

Sharon's valid analogy

By Martin Sherman

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(October 14) - The storm of protest created by the recent comparison that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon drew between the circumstances of Czechoslovakia in the 1930s, and those in which Israel finds itself today is more than a little puzzling. Indeed, if the analogy is to be faulted in any way, it should be because it did not go far enough in underscoring the disconcerting similarities between the two cases.

Although there are obvious differences in detail between the two cases, there also appear to be a significant number of striking similarities that relate to the general nature of the causal processes in both instances. For example, both events relate to beleaguered democracies located in inherently inclement regions, beset by hostile authoritarian regimes, which coveted areas within their borders.

Both events involve democracies confronted with demands for territorial withdrawal from strategically important highlands on their frontiers (the Sudeten Mountains in the case of Czechoslovakia and the highlands of Samaria and Judea in the case of Israel) - highlands that constitute a formidable natural barrier against invasion.

Both events involve democracies being pressured to forgo these highly significant strategic assets in order to acquiesce to demands from antagonistic ethnic group (the Sudetens of German origin on the one hand and the Arabs of Palestinian origin on the other), closely associated with tyrannical regimes in the regions, to remove "alien rule" over them in their long-standing historical homeland. Both events involve democracies being subjected to intense pressure by their self-professed allies, the leading democratic powers of the day, to comply with these demands - in the name of regional stability and world peace, in a transparent bid to appease unappeasable dictators.

It would be possible to carry on in this vein and continue to catalogue the points of congruence between the situation of Czechoslovakia in the past, and Israel in the present; the former under threat from a dictatorial German regime and pressure from its Western allies, the latter under threat from dictatorial Arab regimes and pressure from its Western allies. It would also be possible to draw further comparisons between the events that took place on the eve of World War II and those taking place today, with the world poised on the brink of new global conflict between the libertarian West and the propagators of a doctrine of intolerant, aggressive, and expansionist tyranny.

For example, one might point to the striking similarities between the demands for self-determination in the German enclave of Danzig and those for self-determination in the Palestinian enclave of Gaza (including the notion of a connecting

corridor via sovereign territory of another state for "safe passage" to kindred homelands). One might be tempted to point to the parallels between the German takeover of Austria, and the Syrian takeover of Lebanon. One might even warn of the ominously emerging resemblance between the German violation of the demilitarized Rhineland area and the huge Egyptian arms buildup which can but undermine the feasibility of continued demilitarization of the Sinai.

In this limited framework, it is perhaps most important to focus on the criticisms leveled at Sharon's remarks - and to rebut them.

Firstly, those like MK Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, who alleged that one could not compare the supposed military "weakness" of Czechoslovakia with the might of Israel's IDF, are either genuinely misinformed or deliberately misleading. Indeed, before yielding the mountainous Sudeten region, Czechoslovakia had one of the strongest armies in Europe. It was precisely the surrender of this territory, together with the other provisions of the Munich Pact, that brought the country to its knees.

Thus, although Germany did have plans to invade Czechoslovakia before Munich, it refrained from doing so until the strategic terrain and its fortifications were yielded to its control.

Secondly, it would be inappropriate to take Sharon's remarks as an accusation that President George W. Bush is behaving as Neville Chamberlain did. Rather, it should be considered a warning as to the grave consequences that are likely to arise if he were to do so - as it seems some of his administration officials would prefer. After all, it was not only Czechoslovakia which suffered the consequences of the cynical and myopic policy of appeasement, but the entire world - including the 40 million victims who paid the price of its failure with their lives.

Thus the prime minister did well to force the world leaders to confront the unpalatable realities of the day. He will err gravely if, due to his misguided critics, he backs away from the bold line he has taken, if he allows the West to evade facing up to emerging threats, and if he meekly condones repetition of the mistake of appeasing adversaries and abandoning allies.

(The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya.) .