

## Middle East Gambit by Ezio Bonsignore

*"Military Technology" 9/2005*

*gambit* \'gam-bet\ n [It.gambetto,lit., act of tripping someone]: a chess opening in which a player sacrifices one or more minor pieces to gain an advantage in position.

It is sometimes so that exceedingly complex political Gordian knots, that would stubbornly resist all attempts at untying them through the conventional tools of diplomatic negotiations or/and military force, can eventually only be cut through by a bold act of visionary political courage. This is arguably the case with Ariel Sharon's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and a tiny portion of the West Bank. While there could be no certainty that the Prime Minister's deliberate gambit will succeed, and while some commentators may have reasons to question the long-term wisdom of his plan, nobody could blame him for lack of courage and determination.

To properly understand what Mr Sharon is up to, it is necessary to appreciate that despite much hype about the Israeli withdrawal being intended to "restart the peace process", this is most definitely not the case - at least, not in the sense of resuming that botched process from where Barak and Arafat left it. Any attempt at resurrecting Oslo-style negotiations would unavoidably end in renewed failure, for the very simple reason that even the very best diplomatic skills and good will as available on the face of Earth could never led to a mutually acceptable agreement on such thorny issues as the status of Jerusalem or the return of the Palestinian refugees. Rather, Mr. Sharon aims at establishing a *fait accompli*, whereby Israel will effectively annex all the land this side of the "security fence", including most of the West Bank and the whole of Jerusalem, while the Palestinians will be left to their own devices in trying to establish a state of sort in the two separate sections of the Gaza Strip and a small area in the West Bank. The new "peace process", if indeed any, would be intended to formalise this status quo as the final solution and define the details (e.g., a possible extra-territorial "corridor" between the two sections of the future Palestinian state), but certainly nothing more. It would be disingenuous and indeed offensive for Mr Sharon's political acumen to think otherwise, and to imagine that he might actually intend to start a difficult negotiating process, by unilaterally giving away one of the most important assets to be negotiated about.

From this point of view, Mr Sharon's plan could be viewed as a commendable attempt at removing Middle East politics from the realm of ideological/religious fanaticism and bringing it back to the "art of the possible". The dream of a Great Israel is no more viable and feasible than the specular dream of throwing the Jews into the sea, not to mention the truly farcical notion, as supported by the international community, of "two states living peacefully side-by-side and sharing Jerusalem as their capital". Indeed, there are very powerful arguments to argue that this partition plan is the only rationally conceivable way out of the current quagmire. Whether or not it will succeed, it is a completely different question altogether.

Mr Sharon's gambit is aimed at multiple players. First of all, of course, the Palestinians. As things stand today, for a Palestinian leader to come forward and tell his own people that all the glorious dreams of revenge and national resurrection they have been restlessly

made to nurture over the past decades have come to naught, and that they must basically be content with whatever bits of land the Israelis are prepared to give away, would be tantamount to immediate political and indeed physical suicide. However, in the medium/long run it is not totally preposterous to imagine than once the Palestinians have got their own state, and provided that this state is at least marginally economically viable, then an increasingly majority of the population will become more interested in pursuing a decent lifestyle rather than providing a continuous flow of "martyrs" for suicide bomb attacks. For this goal to be achieved, however, it depends on the Palestinian leadership being able to perform a pretty delicate balancing act between what they have to concede to the Israelis, and the baloney they still must feed their own people as a matter of sheer survival.

The second target are the neighbouring Arab states. For decades over decades the Arab nations have provided their absolute support to the Palestinian cause and its more extreme demands, and some of them are officially in a permanent state of war against Israel. This policy, however, has since become an increasingly uncomfortable albatross hung around the Arab nations' neck (particularly as regards their complex relationship with the US), and they would probably be mightily relieved by whatever political outcome could be accepted without losing too much face. At the very least, any indication to the effect that a passably credible Palestinian leadership is prepared to at least tacitly accept Mr Sharon's status quo plan will arguably lead to a prompt evaporation of most of the Arab nations' underground support for Palestinian terrorism, as well as to a radical reduction in their vociferous backing for the hopelessly lost causes of Jerusalem and the return of the refugees.

And then there is the international community and most specifically Europe. Apart from the US, the plight of the Palestinians has come to substantially weaken Israel's diplomatic stand in the international arena, and Mr. Sharon's gambit will hopefully correct this weakness, too, and remove at least part of the sympathetic attitude towards the Palestinians' claims in some European circles. EU support is the more important, in that for the notional Palestinian "mini-state" to be something more than a Bantustan or a glorified concentration camp, and to provide its citizen living conditions that would arguably steer them away from supporting terrorism, it very critically depends on truly massive economic support from abroad -

Of course, a gambit necessarily contains a not insignificant element of risk. If the Palestinian leadership were to feign not to understand the true nature of the Israeli "take it or leave it" offer that is implicit in the unilateral Gaza withdrawal, and would rather stick to their current official position of regarding it as but a starting point for future and much wider concessions, then Mr Sharon would find himself in a very exposed position indeed. Needless to say, the Palestinians, too, would find themselves in a pretty dire predicament, and amongst other issues the unavoidable hardening of the Israeli stand will likely lead to Al Fatah being swept away by Hamas as the ruling political force. Still, history provides plenty of uncomfortable examples of people refusing to see the light, and stubbornly marching to their own demise.

Let's keep our finger crossed, then. Mr Sharon deserves to see his gambit succeed, and furthermore if it were to fail not even the wisest man on Earth could come forward with an alternative peace plan - I mean, one that has at least a minuscule chance to go through.