

Israel and Palestine : The real obstacle to peace is Sharon, not Arafat

By Avi Shlaim, International Herald Tribune

Sept. 24, 2003

The Israeli cabinet's decision to exile Yasser Arafat, and the threats to assassinate him, have provoked a storm of international protest. A Security Council resolution demanding that Israel desist from deporting Arafat or threatening his safety was only defeated by a United States veto.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Israel Radio that killing Arafat "is definitely one of the options" under consideration by the government. So the debate in the government is not whether Arafat should be deported or not, but whether he should be deported or killed. There is thus a real risk that the American veto at the Security Council may be interpreted by the Israeli ministers as a tacit approval of their plan to move against the embattled Palestinian leader.

To the historian of the Arab-Israeli conflict, outrageous behavior by Israel's leaders, and American complicity in such behavior, are nothing new. British resentment toward the United States still smolders in the files of the Public Record Office. In a memorandum to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin dated June 2, 1948, Sir John Troutbeck held the Americans responsible for the creation of a gangster state headed by "an utterly unscrupulous set of leaders."

Today, a similar sense of moral outrage is felt toward the rightist government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon by people throughout the world, though evidently not by the Bush administration. President George W. Bush himself has famously described Ariel Sharon as "a man of peace" and has made no real effort to restrain him in the savage war that Sharon has been waging against the Palestinian people since coming to power two and a half years ago.

In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush appears to have accepted Sharon's claim that Israel's fight against the Palestinian Authority is part of America's global war against terrorism. Consequently Bush has become not just an accomplice but an active partner in Sharon's campaign to marginalize, isolate and undermine Arafat, the democratically elected Palestinian leader.

The main charge against Arafat is that he is an obstacle to peace. Sharon called the Palestinian president a "murderer" and even compared him to Osama bin Laden. A cabinet statement described Arafat as "a complete obstacle to any process of reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians" and promised that "Israel will work to remove this obstacle in a manner, and at a time, of its choosing."

Arafat is not a paragon of virtue. He has made serious mistakes and, like Sharon, he has the blood of countless innocent civilians on his hands. Yet Arafat has a fairly consistent record of political moderation going back to 1988, when he persuaded the Palestinian National Council to recognize Israel's legitimacy, to accept all relevant United Nations resolutions and to opt for a two-state solution.

In 1993, a decade ago, Arafat signed the Oslo accords and clinched the agreement with the historic handshake with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the lawn of the White House. The former guerrilla leader proved himself to be a reliable and effective partner to Israel on the road to peace. Security cooperation between the two sides paved the way to progress on the political front.

The unraveling of the Oslo accords began with the assassination of Rabin and the rise to power in May 1996 of a Likud Party government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Likud regarded the Oslo accords as incompatible with Israel's security and with the historic right of the Jewish people to the whole of the land of Israel. Netanyahu spent his three years in power in a largely successful attempt to derail the Oslo process and to demonize its principal Palestinian architect.

Israel has a remarkable record of accepting peace plans in theory and subverting them in practice. The latest victim of this dual strategy is the "road map" to peace initiated by the quartet — the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia — on May 1. The Palestinian Authority embraced the road map and started implementing it even before it was issued. Sharon obtained from Bush three delays in issuing the road map and then submitted 14 amendments designed to wreck it.

The road that Sharon is pursuing is not the one charted in the road map. He is driving down another road on which the main signposts are expanded settlements, a security wall that bites deep into Palestinian territory on the West Bank, and targeted assassinations of

Palestinian leaders. It is these actions, and in particular the attacks on Hamas leaders, that fuel the cycle of violence and make it impossible to pursue the road map to peace.

The real obstacle to peace between Israel and the Palestinians is Ariel Sharon, not Yasser Arafat. Killing Arafat would not bring peace but ring the death knell of Palestinian moderation. It would also be a serious blot on the reputation of a country that prides itself on being the only democracy in the Middle East.

In 1948 Yitzhak Shamir, who later became leader of Likud and prime minister, conspired with his colleagues in the Stern Gang to assassinate Count Folke Bernadotte, the UN mediator, in Jerusalem. Likud thus has the dubious distinction of counting among its leaders a man who assassinated a UN peace envoy. It can now build on this reputation by assassinating the only democratically elected leader in the Arab world.

*

The writer is a professor of international relations at the University of Oxford and author of "The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World."

[Not to be reproduced without the permission of the author.]