

Israel's right wing take Middle East to the brink of war

Jean Shaoul, Chris Marsden
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Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians threatens a war that could engulf the whole of the Middle East, bringing about a human tragedy of terrible proportions.

The Palestinian uprising on the West Bank and Gaza Strip over the past two weeks was sparked by a carefully planned and well-organised provocation by right-wing forces within Israel. The opposition Likud Party and a significant section of the military have consistently opposed a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. Several factors came together to convince them that the time was ripe to blow any chance of achieving a final agreement out of the water.

Firstly, Prime Minister Ehud Barak is regarded as a lame duck. His governing "One Nation" coalition has suffered a series of defections that have given Likud the possibility of controlling the *Knesset* (parliament), in alliance with small right-wing religious parties. A recent poll in *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper has shown a personal approval rating for Barak of only 30 percent, while 49 percent believed he had used too little force against the Palestinians.

Secondly, with the US presidential elections imminent, Likud calculated there would be little chance of the Clinton administration coming out strongly against an Israeli provocation against the Palestinians. In the longer term, Likud believes that a Republican administration led by George W. Bush would be more likely to support its aims than the Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore.

Finally, former Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was acquitted on corruption charges enabling him to return to political life. Several opinion polls have indicated that Likud could now win a general election under Netanyahu's leadership should Barak's government fall. Netanyahu's main political rival within Likud, Ariel Sharon, saw a need to assert his own authority over the right wing's main constituency of religious zealots and the settlers within the Occupied Territories.

The visit by Sharon—the man responsible for the massacres at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in 1982—under armed guard to Jerusalem's shared holy site at Temple Mount was calculated to provoke a violent reaction from Palestinians. When Sharon was met by protesters, Israeli troops opened fire, killing six demonstrators. So began days of violent repression by Israel's security forces, in which more than 90

people—almost all Palestinians—have been killed and 2,000 injured.

The actions of the right wing and the military have exposed the impotence of the Labour Party-led government. Barak has done everything possible to confirm Likud's estimation of his own weakness. He has become a hostage to fortune, whose political enemies seem capable of dictating his actions.

Rather than condemning Sharon for deliberately wrecking the peace negotiations that Barak had pledged to bring to fruition, he blamed Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat for engineering the conflict. "If we do not see a change in the pattern of violence in the next two days, we will regard this as a cessation by Arafat of the peace process," he warned. "We will order the army and security forces to use all means at their disposal to halt the violence," implicitly threatening all-out war. Barak's national security advisor, Major General Uzi Dayan, even suggested that Arafat's government headquarters could be the target of military action.

With Israeli warplanes flying over Beirut and hundreds of tanks moving north, Barak declared that Israel would not hesitate to fight on two fronts and take harsh action against Syria and Lebanon, if the three Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah on Israel's northern border were not returned safely. Even before Barak's ultimatum had expired, Israeli security forces razed to the ground two multi-story apartment blocks bordering an Israeli settlement in the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, attack helicopters blasted hilltop positions near Hebron. Palestinians living near the isolated Zionist settlement of Psagot were driven from their homes.

The violence has, for the first time, assumed the character of a civil war, with attacks being mounted by the army and police against Arab Israelis. Clashes between Palestinians and Israeli civilians have grown in intensity and taken on the character of a pogrom.

In Nazareth, hundreds of Jews rampaged through Arab areas. In response to evidence that Palestinian corpses showed evidence of having been tortured, Israeli peace activist Gush Shalom told the *Guardian* newspaper that events bear "all the hallmarks which were well known to Jews in tsarist Russia, that is collusion between the racist attackers and police". Barak has stated his concern for "the delicate fabric" of Jewish-Arab

coexistence inside Israel.

Protests against Israel and America have spread throughout the Middle East, including the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—considered by America as key allies in securing a negotiated settlement with Israel. Yemen, Iraq and Libya have all called for action to aid the Palestinians. Egypt, anxiously trying to calm the tensions, is to host an Arab summit on October 21, at which Kuwait and Iraq have agreed to sit down together for the first time.

Many Arab leaders have indicated their alarm at the scale of Arab protests against Israel and the intensity of domestic support for the Palestinians. “We are all running the risk of being dragged by our public opinion”, said an Arab official. “And when leaders are following public opinion, it can be a disaster, especially in this part of the world and especially when our abilities to fight are limited.”

The events of the past fortnight have left US strategy in the Middle East in a state of disarray and possibly collapse. Seven years of diplomatic efforts, which were to culminate in an agreement ending 52 years of hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbours, are in tatters. There is virtually nothing left of the foreign policy initiative that was to be the crowning achievement of Clinton's presidency. One White House official admitted, “This is not about salvaging trophies of peace accords. This is about core foreign policy interests.”

The Clinton administration is engaged in frantic efforts to stop the spiralling violence from becoming an outright war. It felt itself unable to veto a UN Security Council resolution criticising Israel for its excessive use of force against the Palestinians, and abstained instead. US officials say they feared that an American veto would further inflame the already explosive mood in the Arab world.

Clinton has been in frequent contact with Barak, Arafat and Syria's Bashar Assad. He has tried to persuade Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak to convene a summit at Sharm el Sheikh next week, pledging to attend himself. A US official said the summit's purpose would be “to look for something that would stop a chain reaction like August 1914 when the European powers ran pell-mell into World War I”.

Only massive diplomatic pressure exerted by the US, aided by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Javier Solana of the European Union and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, persuaded Barak to step back from the brink and extend for “three or four days” a 24-hour deadline for Arafat to end the Palestinian uprising.

But conflict continued yesterday and the prospects of a more permanent end to hostilities remain bleak. A clearly despairing Arafat said that the new deadline was just “threats, threats, threats”.

All efforts to impose a settlement from above, by diplomatic efforts shaped by the interests of the imperialist powers and the region's ruling elites, have proved incapable of bringing peace and stability to the Middle East. To prevent renewed slaughter

and create a viable basis for harmonious social and political development requires the unification of Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle for the building of a socialist society throughout the Middle East. In opposition to such a perspective, Arafat and the PLO hold out the possibility of securing a Palestinian homeland through an agreement with the imperialist powers and Israel, a perspective that now lies in ruins.

Barak's claim that Arafat is responsible for the violence is not only false, but conceals the extent to which the PLO leader is faced with a political rebellion against his efforts at accommodation with the Zionist regime. The extent of the hostility and resistance that met Israeli repression lies in the failure of the agreement, first laid down in Oslo in 1993, to address the needs and aspirations of the Palestinian masses. The protests are giving vent to the accumulated social discontent produced by the unimaginable economic hardship and suppression of democratic rights that is the daily lot of workers and peasants within the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Unemployment is over 50 percent and what jobs exist pay a minimal wage. Housing, sanitation, health care and even water supplies are primitive and scarce, while neighbouring Israeli settlers live in relative comfort behind heavily fortified borders.

Arafat and his ruling clique are politically isolated, to the extent that even the youth section of his own Fatah organisation has issued unauthorised leaflets calling for a popular war against Israel. Responding to Barak's demands for Arafat to bring the uprising to an end, PA spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi bluntly admitted, “Arafat cannot give orders to a people, a whole nation, that is being killed every day, that is being asked to lie back and die quietly and not defend themselves”.

The rightist forces within Israel may have achieved their objective of derailing the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians in the short term, but only at a cost of radicalising the Arab masses throughout the Middle East. In the process they have endangered the political survival not just of Arafat, but all the Arab bourgeois regimes on which imperialism has relied to police mounting social and political tensions.



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