

SHARON'S SINKING SHIP OF STATE

By David Dolan

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The prospects for early Israeli national elections increased in August after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lost another key vote inside his deeply divided Likud party. The outcome added significant gravitas to the many Likud opponents of his controversial Gaza Strip evacuation plan, and led the opposition Labor party to declare a halt to coalition negotiations with Sharon, and to call for early elections. All this came as Yasser Arafat admitted making “mistakes” during his prolonged rule of the tottering Palestinian Authority, while once again ignoring internal and international calls that he step aside and let younger leaders take to the stage.

Likud party convention delegates voted by a substantial majority—843 to 612—to oppose the Labor party’s inclusion in Sharon’s wobbly coalition government. Political analysts from right and left agreed that the 18 August vote was a serious blow to the aging Israeli premier, who had earlier pleaded for support from heckling convention delegates. Adding to growing assertions that he is acting more like a typical Middle East dictator than a democratically elected leader, Sharon angered many Likud voters by also vowing to continue negotiations with “all Zionist parties” whether or not a majority of his party backed such talks.

Many political analysts said the PM will now find it extremely difficult to knit together a viable coalition with Labor leader Shimon Peres, especially since popular former premier Binyamin Netanyahu and current Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom were among the many Likud naysayers (who were formally led by Minister Without Portfolio Uzi Landau). More importantly, the embattled Israeli premier can no longer pretend that his core power base supports his contested evacuation plan. “George Bush, Tony Blair, and Shimon Peres may admire Sharon as a courageous politician who is risking all for his pullout proposal, but the average Likud convention delegate obviously doesn’t see it that way,” said one commentator on Israel state radio.

Others noted that while Sharon could reasonably claim that last May’s national Likud member’s rejection of his unilateral evacuation plan was due to the passions of the undereducated and emotional masses, this vote—occurring inside the previously elected 2,900 member Likud party convention that also chooses Knesset slates—could not be so easily dismissed as a false reflection of actual party sentiments.

Political commentators pointed out that Labor leader Shimon Peres has little to lose, and much to gain, if the current Knesset is dissolved in the coming months. Celebrating his 81st birthday in August, the veteran socialist politician would probably head his party’s Knesset list if the current parliament is prematurely disbanded. That prospect would diminish if the election is held on schedule in late 2006, when Peres would be heading toward his 84th year on earth.

However, several Labor politicians said they will demand a new vote for party chairman if the national vote is moved forward. This prompted Peres to back away somewhat from his earlier announcement that he would suspend coalition negotiations with Sharon. But he realizes that many of his colleagues are eager for early elections since the left-wing party—which was trounced in 2003, ending up with only 19 Knesset seats—is expected to win back at least a few of the seats it lost to the centrist Shinui

party. Shinui leaders have come under substantial criticism in recent months for their failure to implement nearly any of the civil reforms they advocated before the last election despite being the second largest party in Sharon's current government. The largest religious party, Shas, is also projected to pick up some seats lost to the Likud in 2003, making it eager for an early ballot as well.

CATS AND DOGS

Without Labor on board, Ariel Sharon's alternative coalition prospects would remain severely limited due to continuing mutual animosity between the 17-seat Shinui party and the two ultra-Orthodox parties that could potentially join his government. While Shinui leaders bended somewhat during August by announcing they could countenance sitting with the smaller of the two parties—United Torah Judaism—if it agreed to drop certain political demands, they repeated their threat to bolt Sharon's coalition if Shas jumps on board.

Although Shas legislators are known to be itching to return to the cabinet table—with all the financial perks that this implies—their rabbinical leaders are hardly enthusiastic about Sharon's withdrawal scheme. They fear that a unilateral uprooting of all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four others in northern Samaria would only increase the flow of Jewish blood, as did the failed Oslo process which was only approved in 1993 because Shas legislators backed it. They also understand that many Orthodox Jews oppose the evacuation on the grounds that it will increase international pressure upon Israel to eventually hand over the eastern half of Jerusalem where the sacred Temple Mount is located; a prospect that does not sit well with most Shas voters.

On the other hand, the four man United Torah Judaism party, with little interest in such "worldly" matters, is too small to ensure Sharon a stable coalition government without Labor's participation. This is doubly the case since over half of the current 40 Likud parliament members openly oppose his withdrawal plan. So without Peres and company formally on board his coalition wagon, most political analysts say the portly Likud leader will find it impossible to successfully pull off his costly and complicated evacuation program, despite the fact that opinion polls show around 75% of the general public supports such a pullback.

COSTLY ENDEVOURS

It became clearer during August just how costly a Gaza uprooting would be—and the projected price tag shocked even some ardent withdrawal advocates. Armed Forces Chief Moshe Ya'alon told the Knesset that the pullout will cost the army an estimated 1.5 billion shekels. But he admitted that this was just the actual projected spending for the retreat itself, not including significant additional outlays to relocate uprooted military infrastructure in nearby areas. More importantly, his estimate did not include government payments to evacuated settlers, along with other necessary civilian spending.

Israeli economic analysts said the actual overall cost of Sharon's proposed withdrawal plan will be at least eight billion shekels, or around two billion dollars. Some estimate it could be closer to four times that amount, or some 20 billion shekels, if not more. They noted that the 1982 Sinai pullback would have cost 15 billion shekels if it occurred today even though the numbers of people and communities involved was far less than in the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria.

Although many world leaders have expressed support for Sharon's unilateral evacuation plan, at least to some extent, few have indicated a willingness to help finance it. Given the continuing economic crisis in Israel which began with the Al Aksa Palestinian attrition war in late 2000, along with a slowing world recovery amid soaring oil prices, withdrawal critics say the question of where such huge sums will come from is another one that the veteran Israeli leader must answer before any retreat begins.

UP IN THE AIR

More Palestinian rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip upon nearby Israeli towns and farming communities during August, injuring several civilians, including children, and damaging more homes and cars. One rocket crashed through a home's outer wall and landed on a bed occupied by a mother and two of her children. Miraculously, only the startled mother was injured when she reached out and grazed the smoldering projectile. Three weeks later, the army announced that it had discovered two Kassam rockets in the town of Nablus—the first time the dangerous and illegal Palestinian weapons have turned up outside of the teeming coastal zone. Israeli leaders are worried that such rockets could be fired in the future at Jerusalem and other major cities, and/or at the international airport east of Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile Knesset Member Yuri Shtern, who co-chairs the new “Christian Allies Caucus” committee, expressed the sentiments of many Likud legislators in a commentary he wrote mid-month for the Jerusalem Post. The National Union politician opined that Sharon's unilateral withdrawal proposal is a “leap of faith” that is both dangerous and illogical.

Shtern warned that most regional Arabs and Iran will see a non-negotiated pullout as “withdrawal under fire” like they did the quick retreat from southern Lebanon in May 2000. He maintained that it will sharply enhance Palestinian demands for *all* Jews to be evacuated from Jordan's former West Bank, including eastern Jerusalem, despite recent expressions of American support for Israel's long-held contention that a total pullout is both unrealistic and unjust. The right-wing politician threw additional salt into his scathing critique by stating what many Likud members privately think: Sharon's disavowal of his party's two votes against his evacuation plan significantly weakens Israel's democratic system of government.

Sharon's backers responded to such criticism by again emphasizing the “important promises” that the Israeli leader secured from the White House last April soon after unveiling his unilateral withdrawal plan. One of those reported pledges—that the US will not oppose “natural growth” in three large Jewish settlement blocks around Jerusalem and east of Tel Aviv—was seemingly confirmed in August after the government announced that it was issuing just over 1,000 new building permits inside the existing borders of several settlements located in the three blocks. The State Department spokesman did not react to the news with the usual rebukes, but merely stated that “the issue of settlement activity is something that continues to be under discussion.”

The Palestinian Authority responded to the moderate US reaction by blasting the Bush administration for supposedly “destroying the Road Map” peace plan—as if continuing Palestinian terror attacks are not the key factor derailing that plan (six Israeli policemen were wounded, and two Arab bystanders killed, in the latest attack just north of Jerusalem on August 11th). Some Likud party evacuation opponents were also not impressed, saying Sharon is gambling on the current US president remaining

in power, which American opinion polls reveal may not be the case at all.

MEA CULPA...SORT OF

On the same day that Ariel Sharon was facing down his rebellious Likud party subordinates in Tel Aviv, Yasser Arafat delivered an internationally-televised speech before Palestinian legislators in Ramallah. The PLO chairman admitted to a certain amount of corruption inside his Palestinian Authority, but in typical fashion, did not take any of the blame himself. He said there were “wrong actions by some institutions, and some were irresponsible and misused their positions.” However he did admit to being among those who “made mistakes,” but then went on to excuse this by adding that “even some of the prophets committed mistakes.”

Aware of growing internal and regional pressure upon him to reform his corrupt administration, and fearing the rising popularity of former security chief Muhammad Dahlan, Arafat then pledged “to correct and reform all the mistakes” and to “strengthen the rule of law and activate the judicial system.” However, these vague promises did not satisfy most of his critics, including former PA cabinet minister Abdel Saleh who actually heckled the long-time Palestinian leader while he was speaking, shouting out that Arafat was “protecting the corrupt.” Saleh later told reporters that the ailing PA leader was “not serious” about implementing reforms—a sentiment echoed by other legislators and Arab human rights advocates, and by Israeli and American officials.

During his speech, Arafat repeated his usual pledge to establish a Palestinian state with “holy Jerusalem” as its capital. He also employed his well-worn tactic of trying to shift most blame for the intense suffering of his people to others, especially to Israeli officials. The PLO chief termed Israel’s controversial security barrier an “apartheid wall” designed to somehow “destroy the PA and create a state of lawlessness.” Arafat then maintained that Israel was deliberately “poisoning Palestinians” with nuclear radiation, an apparent allusion to Israel’s undeclared nuclear weapons stockpile—which are presumably under lock and key, and nowhere near hostile Arab population centers.

Arafat also pledged support for Arab prisoners engaged in a hunger strike, calling the participants “martyrs” for the Palestinian cause. The jailed men are demanding public telephones inside their cells that cannot be monitored by prison authorities, and the removal of glass barriers when they meet their families and friends, among other things. Palestinian officials were embarrassed when imprisoned Fatah militia leader Marwan Barghouti, the main organizer of the hunger strike, was secretly filmed eating a meal during the strike.

SHOWDOWN TIME

While dealing with their own domestic problems, Israeli leaders continue to closely monitor dramatic events in nearby Iraq, where fighting escalated in August between coalition troops and Muqtada Al-Sadr’s Shiite forces. Even more attention was being focused on Shiite Iran, which issued fresh threats to launch a preemptive strike on Israel to forestall any air force action against Iran’s sprawling nuclear facilities. Indeed, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani went even further, hinting at a possible assault upon American soldiers in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan. He maintained that Israel would not dare destroy his country’s nuclear sites without a “green light” from Washington, necessitating possible action against US forces stationed in the region.

One day before he spoke on the Al-Jazeera news network, another Iranian official warned that Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona would be "obliterated" if Israeli warplanes tried to wipe out Iran's nuclear facilities. He boasted that Iran's long-range missiles can reach "any target in the Zionist entity," which most experts say is certainly the case. Israel has not actually threatened to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, but has stated that it will not allow the radical regime to build nuclear bombs. Iran's latest threats came soon after the country confirmed it has resumed constructing centrifuges that can be used to enrich uranium for nuclear warheads.

With the scent of the prophesied final battles of history growing ever stronger in the explosive Middle East, the Israeli people and their many international Christian friends can be confident of the fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continues to hold the future in His strong and competent hands. He alone is Israel's Lord and Redeemer, who revealed ages ago that, "*For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In an outburst of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingness I will have compassion on you.*" (Isaiah 54:7-8).

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