

Israeli provocation against Palestinians ignites a social powder keg

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Israeli security forces have killed at least 60 Palestinians (including 12 children) and injured more than 1,500 (including 350 children) in the Palestinian Authority-controlled West Bank and Gaza. An uneasy cease-fire did not hold Tuesday in many areas, after five days of angry demonstrations and strikes followed the visit to the Al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem by Ariel Sharon from Israel's opposition Likud party.

Shops and schools were closed throughout the West Bank and Gaza, as Palestinians called a general strike. Tanks were sent in to deal with the strikes and riots that spread to Arab towns and villages within Israel itself, in the most widespread violence in four years.

In a spontaneous outburst of anger, stone-throwing Palestinians confronted the heavily armed forces of the Israeli army, which employed live ammunition, anti-tank weapons and attack helicopters in an attempt to quell the uprising. A French television crew captured the frantic gestures of an unarmed Palestinian with his 12-year-old son crouching behind a concrete water butt, appealing to the Israelis to spare them. Seconds later the boy was hit by four bullets and lay dying in his father's arms. Eight bullets hit his father and the ambulance driver who came to their aid was also shot dead.

The Israeli armed forces sent in tanks, sealing off the West Bank and Gaza, but fighting broke out in the main centres of Nablus, Hebron and Ramallah, and at an army post guarding Netzarim, the Israeli settlement in the Gaza Strip. Children as young as 10 have been shot in Rafah in Gaza, and a member of the Palestinian security forces is said to have died in Nablus in the West Bank after exchanging fire with Israeli troops. A significant feature of the conflict was the fact that a number of Palestinian Authority (PA) security officers joined the protest by local residents.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak called on the Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat to intervene and stop the demonstrations, but Arafat clearly felt unable to simply accede to such demands. He responded by demanding that Israel withdraw its forces from the entrances to Palestinian

towns and villages and stop firing on his people. Only the intervention of US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright eventually secured a truce, pending talks between Arafat and Barak in Paris today.

An emergency meeting of the Arab League held on Sunday called on the UN Security Council to investigate Israel's conduct. Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa expressed their fear that the violence was wrecking the peace process. The militant Muslim group Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, urged the Palestinians to keep fighting Israel, but have given no indication of wishing to directly intervene. Hezbollah echoed calls for a meeting of the UN Security Council to take measures against Israel.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon demonstrated for a second day on Sunday to condemn the Israeli killings on the West Bank and Gaza. Angry crowds burned tyres and the American and Israeli flags and called on the Palestinian Authority to halt peace talks with Israel, and announce the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The 360,000 Palestinian refugees who live in Lebanon are particularly concerned that any agreement with Israel will leave them stateless and subject to further dispersal.

The uprising is being described as a second *Intifada* —the 1987-88 rebellion against the appalling social, economic and political conditions under Israeli occupation since 1967. The *Intifada* became the catalyst for the now stalled peace talks, begun in Madrid in 1991, aimed at finding a political mechanism for defusing the 52-year Arab-Israeli conflict. But events over the last few days have demonstrated the widespread discontent that exists among the Palestinian masses regarding the limited self-rule granted by Israel, which is seen to have significantly benefited only a small clique of notables around Arafat.

The actions of political forces within Israel opposed to even the limited concessions granted to the Palestinians and seemingly intent on wrecking any chance of a lasting peace settlement were responsible for triggering the demonstrations. Deep-seated divisions exist within the

Israeli political establishment about the nature of the state of Israel and the future of the Old City of Jerusalem—which has become the main stumbling block to a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post* given in response to strong pressure from the US to end the deadlock, Barak put forward a plan for twin capitals situated next to each other in Jerusalem. Al Quds, the Arabic name for the city, would belong to the Palestinians, while Jerusalem would be Israel's internationally recognised capital. Barak insisted that he would not accede to Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif—a site of religious and historical significance to both the Jewish and Moslem faiths—but argued that a “partial agreement” was possible. A division of Jerusalem would actually make Israel stronger, he argued. Barak had already ceded the strategic Jordan valley to the PA, forming its border with Jordan. Palestinian officials welcomed Barak's statements, which appeared to reflect the agreement he had reached with Arafat at their meeting last week.

The limited concessions on the status of Jerusalem followed Barak's announcement of a series of measures aimed at secularising the state of Israel and limiting the power of the religious authorities and parties who control much of its economic and social life. This turn to secularisation was a desperate bid to mobilise declining popular support against his conservative opponents and so forestall the imminent collapse of his minority “One Israel” coalition government. Barak calculated that if his government fell, then so did any chance of reaching a settlement with Arafat when the *Knesset* (parliament), with no party holding more than 20 percent of the vote, reconvenes at the end of October. Likud, the main opposition party, has the support of most of the small religious parties and is opposed to any concessions to the Palestinian Authority.

Sharon's decision to visit to the Al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount was made in an attempt to cast himself as the defender of a united Jewish Jerusalem and secure his leadership of Likud against former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu is now free to return to political life after being recently cleared of allegations of fraud and bribery. Given Sharon's military record against the Palestinians in the 1970s, and his responsibility for the massacres at the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla in 1982, his visit to the Temple Mount must be seen as a deliberate provocation. When he was met with demonstrations, riot police responded by storming the Al Aqsa mosque and opening fire on stone-throwing worshippers, killing six.

The extent of the conflict unleashed by Sharon's visit, and

Israel's brutal actions, gives a measure of the social and political tensions within the Palestinian Authority. There is significant opposition to Arafat's conciliatory stance towards the Zionist regime and a degree of anger over his failure to keep his promise to declare an independent state of Palestine on September 13—the seventh anniversary of the 1993 Oslo Accords that were supposed to inaugurate a Palestinian state within five years. Israel's pull out from the Lebanon in May has also played a part in encouraging militant sentiments amongst the Palestinians, but the roots of the uprising of the past five days must be sought in the popular anger over the appalling squalor and poverty that exist within the Palestinian Authority.

Far from bringing peace and an improvement in living standards, the Oslo Accords and subsequent “land for peace” deals with Israel have intensified the misery of the majority of Palestinian people. With the PA's economy still totally under Israeli control, living standards have plummeted and unemployment is rife, reaching more than 50 percent in the Gaza Strip. Denied adequate water for irrigation, agricultural production has slumped. With only limited access to clean drinking water and sanitation, life is a never-ending struggle for just the bare necessities.

Arafat has only been able to keep a lid on rising discontent with promises of “jam tomorrow”, provided by loans from the US and Europe, backed up with repression against his political dissidents: the ratio of policemen to the overall population in the PA is a staggering 1:50, the highest in the world. Funded by the US and the international banks, the security forces consume the overwhelming proportion of the PA's limited budget and enforce Arafat's rule by means of midnight arrests, military courts, torture and repression. The conditions of near civil war in the aftermath of Sharon's visit show that this cannot last indefinitely. Social and political tensions have now reached breaking point, at a time when the standing of both Arafat and Barak has been severely undermined.



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