

Is Sharon Launching A Third Intifada?

by Dean Andromidas

Five years ago, on Sept. 28, Ariel Sharon made his infamous march on the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and ignited the Al Aqsa Intifada. Now his bloody anti-Hamas military campaign, Operation First Rain, could ignite a third Intifada.

On Sept. 26, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched Operation First Rain, targetting the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. With this operation, Israel has renewed its policy of targetted assassinations by killing several militants, arresting almost 400 Hamas operatives in the West Bank, and firing artillery shells into populated areas of the Gaza Strip. On Sept. 27, Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz announced that Israel would begin assassinations of senior Hamas leaders, while Major Gen. Yisrael Ziv, chief of operations, warned that Israel would launch artillery barrages against the Gaza town of Beit Hanun if home-made Qassam rockets were fired from that direction.

Contrary to the Israeli government claim that the latest escalation of violence was a reaction to the launching of a barrage of home-made Qassem rockets from Gaza into the neighboring Israeli town of Sideot, Operation First Rain was planned months ago. Its mastermind is Sharon's hand-picked IDF Chief of Staff, Gen. Dan Halutz. It had been mooted in the Israeli press that such an operation had been planned to take place after the completion of the evacuation of the Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip, to "root out terror," as Sharon and his generals have been saying, but also to prevent any diplomatic initiative from taking hold.

If Sharon continues to act unilaterally against the Palestinians, he will provoke Palestinian attacks which he will use as a pretext not to implement the so-called Road Map to a Middle East peace. At this point, Sharon is testing the waters to see if Washington will intervene to force him to implement the Road Map.

Sharon told the United Nations General Assembly in September, that his evacuation of Gaza was part of his "painful concessions" for peace. But at a press conference in New York, he said that Israel would not allow Hamas to participate in the Palestinian elections, and even threatened to prevent the elections from taking place. This was a slap in the face to efforts by Egypt and the Europeans to bolster Palestinian President Abu Mazen's efforts to encourage Hamas to rein in its militants, and participate in the elections scheduled for January, in hopes that such a move would stabilize the situation in the occupied territories, and put pressure on Sharon to

begin negotiations. "The escalation is putting the entire peace process in real jeopardy," Mazen warned Sept. 30. "We call on Israel to stop these acts, especially since all our factions have committed themselves to the cease-fire."

Aluf Benn, another senior *Ha'aretz* correspondent covering the Palestinians, reported that even in the Israeli military, certain circles disagree with Sharon's policy. "A senior source said this week, that Hamas's participation in the elections could be advantageous to Israel. The more it plays an institutional role, the more it will heed public opinion and show responsibility. But Sharon rejects this argument and is afraid of the international legitimization Hamas would receive."

The IDF is targetting the Hamas-linked Islamic Jihad, but has also killed several leaders of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, who have been adhering for months to a cease-fire brokered by Abu Mazen.

Situation Worsens After Netanyahu Defeat

On his return from New York, Sharon was able to win a crucial vote in the Likud party Central Committee that defeated an attempt by Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu to bring forward primaries for the leadership of the party. If Sharon had lost that vote, it would have led to an early fall of his government, and brought Bibi back into the Prime Minister's office. Bibi's defeat, most likely, forestalled an attempt by Vice President Dick Cheney to get Israel, under a Bibi government, to attack Iran's nuclear sites. According to Israeli sources, Sharon, fearing the obvious consequences, was not enthusiastic about an Israeli solo attack against Iran, at least not in the immediate future. While Netanyahu's defeat may have pulled the situation out of the "permanent revolution and permanent war" paradigm, Sharon has now been given a free hand to keep the region in the throes of his hardline policy against the Palestinians, which promises the same result.

Sharon reportedly made his policy clear to the Likud Central Committee: "Today we must invest all our efforts in what is possible, in what is vital," which he defined as securing their hold on Jerusalem, the large settlement blocks, and completing the security fence, fortifying the Jordan valley, buffer zones, and the Golan Heights. This means grabbing over 40% of the West Bank, and holding on to the occupied Golan Heights, which rules out any possibility for peace with Syria.

A few days later, one of Sharon's strategic advisors, Eyal Arad, speaking at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, clarified Sharon's policy: "If we see that the standstill continues," Arad said, "there may be room to consider turning disengagement into a strategy." He called this "a strategy of unilaterally determining the permanent borders . . . of Israel."

The Herzliya Center, which is financed by U.S. neo-con billionaire Ron Lauder, is where Sharon first announced his so-called disengagement plan almost two years ago, and now it is where Sharon has announced his plan to unilaterally draw the permanent borders of Israel. This is not a policy for peace, but for permanent war.