

Israel steps up military offensive against Palestinians

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31 March 2001

The Likud-Labour coalition government led by Ariel Sharon is intent on provoking a major escalation in Israel's ongoing conflict with the Palestinians.

On Wednesday Israel launched air raids on the West Bank town of Ramallah and in Gaza, after three suicide bomb attacks, and the killing of three Israeli children. Although the militant Islamic group Hamas accepted responsibility for the bombings, the Israeli Defence Force blamed the Palestinian Authority (PA) and targeted its elite Force 17 guard headquarters in Ramallah, almost hitting the home of PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

The next day, three Palestinians, two of them teenagers and the other a member of the PA security forces, were shot dead by Israeli troops in a clash near the isolated Jewish settlement of Netzarim, south of Gaza City. When Israeli forces opened fire, one Palestinian was killed and another wounded as they tried to enter Gaza over a fence bordering Egypt.

In Hebron, where a 10-month-old Israeli girl was killed on Monday by gunfire from a Palestinian-controlled hill, Israeli tanks fired on Arab houses from which they said the shots had originated. Later in the week, about 100 settlers battled with police attempting to stop them attacking Palestinian property. One soldier reported that a settler had attempted to stab him. Three Israeli human rights organisations, the Alternative Information Center, the Israel Committee Against House Demolitions and Moked have appealed to the High Court of Justice to order the army to stop settlers "who live in Hebron, or reach the city, from using violence, thuggery and vandalism against the Palestinians."

Earlier on Monday, a Jewish mob burned tyres and attacked Arab properties in Tel Aviv. There are press reports of Arabs being stabbed in Bat Yam, riots in Acre, while fighting continues every night between Arab and Jewish civilians in Galilee and towns on the Mediterranean coast.

Major clashes have taken place on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Palestinians hurling stones at Israeli soldiers, who returned fire with live rounds and rubber bullets, killing a Palestinian man. In another indication of the

shift in strategy within Israel's ruling elite, Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer had warned that the government may send forces into Palestinian-controlled territory for the first time, saying Israeli soldiers would go to "any place" that was endangering the Jewish state. "Everything for us is kosher," he said.

Even before Israel's military escalation, it had tightened up the economic blockade of the Palestinian areas on several occasions. The housing ministry had also drawn up preliminary plans for a new Jewish settlement of 6,000 homes in the West Bank, south of Jerusalem and for nearly 3,000 more homes to be built at the controversial Har Homa settlement.

Avigdor Lieberman, Minister of Infrastructure and Israel-Beitenu party leader, part of Sharon's coalition, said of Wednesday night's raid, "this is not a reaction, this is not a one-time operation. This is the opening phase of an overall policy whose aim is putting an end to terror. The difference must be that the political echelon gives full backing to the security forces to do everything they can and know how to do, full freedom of operation." Environment minister Tzahi Hanegbi was more blunt still, stating, "This could likely lead to war".

Arafat declared that Israel had effectively begun a "100 day war", adding that the Palestinian intifada would continue, "until we raise the Palestinian flag in every mosque and church and on the walls of Jerusalem."

"This is an escalation," he told reporters at the Arab summit in Amman, Jordan. "An escalation for the next 100 days that has been described as a military plan by [Israeli Chief of Staff] General Mofaz."

Sharon was elected prime minister in February, having pronounced the failure of efforts to arrive at a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians by the previous Labour-led One Nation coalition of Ehud Barak. He insisted that he would place what he referred to as "security concerns" above continued negotiations, which, given his political history, could only be seen as a pledge to conduct an all-out military offensive against the Palestinians.

Two things were necessary for him to be able to carry out his agenda, however. The first was to secure a parliamentary majority by bringing the Labour Party into government alongside the right wing religious and settler parties. He did so earlier this month, with Shimon Peres—one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo accord between Israel and the Palestinians—taking the post of foreign minister and Labour's Ben-Eliezer acting as defence minister, thus implicitly endorsing Sharon's view that peace was no longer on the agenda.

The second task for Sharon was to win US endorsement, or at least acquiescence, for his plans to take on the Palestinians. He felt able to do this because of the end of the Clinton presidency—the main sponsor of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Republicans under George W. Bush had made clear they no longer prioritised achieving a settlement with Arafat and the PA, and felt that Clinton's emphasis on this had proved detrimental to US interests in the Middle East.

However, this view did not automatically translate into support for Sharon's plans for a military offensive, given the continued concerns in Washington that war between Israel and the Palestinians could destabilise the Middle East.

On March 20, therefore, Sharon went to the White House to meet with Bush, where he emphasised Israel's usefulness to the US, and stressed his willingness to combat terrorism and support a hardline stance against Iraq and Iran. Bush responded by declaring he would not "try to force peace", while a White House spokesman said, "We do have a special relationship with Israel."

An indication of the direction of this "special relationship" was provided when the Bush administration proved to be the only national government to side with Israel in blocking the dispatch of a United Nations observer force to the West Bank and Gaza. Israel believed this would lead to an official UN condemnation.

Responding to Wednesday's Israeli air raid, Bush called for restraint on both sides, but made clear he supported Sharon's claim that Arafat was responsible for the Palestinian *intifada*, and that peace talks were dependent on him ending all resistance to the IDF. "The signal I'm sending to the Palestinians is stop the violence," he said. "I cannot make it any more clear. And I hope that Chairman Arafat hears it loud and clear."

The State Department called on the PA to "speak out publicly against violence and terrorism, arrest the perpetrators of terrorist acts and resume security cooperation." At the same time, Israel should, "exercise restraint while taking steps to restore normalcy for the lives of the Palestinian people by easing closures and removing checkpoints."

Shortly after Bush's news conference, Assistant Secretary of State Edward R. Walker Jr. told a Congressional hearing that Arafat had not called for an end to violence but rather for the "continuation of the *intifada*." He contrasted this with the supposed efforts by Sharon to allow the movement of goods and people between the Palestinian territories and Israel, concluding that, "We've seen absolutely no response from Arafat to our urgings to him to help bring the violence to a stop."

Jewish groups in the US such as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations, the Orthodox Union, and the Zionist Organisation of America are calling on the State Department to put the Palestinian Authority on the government's list of terrorist groups. They have the support of several leading Republicans and Democrats in Congress and the Senate.

To the extent that there was an attempt by Bush to project an even-handed approach by the US, this indicates the mounting concern amongst the Western powers and the Arab regimes that the situation in Israel is spinning out of control.

The two-day Arab Summit of 22 nations that ended Wednesday pledged moral support for the Palestinian uprising and financial aid worth \$240m in the form of a monthly stipend to bailout the PA. The Arab leaders also endorsed Syrian President Bashar Assad's call for renewal of the economic boycott of Israel. Assad described Israel as "a racist society, and more racist than Nazism."

This was the minimum that could be done in order to placate the Arab masses that are demanding action against Israel. Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdul-Allah Khatib reiterated the Arab countries' desire for an accommodation with Israel, but complained that events on the West Bank and Gaza "undermine our ability to convince our people that this is a viable option".

The Bush administration naturally expressed opposition to the renewal of the Arab boycott, but Washington's refusal to reign in the Sharon government has contributed to the political difficulties now facing Arab regimes that are just as vital as Israel to securing US interests in the Middle East.

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