

# How Sharon and Arafat May Respond to U.S. Initiatives

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### Brief Analysis

On May 24, 2001, David Makovsky, Robert Satloff, and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Makovsky is senior fellow at the Institute and former editor of the Jerusalem Post. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=2019\)](#) of Dr. Satloff and Ambassador Ross's remarks.

As Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs—designate William Burns seeks to coax Israelis and Palestinians into accepting a sequence of steps to halt the current deterioration of violence that has engulfed the area in recent months, the question is whether there is sufficient political will among the parties to arrive at a mutually satisfactory arrangement.

The Sharon Government In his public remarks this week, Secretary of State Colin Powell repeatedly said that there is no linkage between the unconditional halt to violence as called for in the Mitchell Commission and the settlements issue.

Powell's remarks about non-linkage, coupled with his comment at the press conference that he hopes the parties can "bridge" their differences over the settlement issue, suggest that the United States is intent on averting a political confrontation with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon over a publicly declared unequivocal settlement freeze. To the contrary, the United States has been playing down a full freeze, recognizing Sharon's aversion for violence for settlements' strict quid pro quo which he believes rewards violence. The United States apparently hopes that it can finesse Sharon's objections by focusing on the substance of reducing settlement activity rather than on public Israeli declarations. After an unequivocal halt to violence that lies at the heart of the original Oslo bargain, the United States hopes that Israel will be amenable to dealing with the settlement issue as part of an overall package. Indeed, there are preliminary signs that the Sharon government favors this approach, in which gestures are made to the United States rather than being given as a political dividend to Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

Sharon himself unilaterally announced — for the first time — this week that Israel would not engage in land expropriations to expand settlements.

Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who by dint of position holds responsibility for Israeli control over sections of the West Bank and Gaza, spoke publicly last regarding his support for halting settlement activity for a three month

period as Menachem Begin did after Camp David in 1978, which incidentally was not announced in advance at the time by the Israeli leader.

So far, Israeli officials in the new Sharon government have only approved two tenders. One is for 500 housing units inside Ma'aleh Adumim, which are located in areas that do not expand the settlement outwards. (It should be pointed out that Maaleh Adumim, just east of Jerusalem, was one of three settlement blocs that Arafat reportedly admitted at Camp David would be part of Israel.) The government also issued a tender to construct 200 homes along another settlement, which is virtually on the old 1967 border. Thus, the Sharon government is not acting in a way that is flagrantly provocative.

It is apparently easier for the Sharon government to deal with the settlement issue without declaring an outright freeze both for reasons of principle (not rewarding Arafat with a quid pro quo), and domestic politics. Unlike Labor, which is homogeneous in its commitment to two states for two peoples, Sharon's Likud is heterogeneous including hard-bargainers and hard-liners. The latter, who are ideologically against giving away any Jewish biblical patrimony in the West Bank, are not an insignificant group. To the contrary, they brought down the Shamir government as a response to its going to the Madrid peace conference in 1991 and they brought down the Netanyahu conference as a response to the Wye agreement in 1998. While Sharon may have minimized their influence by establishing a national unity government with Peres earlier this year, he fears losing his political base within the party. He does not want to be politically dependent upon the largesse of the Labor party for his own future, given the vagaries of Israeli politics. Thus, Sharon views every attempt to impose a declared settlement freeze on him as an explicit effort to bring about the downfall of his government.

Yasir Arafat's political will to reach a deal is far from certain. While he has in principle supported the Mitchell Commission, he has publicly said this week that he wants more than that. His aides also indicate that they want other things, chief among them a commitment to wrap up explosive issues such as Jerusalem and refugees within a year. Neither the Bush Administration nor the Sharon government believes this is possible given the failure of efforts by the Clinton Administration at the end of its tenure.

While Arafat's political will cannot be discerned, there is sufficient reason to suggest that he hardly feels any political constraints to halt the violence. There is no evidence that he is feeling any pressure from fellow Palestinians. In one recent poll, 80 percent of Palestinians say they support the current violence. According to a particular upsetting statistic, 73.7 percent say they support civilian attacks inside Israel.

Arafat seems to be counting on Secretary Powell rather than General Powell. While Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff a decade ago, Gen. Powell spoke of the importance of bringing overwhelming force to bear during a conflict. This became known as the Powell Doctrine. Yet, while Secretary of State Powell has, on occasion, been critical of what he has termed "excessive" Israeli force.

Moreover, there are indications that Arafat believes the worse it is, the better it is. When Israel accidentally killed more than 100 civilians in the south Lebanese village of Kana in 1996, the whole Grapes of Wrath military operation collapsed due to international pressure. Should Israel use overwhelming pressure and Palestinian civilians be killed in large numbers, in Arafat's mind, this attack would virtually guarantee the imposition of UN peacekeepers.

Furthermore, he does not see himself in danger. As a Palestinian icon, he does not think Israel will kill him, fearing the impact on the world arena. Alternatively, were Israel to lock him out of the country during travel abroad, he would reap a public relations bonanza. This would enable him to declare that he is the latest Palestinian "refugee" while claiming he cannot be held to any standard to stop violence while he is out of the country and thus has no responsibility.

Finally, he thinks using violence is effective. Its success as a tool has been proven since the original intifada,

reinforced throughout the Oslo process, and of course, culminated with Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon.

Egypt and Jordan among others have an interest in stability, and fear things will spin out of control. Yet, Arab leaders are being intimidated by their publics. When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was asked by interviewer Charlie Rose during his U.S. visit in April about his ability to press Arafat to accept compromises, the Egyptian leader replied, "I cannot tell him to accept this, accept that.... I am going to have a problem with my people, the public opinion in Egypt as far as I am concerned. I cannot tell Arafat to accept this." Arab satellite television is inflaming public emotions by dint of its rather selective blood and guts coverage of Israeli attacks on Palestinians during the intifada.

Some Arab policymakers, evidently believe that if the violence persists, the Israeli public will turn out Sharon because he will not be able to deliver on his core campaign promises of ending the violence and bringing security to Israel. Yet this thinking is flawed, since it is predicated on an idea that Israeli public believes there is a Palestinian partner as it felt with Rabin election of 1992 or the Barak election of 1999. In the absence of a Palestinian partner, the pendulum is more likely to keep swinging rightward. In a recent Israeli poll, Likud representation in the next 120-member Knesset is projected to skyrocket from 19 to 48 seats.

Conclusion If indeed there is a problem of insufficient Palestinian political will while Israeli political will does exist, there may be a need to turn from carrot to stick. It is worth recalling Arafat agreed to terms at Oslo in 1993 that he had foresworn in the past because he was diplomatically isolated after the Gulf War. An all carrot, no stick policy has not succeeded in the subsequent years. Perhaps the United States needs to consult with its European allies about extending some common diplomatic sanction-along the lines of no Arafat White House visits-to European capitals as well.

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