After the Arab summit: Israel escalates attack on Palestinians

Chris Marsden
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The Israeli military used helicopter gunships to attack the West Bank town of Beit Jala near East Jerusalem late Sunday, blowing up a local factory. On Monday morning Israeli army units encircled the town, as the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, following the Arab League summit in Cairo, escalated its three-week-long military assault on the Palestinian masses.

The death toll from the violence has risen to around 130, with Arabs accounting for all but eight of the victims.

Over the weekend Barak declared his intention to take a “time out” to “reassess the peace process”. He is holding negotiations with the right-wing opposition led by Ariel Sharon's Likud to form a government of national emergency. To date Likud has not agreed to enter such a government, and is using the negotiations to pressure Barak into taking an increasingly bellicose stance and all but rule out a return to negotiations. The religious parties Shas and the National Religious Party have echoed Likud's stance.

Late last week Barak's “One Nation” coalition said it was re-examining earlier contingency plans for a “unilateral separation” in the event Arafat unilaterally declared Palestinian statehood. The plans, if implemented, would seal off the Palestinians behind concrete walls and barbed wire and sever telecommunications, electricity and water supplies.

Palestinian areas on the West Bank and Gaza would be starved of investment and trade, as well as 110,000 jobs in Israel that account for 20 percent of the Palestinian gross domestic product. Israel would also annex large Jewish settlements on the West Bank, transforming them into heavily armed outposts overlooking Palestinian towns and villages. Palestinian Information Minister Yasir Abed Rabbo described the Israeli scheme as “a declaration of war” and “an apartheid plan”.

Barak's latest moves were framed against last week's two major events in the Middle East—the US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian summit at Sharm el-Sheikh (October 16 and 17) and the Arab League summit that met in Cairo on the weekend of October 21 and 22. They indicate that, despite his denials, Barak has virtually abandoned any attempt at a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

At Sharm el-Sheikh, the US pressured Palestinian Authority leader Yassir Arafat to publicly call for an end to all Arab protests and make other concessions to Israel. Arafat did what was demanded of him, even abandoning his call for an independent international investigation into the violence in favour of Israel's counterproposal of a US-led inquiry. In return, Barak agreed to the scaling down of Israel's military blockade on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But no sooner had the summit concluded than Israel made a travesty of the pledges it had given, with the army declaring it would give the Palestinian authorities 48 hours to bring a halt to all protests, before which time it would not implement the promised withdrawal of its heavily armed units from Palestinian areas.

This unilateral declaration was itself a provocation, and was followed by a number of incidents calculated to keep tensions at the boiling point and prevent a cease-fire from taking hold. On October 19 a group of 36 Israeli settlers were given an armed guard to march on the hills overlooking Nablus, ostensibly to view the Jewish holy site of Joseph's tomb. Fighting ensued in which two people, a Palestinian and a Jew, were killed and scores of Palestinians injured. The same day Israeli special forces mounted a raid into the Palestinian town of Ramallah to capture up to eight people suspected of taking part in the killing of Israeli soldiers. Friday, October 20 witnessed one of the worst days of violence so far, with 10 Palestinians killed in fighting along the West Bank.

Sharm el-Sheikh was popularly viewed by the Palestinian masses as a further climb-down by Arafat before the US and Israel, and Israeli actions in its aftermath only fuelled their outrage. The Islamic opposition groups all condemned the cease-fire and were joined by Arafat's own Fatah movement.

The 14 heads of state who gathered at the Arab League summit in Cairo over the next two days agreed to a formal condemnation of Israel, but did not propose any punitive measures and called for a return to negotiations. The summit's host, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, said the Arabs had adopted a “responsible position” and hoped Israel would respond in kind. Instead Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak condemned the “language of threats” and reaffirmed his decision to cut off diplomatic negotiations with the Palestinians.

Mubarak, King Abdullah of Jordan and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia number themselves among the main allies of the US in the Middle East. They played a pivotal role in ensuring that the Arab states acquiesced to America's declaration of war against Iraq in 1991, and have worked ever since to secure a political accommodation with Israel. But all of the Arab bourgeois states, including those that engage in more militant rhetoric, are, in reality, more concerned with maintaining diplomatic and financial ties with the US and Israel than with the fate of the Palestinian masses. Several of the participants at Cairo issued calls for a holy

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war, or *Jihad*, to liberate Palestine. But Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih reassured his Egyptian host, “We aren't calling for war.”

Salih is in the midst of a joint investigation by the Yemeni police and US police and intelligence agencies into the October 12 attack on the US destroyer *Cole*. His investigators have pointed the finger at America's designated public enemy number one, Osama bin Laden.

Libya's Muammar Gaddaffi opposed the convening of the Cairo summit and refused to attend. His rationale was indicative of the growing fear in Arab ruling circles that Israel's brutal tactics will provoke popular uprisings throughout the region. He declared, “I want to save them [the Arab leaders] from the wrath of the masses, who will turn on them.... A summit must declare a war or an economic boycott against the enemy, but the Arabs are not capable of fighting or boycotting the enemy.”

Gaddaffi's fears of a popular movement against the Arab bourgeois regimes are well founded. The growing danger for the US and Israel alike is that the assault on the Palestinians will ignite simmering social and political opposition to the Arab rulers amongst the working class and peasant masses. The failure of the Cairo summit to act against Israel met with bitter denunciations and protests from Morocco to Yemen.

In Egypt itself, thousands of students staged a demonstration, chanting, “Where is the Arab army?” Many of those Arab workers and students interviewed by Western reporters made clear they expected little from their leaders. Whatever popular support the Arab regimes may have once enjoyed is rapidly disintegrating. These countries are characterised by an extreme social polarisation between a wealthy elite that exploits the oil riches of the region and the workers and peasants, who are forced to eke out a meagre existence.

An indication of the concern amongst the Western powers over the political implications of Israel's turn to military repression was given by an article that appeared in the influential German weekly *Die Zeit*, edited by former Social Democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Author Michael Lüders warned that the danger lay not in an Arab war against Israel, but rather “an implosion of political relations, the collapse of the Arab regimes”.

Israel's decision to abort seven years of negotiations confirms that a just and democratic settlement in the Middle East is incompatible with the existence of a state based on religious exclusivism and the dispossession and repression of the Palestinians. Those factions within Israeli ruling circles who sought a negotiated settlement, led initially by Shimon Peres and Yitzakh Rabin, and later by Barak, have proved incapable of making even the most basic concessions to address the democratic and social grievances of the Palestinian masses. At every turn they have faced the intransigent opposition of the more extreme right-wing forces within the Zionist political and military establishment, without whose backing no Israeli government can long rule.

These events have, at the same time, revealed the dead end of Arafat's nationalist perspective for securing a Palestinian homeland—whether by force of arms, manoeuvring with the US and the Arab regimes, or a combination of both. The Oslo Accord he signed in 1993 laid the basis for the establishment of the Palestinian Authority as a series of enclaves on land in the West Bank and Gaza that Israel captured in the 1967 war. These territories were surrounded by Israeli-controlled borders and economically reliant on their more powerful neighbour.

The key questions of joint sovereignty over Jerusalem and the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees were never resolved. The ruling Palestinian Authority clique around Arafat has enriched itself, but the conditions of poverty and degradation facing ordinary Palestinians have not improved.

Having held out the prospect of eventual independence to this truncated Palestinian entity, Israel continued to move thousands of Jewish settlers into those parts of the occupied territories it was determined to retain. The settlers in turn have become the most determined opponents of any agreement with the Palestinians, and the backbone of Likud and even more right-wing political formations.

The Islamic groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbollah have sought to exploit the growing opposition to Arafat and tap into the anger of the Palestinian and Arab masses. But they too offer no perspective on the basis of which the social and democratic interests of Arab workers and peasants can be realised. Their own perspective differs from Arafat's only by the degree of militant pressure they seek to place on Israel and the US. All are dependent politically and financially on one or another of the Arab regimes, who have repeatedly proven their willingness to sacrifice the Palestinians.

The only way to successfully combat Israel's offensive against the Palestinian masses is through the adoption of a new, internationalist program that can unite Arab and Jewish workers on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.

The Zionist regime is wracked by enormous contradictions between Jewish workers and the ruling elite. For the past 10 years the wages and living conditions of the working class have been subjected to constant erosion. Unemployment now stands at over 10 percent and thousands of employed workers face the loss of their jobs as the government implements privatisations, wage reductions and public spending cuts.

To date the right wing, with the assistance of Barak, has succeeded in largely channelling social and political discontent by scape-goating the Palestinians. But while many workers, intellectuals and peace activists within Israel are opposed to the actions of Barak and the military, they feel intimidated by the absence of any organised political opposition.

This situation can be changed, provided that a perspective is advanced that meets up to the social and political needs common to Arab and Jewish workers. The workers and oppressed masses of the entire region can be unified only through the struggle for a United Socialist States of the Middle East, so that the region's vast natural wealth can be used to provide a decent life for all.

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