

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

October 23, 2002

IN THE SHADOW OF IRAQ: THE SHARON VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Abraham Ben-Zvi
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

Ariel Sharon's mid-October visit to Washington proved far more consensual and harmonious than most of his previous Prime Ministerial excursions to the United States. In the past, when the agenda was dominated by the Palestinian issue and the repercussions of ongoing violence, Sharon's meetings with President Bush occasionally exposed significant differences between Washington and Jerusalem. For example, in the period preceding September 11, 2001, Bush had repeatedly expressed his desire for a quick implementation of the Mitchell Committee recommendations, including confidence-building measures such as the freezing of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. This position was incompatible with the Israeli insistence that such measures belonged in the second phase of the Mitchell Report and were conditional on a total cessation of violence by the Palestinians. As a result of these differences, some of the American-Israeli discussions which took place before September 11 were permeated with tension and cleavage.

However, the President's disillusionment with the Palestinian Authority and its chairman, Yasir Arafat, combined with his post-September 11 agenda, precipitated a change in the American order of priorities. With the

Mitchell Report fading into the background of the relationship, new issues which were inextricably related to the impending campaign against Iraq began to dominate the scene. And while it was still important for the Administration to help stabilize a highly volatile situation in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, the need to ensure that Israel fully cooperate with American war plans and not resort to unilateral action against Iraq took priority in American thinking over any other objective or policy goal.

Against this backdrop, with the Palestinian predicament relegated to the periphery of the agenda as a constraint to be satisfied rather than as a short-term objective to be accomplished, it is hardly surprising that Sharon's October visit revealed a picture of unity and cooperation within the American-Israeli framework. In fact, the core objective of the Prime Minister's visit, namely, an agreement on the scope and components of the American-Israeli strategic cooperation on the eve of and during a war in the Gulf was quickly achieved. This agreement included "adequate advance warning" to Israel of the approaching American attack, the reinforcement of Israel's deterrence and defense capabilities, and an American commitment to eliminate the Scud

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

missile threat to Israel from western Iraq in the early stages of the war.

From Washington's point of view, these commitments and measures were designed to reassure Israel and thus to reduce the likelihood that the tensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict would be injected into the Gulf theater. From Israel's vantage point, these assurances guaranteed that it will be far less exposed and vulnerable to the dangers of an Iraqi attack than was the case in 1991. In other words, the strategic picture has changed since 1991. At that time, coordination between President George H.W. Bush and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was partial and limited. Now, the Administration is prepared to go beyond those limits and to preclude a situation in which Israel will be drawn into the war. This is the major significance of Sharon's visit.

There remained, of course, the Palestinian component of the visit. But this, too, did not constitute a source of friction and crisis. With the Administration largely preoccupied with the Iraqi issue, all that Bush really sought was the ability to demonstrate to such pivotal regional parties as Saudi Arabia and Egypt that Washington was still committed to help resolve the Palestinian problem, while avoiding any commitment to risky initiatives in the short-run.

Viewed against this backdrop, the "road map" outlined by President Bush in his negotiations with Prime Minister Sharon was primarily intended to accomplish the tactical, short-term goal of making it easier for central Arab powers to cooperate with the U.S. against Iraq (or at least to acquiesce in the campaign) without being continuously distracted or constrained on their Palestinian flank. For this purpose, it was sufficient to lay out a general map that could later be modified or adjusted in accordance with changing circumstances. Thus, the new American map, unlike the

Mitchell Report, did not specifically call on Israel to stop all settlement activity (in the context of confidence-building measures) as soon as an effective cease-fire was implemented. Instead, it anticipated that the settlement issue would be addressed as an integral part of the second stage of the plan, to be negotiated in 2003. Closely patterned on the principles of long-term incrementalism and phased progress, this plan divided the Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process into three stages, scheduled to culminate in the establishment of a permanent Palestinian state by 2005. In other words, contrary to earlier American plans and initiatives, Bush's road map relieved Prime Minister Sharon of the need to confront head-on the thorniest, most controversial issues at the core of the Palestinian dispute -- permanent boundaries, the status of Jerusalem, and the shaping and nature of the permanent Palestinian state -- during the period preceding the Israeli Parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2003.

In conclusion, President Bush secured an Israeli promise of maximum effort to avoid involvement in any war against Iraq as well as agreement to consider his Palestinian road map favorably, though without any *a priori* promises of concrete concessions on matters reserved to the third phase of the process. In return, Prime Minister Sharon secured a package of security commitments and guarantees which, if fully implemented, can minimize the risks to Israel of another war in the Gulf. With respect to the most immediate and urgent priorities of the parties, the visit was therefore a success. It remains to be seen whether or not this success was only achieved by suppressing potential sources of future disagreement between Washington and Jerusalem.