

LOS ANGELES NATIONAL JEWISH NEWS

February 2004

"Israel's Declaration of Independence"

By Kenneth W. Stein

Israel is prepared to act unilaterally with or without a Palestinian negotiating partner-- so declared Israeli Prime Minister Sharon on several occasions within the last month. His essence: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a drain on Israeli society demographically, physically, economically, and emotionally.

Frustrated by paralysis and the advent of bankruptcy within the Palestinian Authority, Israel is planning to separate physically from the Palestinians. Sharon's motivation was enunciated in his policy speech at Herzlia on December 18, 2003.

His aim is "to protect the face of the Jewish and democratic State of Israel" through growing Israel's "economy, educating the young generation, immigrant absorption, enhancement of social cohesion, and the improvement of relations between Arab and Jews in Israel." This is Sharon's road map. Its core is "disengagement," a word he used sixteen times in that speech. According to the Tel Aviv University Tami Steinmetz Center Monthly Peace Index for December 2003, undertaken after Sharon's speech, 59% of Jewish Israelis prefer immediate unilateral separation from the territories.

Why now? Israelis want it and Sharon has the power to do it. In the same Tel Aviv University survey, broad Israeli support for separation stems from the widespread fear that 73% of the Israeli Jewish population believe: "if a solution to the conflict is not found in the near future and Israeli control of the territory continues, the Palestinians will become a majority west of the Jordan and a de facto, bi-national state will emerge."

For regional, international, and domestic reasons, Sharon senses he can act preemptively. Relative to its neighbors, Sharon sees Israel as reasonably secure. Saddam Hussein's departure and deepened American presence/influence in the region has changed the strategic calculus in the Middle East for decades to come.

The Middle Eastern political landscape is in a state of semi-turmoil and paralysis. Every Arab state has one eye cocked to see if Iraq can put together as it seems has happened in Afghanistan. The Arab world is drifting aimlessly, indecisive without direction or regional leadership.

Individual Arab countries are overwhelmed by issues of governance, economic viability, population explosions, and skyrocketing unemployment. There is palpable tension in each state and within the Palestinian community between reforming noises and regime elites that shun change.

International, Israel feels little external pressure. In President Bush, Sharon enjoys an ideological soul-mate in the war on terrorism and Arafat as a major obstacle to diplomatic progress. With the U.S. engaged in a presidential election year, Sharon can anticipate limited American intervention in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, at least until Spring 2005. Meanwhile, Europe, Russia, and the UN have loud voices but toothless bites.

Corruption, Arafat's autocratic ways, and the turgid pace of reform have put the Palestinian Authority on the brink of bankruptcy. And with Palestinian unemployment above 50%, disengagement and separation from them avoids an Israeli commitment to provide annual subventions to the Palestinian economy. Disassociation from the Palestinian economy leaves the enormous future foreign aid burdens on the shoulders of the industrialized and Arab world.

Domestically, Sharon's Likud-led government is relatively secure through 2007, although fundraising scandals swirl uncomfortably about him. Israeli parties of the left and center, who today are not in his ruling coalition, are eager to support any disengagement from the territories. Those in his coalition and in Israeli society who vehemently oppose any withdrawals do not have the political clout to bring down his government, except through violence. The settlements are a drain on the overall Israeli economy, costing (according to a study done by *Ha'aretz*) some \$8 billion since 1967. Israeli society needs money devoted exclusively to raising Israelis out of poverty, bettering a tattered educational system, and narrowing the social gaps in Israel's ethnic democracy.

And finally, there is the place that Sharon wants for himself in Israel's history. His predecessor, Ehud Barak, was a great Israeli military leader but failed miserably as a politician-- a distinction Sharon does not wish to share. With an already storied and checkered political and military history, Sharon can be like David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Jewish state in-the-making, and the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who subordinated ideological ideals for the long-term strategic good of the Jewish state.

What is certain is that Sharon can implement such a unilateral decision if he wishes. Moreover, no Israeli political successor appears on the horizon who could carry out the substantial withdrawals that are

necessary and survive politically. A finite window of opportunity is present to preserve Israeli identity and security while granting Palestinians their own state.

If Sharon implements major withdrawals from the West Bank, he will put himself among the ranks of great Israeli leaders like Ben-Gurion and Begin. Almost nothing but his own will, courage, and his own health stand in the way.

At Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches contemporary Middle Eastern History and Political Science. Dr. Kenneth W. Stein is the William E. Schatten Professor of Contemporary Middle Eastern History, Political Science and Israeli Studies, Director, Middle East Research Program and Institute for the Study of Modern Israel. He can be reached at 121 Bowden Hall, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia 30322; tel: 404-727-2798 (o); 404-727-4472 (direct line); 404-727-2441 (fax); or visit the web site at : www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/JewishStudies/stein.html