

# Bush Must Turn Up Heat, Make Sharon Make Peace

by Dean Andromidas

“Without constant pressure directly from Bush, Sharon will do nothing. This is what we have seen in the last weeks. Sharon continues to balk, until Washington intervenes and pressures him,” a senior Israeli military source told *EIR*, adding that if President George Bush does not escalate the pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the Road Map for a Middle East peace will collapse.

His pattern of saying “Yes,” and doing “No,” has been consistent: When President Bush decided to implement the Road Map, culminating in the early June summits in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt and Aqaba, Jordan, Sharon managed to come up with 100 objections, and then refused to make his acceptance official, by bringing it before his Cabinet for a vote.

The Israeli Prime Minister only caved in after Secretary of State Colin Powell threatened an arms embargo, if the Israelis used U.S. weapons against Palestinians in the West Bank. Then, after being dragged to the Aqaba summit on June 4, to commit to the Road Map with President Bush and Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), Sharon refused to implement his promises, which included halting the targeted assassinations of Palestinians and withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and Bethlehem. He was directly rebuked by Bush, who sent Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to Israel as his personal envoy, and only then did Sharon relent.

## Sharon Following the ‘Clean Break’ Script

Now, a new crisis has been provoked over Sharon’s government’s refusal to release Palestinian prisoners; to dismantle of some 100 “outposts” or mini-settlements in the Palestinian territories, which were established since Sharon came to power; and to ease the brutal living conditions imposed on the Palestinian population by Israeli closures, sieges, roadblocks, and mass arrests. If Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen cannot deliver Israeli compliance to his constituents within the next weeks, his government, and the Road Map along with it, will collapse, and threaten to engulf the region in permanent bloodletting.

Moreover, Sharon’s foot-dragging not only continues to

receive support from the chicken-hawks around Vice President Dick Cheney, but is following the 1996 script for “securing the realm”—known as the “Clean Break” doctrine, of Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and others—who are preventing the Bush Administration from making a clean break with Sharon.

Sharon’s latest strategy of procrastination is aimed at collapsing the cease-fire organized by Abu Mazen with the Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others. These groups would then resume their attacks—conveniently allowing Sharon to again expanding settlements and escalate the repression against the Palestinians.

## Israel Violates Spirit of Cease-Fire

Typical of Sharon’s stonewalling, were his broken promises to release Palestinian political prisoners. Israel admits to holding 6,500 prisoners, but unofficial reports put the figure above 10,000. Israeli media report that there are secret detention centers holding an unknown number of prisoners, “disappeared” from their homes or workplaces. Most of these prisoners are under administrative detention, and have not been charged, allegedly for lack of evidence. In fact, they are political activists from across the Palestinian spectrum. Their release would have a profound, favorable impact on the Palestinian population, whose friends, relatives, and political associates can be counted among the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of administrative detainees.

While saying “Yes” to such a release, Sharon’s government only agreed to freeing 350 prisoners, mostly car thieves and day-laborers arrested for illegally entering Israel. Sharon openly refused to release any members of Hamas, or those allegedly with “blood on their hands.” His aim is to directly undermine the Palestinian cease-fire, and the Palestinian Prime Minister’s credibility. The same tactic was used in the 1990s, which contributed to the breakdown of the Oslo Accords. Sharon further covered his own foot-dragging, by getting the prisoner release passed on a 13-8 cabinet vote, in which Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (a former chairman of Sharon’s Likud party) and one other minister agreed to

abstain. Transport Minister Avigdor Lieberman, of the fascist National Union, vociferously voted nay, and reportedly proclaimed that not only should the prisoners be drowned in the Dead Sea, but offered to have his ministry supply the buses to take them there.

Palestinian Minister for Prisoner Affairs Hisham Abdel Razek responded, "This decision is not enough and threatens the cease-fire agreement. We insist that Israel release all the prisoners. This will help calm the situation and consolidate the *hudna* [temporary cease-fire]. The time has come to close this file, otherwise the *hudna* will collapse. Israel must decide in principle that it will release all the prisoners and implement the decision gradually. If this is not done, then there will not be negotiations, no Road Map."

Sharon's promise to dismantle the outposts similarly was shown up to be a complete sham: For every dismantled outpost, another sprang up, a few hundred meters away. New reported land seizures to expand Jerusalem's city limits deep into the West Bank soon followed.

These achieved the desired effect: creating a breakdown in talks on further steps to implement the Road Map, undermining Prime Minister Abu Mazen, and nearly collapsing the cease-fire agreement.

### Causing a Crisis Within Fatah

On July 7, Abu Mazen came under personal attack at the Fatah Central Committee. Fatah is the Palestine Liberation Organization faction which includes both Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat and Abu Mazen. One Central Committee member, Sahar Habash, charged, "You have been managing the negotiations for three weeks and all we've seen are interviews on TV. How many checkpoints have you removed? How many prisoners have you released? You turned us all into terrorists after 55 years of struggle and have given the Israelis quiet, but everything goes on as before. I ask, how long will you negotiate for the sake of negotiation?"

The next day, Abu Mazen handed his letter of resignation from the Central Committee to President Arafat; it was immediately rejected. But the storm has prompted Washington to take action to bolster support for Abu Mazen.

On July 8, Ambassador John Wolf, President Bush's special envoy overseeing the Road Map's implementation, flew to Israel to pressure Sharon to remove more outposts and release more prisoners. Wolf and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer told Sharon that, net, he has removed only one outpost of the 100 Israel had promised to dismantle, and that they were perfectly aware of his shell game, replacing every outpost removed with a new one. On the prisoner issue, Wolf and Kurtzer met with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, who balked at the request, saying that the prisoner release was just a "gesture" and does not feature in the Road Map. In response Wolf said, "That's true, but the prime minister made a commitment to President Bush to free Palestinian

prisoners. . . Both sides need to progress and keep progressing. If each side says they are waiting for the other side, it will be difficult to make progress. You have to help Abu Mazen so he won't be isolated."

Meanwhile, in Washington, State Department spokesman Philip T. Reeker reaffirmed the Administration's support for Abu Mazen's leadership, saying on July 8, "We think it's important to keep acting and act now to reinforce the positive progress and signal our support." The White House shortly thereafter announced that Bush had approved a \$20 million aid package to be given directly to the Palestinian National Authority, the first time in two years that Washington has channelled aid directly to the P.N.A.

Although Wolf and Kurtzer's moves helped Abu Mazen's credibility, they have yet to effect a significant change in Sharon's intransigence.

### Palestinians Playing by the Rules

Abu Mazen and the P.N.A. have taken the strategic decision to play by Bush's rules, to avoid falling into the traps set by Sharon, and the key to their strategy has been the cease-fire accord with Hamas and other rejectionist groups. Contrary to Israeli spin, the Bush Administration supports the cease-fire, as a step to ending the violence and disarming the militant groups. Abu Mazen knows that the only way this can be accomplished, is through integrating the groups' political leaderships into the peace process, and eventually incorporating them into the Palestinian National Authority. He will not, and can not launch an armed struggle against Hamas and throw the Palestinians into a civil war.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia are making their contribution, as they had promised Bush at the June 3 Sharm el-Sheikh summit.

Adding their support for Abu Mazen, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak deployed his deputy intelligence chief, Mustafa Al Beheiri, to meet with Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip. As a result, on July 9, Hamas' spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin reaffirmed the group's commitment to the cease-fire. But he also warned, "Our patience has its limits." He stressed, "Israel's practices [including] the issue of prisoners, are a red line that can never be bypassed in any way or form. . . . The Israeli enemy has to abide by the [conditions] in our initiative. It must shoulder its responsibilities, so things will not return to what they were in the past," an allusion to Israel's targeted assassinations of Hamas members. Sheikh Yassin's statement could have a significant effect on the various armed cells, who still might oppose the cease-fire.

At this writing, the situation remains unresolved. Sharon has not agreed to a serious prisoner release, the outposts remain—actually, increasing—and Palestinian living conditions are unchanged since the Road Map was announced.

The question being asked in both Israel and Palestine is: Will Bush increase the pressure on Sharon to implement the Road Map, or will he allow the Road Map to be destroyed?