

Sharon & The Record

By Conn Hallinan | June 20, 2003

One thing to keep in mind about the current push for peace between Israelis and Palestinians is that Ariel Sharon is one of the most consistent political figures in the Middle East, and he keeps his word. It is a deeply chilling observation.

Back in the early 1970s, when Sharon engineered the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, he was always clear that they were permanent, and that their primary function was military. "They guard both the birthright of the Jewish people," he told the newspaper *Ha'aretz*, "and also grant us essential strategic depth to protect our existence." For all his talk about "painful concessions" in the present "road map," those priorities have never altered a whit.

However, like any good general, deception is always central to his strategy.

In the uproar created over his use of the word "occupation" to describe Israeli presence in the Territories, most people missed the fine print. Sharon did indeed use the word, but quietly told his supporters that the "occupation" referred to the Palestinians in "those cities," not the land. In short, while Israel intends to maintain its hold over the West Bank, it doesn't want the burden of feeding and providing basic services to the increasingly impoverished Palestinian population. Some 1.8 million are presently being fed by various international agencies.

Asked by Likud lawmakers if ending the "occupation" meant freezing settlements, he told them there were "no restrictions" against expanding the settlements: "you can build for your children and your grandchildren, and I hope for your great-grandchildren."

The key to understanding the Prime Minister, says Israeli Knesset member Yossi Sarid, is that "Sharon is a deceiver."

The settlements of Shiloh and Beit El are a case in point. Sharon told the *New York Times* "I know that we will have to part with some of these places. As a Jew, this agonizes me." But when asked about the two settlements by the conservative *Jerusalem Post*, he said, "Jews will live there," and made it clear that the Palestinians would never regain control of Shiloh and Beit El.

The present "road map" is a three-stage plan whose goal is the eventual establishment of an "independent, viable, and sovereign Palestinian state" by 2005, and peace for

Israel. But is hard to imagine how that would come about if Israel maintains its 150 plus settlements in the Occupied Territories.

Continuing to allow some 220,000 Israeli settlers (plus another 200,000 in East Jerusalem) to remain in place is a non-starter for the Palestinians. As the Palestinian's chief negotiator Saeb Erekat says, "It's either the settlements or peace. Both cannot go together."

Sharon has talked about removing 17 "unauthorized" outposts, although both the Palestinians and the international community consider all the settlements to be illegal. According to Peace Now, there are about 100 of these small outposts, most created since the Sharon government took office in March 2001.

If there is any word that best describes the Prime Minister, it is consistent.

According to Israeli historian Jonathan Shainin, Sharon has a "persistent preference for force over diplomacy to solve political problems." In his autobiography, *Warrior* Sharon says his goal has always been "to create in the Arabs a psychology of defeat, to beat them every time, and to beat them so decisively that they would develop the conviction that they would never win."

That philosophy has guided him throughout his career. In 1953 he retaliated against a guerilla raid by attacking the Jordanian town of Qibya, blowing up 45 houses and killing 69 villagers.

In 1982 he allowed the Christian Phalange militia to massacre somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 helpless civilians at the Sabra and Shantilla Palestinian refugee camps during his invasion of Lebanon.

Sharon bitterly opposed to the 1993 Oslo Agreements, particularly the creation of a Palestinian Authority. So when the Israeli army reoccupied the territories last year, he targeted the Authority for destruction. What the man couldn't stop politically, he dismantled with tanks.



The Prime Minister has also surrounded himself with similar-minded people. His Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff, General Moshe Ya'alon says his job vis-a-vis the Palestinians is to get them to accept that "in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people."

Others, like Tourism Minister Benny Elon, openly call for "voluntary transfer" of the Palestinian population to Jordan and Egypt. And Sharon allies, like Efraim Eitam of the National Religious Party, calls all Arabs a "cancer," and advocates transferring not only Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, but the 1.2 million Arab citizens of Israel.

In the Balkans this would be called "ethnic cleansing," and probably land one on the docket at the International War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague.

One Sharon initiative that has sparked deep antagonism among Palestinians is the "Fence," a 225-mile-long "security barrier" fencing in the entire West Bank. According to the World Bank, the fence will push 3 1/2 miles into the West Bank, and cut off some 95,000 Palestinians from the richest agricultural land in the Occupied Territories. In its first phase it has already seized almost seven square miles of Palestinian land, and uprooted 83,000 fruit and olive trees.

Palestinians claim the fence is a permanent border, designed to protect Israeli settlements, divide Palestinian communities, and harass the local Arab population into "voluntarily" leaving. "Transfer isn't necessarily a dramatic moment, with buses and trucks loaded with people," human rights activist Gadi Algazi told the newspaper *Ha'aretz*, but a "continuing strangulation under closures and sieges that prevent people from getting to work or school, receiving medical services, and from allowing the

passage of water trucks and ambulances, which sends the Palestinians back to the age of the donkey and cart."

Attacks by settlers, settlement expansion, and border closures have wrecked the Palestinian economy, in particular, agriculture. The olive harvest, for instance, fell from 126,147 tons in 2000, to 22,155 tons in 2002. According to Palestinians, one million olive trees have been uprooted by the occupation.

Sharon has always been clear that a Palestinian "state" would consist of less than half the land on the West Bank and the settlements would remain. Some small outposts may be removed, but huge sprawling settlements like Ariel and Shiloh will remain. The "state" will not include the Jordan Valley, and Israel will control its borders and airspace (which is why Sharon refuses to use the word "sovereign").

It is not a new "map" at all. Ariel Mayor Ron Nahman told *Ha'aretz* that the "road map" is the "the same map I've seen every time I've visited Arik [Sharon] since 1978. He told me he has been thinking about it since 1973."

Will it bring security? "The occupation itself is the source of insecurity for everyone, including the Israelis," says Palestinian human rights activist and legislator Hannan Ashwari. "Sharon still thinks that massacres, gratuitous cruelty, and killing can produce results. He has not learned that armies can defeat armies, but can never defeat a nation or a people's will to be free."

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