Sharon’s cabinet on whether to force Arafat’s exile from the occupied territories. Arafat has made it clear that the only way he could be exiled is in a coffin, while any Arab leader who agreed to accept Arafat as part of a deal with Sharon, would be overthrown. Therefore, “exile” should be seen as the code word for assassination.

In the April 21 *Ha’aretz*, senior political correspondent Aluf Benn wrote, “The signs that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his government are taking a decisive and perhaps final step in office are becoming increasingly evident. . . . While riding a wave of public support for Operation Defensive Shield, the Prime Minister has spotted a window of opportunity through which to get rid of Arafat once and for all; and he is being backed by increasing support from President

George W. Bush and the hawks in the U.S. administration. . . . One can assume that the prime minister will wait for the next terror attack to give him the political and public justification for this action and silence the opposition in the cabinet.”

The London *Daily Telegraph* reports that while Netanyahu was in Washington in mid-April, he held discussions with Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld “on how to proceed if Mr. Arafat were removed.”

Sharon’s scheme to “exile” or eliminate Arafat was hatched with the help of Israeli Chief of Staff Gen. Shaul Mofaz. They presented the proposal to the Israeli Cabinet on April 18. Sharon said, “I know that the defense minister and the head of the Shin Bet security service disagree with me,” but he nonetheless put forward the absurd notion that an “alternative Palestinian leadership” could take over the territories once Arafat disappears from the scene. But Sharon knows full well that the death of Arafat would mean a regional explosion and war, by means of which he intends to implement his “Jordan is Palestine policy,” forcing 2 million Palestinians across the Jordan River.

No sooner did the Cabinet meeting end, than the Israeli military began announcing its intent to raid the Mukata compound in Ramallah where Arafat is a virtual prisoner. The pretext for the raid would be to capture the alleged murderers of Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze’evi, who are imprisoned in the compound.

A senior Israeli military source confirmed that he has been “hearing whisperings” of an attack on the Mutaka compound with the explicit purpose of killing Arafat. He underscored that “only Sharon will make that decision.”

The UN Security Council met on April 23, at the request of Syria, after several explosions near Arafat’s compound. Security Council President Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Ambassador to the UN, stated: “The members of the Council express



The danger of an Israeli Defense Forces move to physically eliminate Yasser Arafat was increasing in late April—primarily because Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's own strategic position was becoming so precarious.

serious concern for the safety of Chairman Arafat. They emphasized that there must be no harm to him or others in the compound. The siege must be lifted, and Chairman Arafat must have full freedom of movement to fully carry out his functions.”

Either Now or Never

Despite high ratings in the polls, Sharon's political position is extremely weak. If the United States opted for a real peace option along the lines proposed by Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche, and signalled that Sharon had to go, he could quickly be packed off to The Hague, or to Belgium, to face a war crimes tribunal.

“Operation Defensive Shield,” Israel's largest military operation since the 1982 Lebanon War, has left hundreds of Palestinians dead, including women and children, and thousands homeless. The massive suffering brought upon the Palestinians, including denial of food and medical services, has brought denunciations by governments and aid organizations from around the world.

There are confirmed reports that the Israeli military also engaged in general looting of civilians' property—including the money in banks—and destruction of hospitals, offices, and administrative centers. Looting and rape were the two war crimes that the Israeli military had always punished severely. Looting is now apparently acceptable—connived at, if not encouraged, by senior echelons of the military.

Sharon's most vulnerable flank is Jenin. If the truth of the war crimes committed in the refugee camp were to be revealed to the world, especially through the auspices of the United Nations, it could force Israel to the negotiating table or to suffer complete diplomatic isolation.

Sharon knows this only too well, and has refused to cooperate with the UN fact-finding mission named by Secretary General Kofi Annan and backed by a UN Security Council

resolution. The April 25 *Ha'aretz* revealed that Sharon's refusal came after his government was advised to drastically curtail the military's mandate by one of Israel's international legal advisers. Daniel Bethlehem, of the Lauterpracht Research Center for International Law at Cambridge University, warned in a memorandum to Sharon's government, that with the naming of the UN fact-finding mission, “For all practical purposes, Israel is faced with a war crimes investigation,” the seriousness of which “should not be minimized.” Bethlehem said, “If the committee's findings uphold allegations against Israel—even on poor reasoning—this will fundamentally alter the dynamics of the Israel-Palestinian leadership and may make it impossible for Israel to resist calls for an international force, the immediate establishment of a Palestinian state, and the prosecution of individuals said to have committed the alleged acts.”

The Bethlehem memo, in effect, tells Sharon and his generals to stop believing their own propaganda. “Israel has already lost the public relations battle. Whether or not there was a massacre in Jenin as the Palestinians contend, there is a widely held perception in the international community that Israel's use of force in Jenin was excessive, disproportionate, and indiscriminate, and that this was compounded by a failure to provide, or allow the provision of, humanitarian assistance in the conflict. Even assuming that all the facts are in Israel's favor, it will be difficult to redress this balance.”

As soon as this memo arrived on Sharon's desk, he announced he was suspending cooperation with the UN mission. *Ha'aretz* commented, “Israel's complete backtracking of its position within three days served to further strengthen the suspicion that it has something to hide under the rubble in Jenin.”

Rats Flee the Sinking Ship

On April 19, Uri Shani, a flunky of Sharon's for the last three decades, resigned as his Bureau Chief, one of the most influential positions among Sharon's personal circle. Israeli political commentators point to two possible reasons, both of which are leading Sharon to yet newer adventures.

The first is the ongoing criminal investigation of Sharon for illegally financing one of his election campaigns though foreign, primarily U.S., donors. Several weeks ago, Shani was questioned by Israel's national fraud squad for eight hours, because of his alleged role in the crime. Sharon was questioned on April 22 for seven and a half hours. Police sources indicate that other, much more serious crimes—such as corruption, influence peddling, and breach of trust—could be involved.

The second is that Shani opposed Sharon's move to launch such an adventure as killing Arafat, and did not want to be in the line of fire when the inevitable political, if not military explosion occurred.

Israeli political commentator Hannah Kim, in *Ha'aretz* on April 23, pointed to the connection between Sharon's political woes and his military strategy: “Sharon did a lot of politicking

while conquering Jenin, because the danger was not only from there. The danger is at home, from Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud Central Committee, and the police investigation into the shell companies that financed Sharon's campaigns. . . . Therefore it would not be an exaggeration to assume that the deranged idea to break into the Mukata compound in Ramallah . . . is something Sharon is taking seriously because it could provide a political dividend."

Meanwhile, the Israeli economy continues to collapse under the weight Sharon and his war. The shekel fell from 4.77 to the dollar on April 23, to as low as 4.92 in the course of 48 hours. Sharon's finance minister announced massive tax increases, including a 26% tax on interest accrued on savings accounts, an increase in the value-added tax, and increased taxes on cigarettes and gasoline. He also announced a cut of 13 billion shekels from the budget, mostly from social programs, prompting the Histadrut Labor Federation to declare its intent to organize a general strike within a few weeks.

Time is running out for Sharon. Either he and his generals accept, in effect, defeat or international isolation, or extend their war drive beyond the occupied territories.