

Sharon faces criticism after Israel's forced withdrawal from Gaza Strip

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25 April 2001

Israel's coalition government has been plunged into a political crisis since it was forced to withdraw troops from the Gaza Strip last week, on the insistence of the US administration.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office insisted that the withdrawal had already been planned, and that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) never had any intention of remaining in Gaza after they had clamped down on Palestinian mortar fire. Not only was this story embarrassingly transparent, but Sharon's decision to back down in the face of US criticism ended with his Likud-led administration facing attack from all sides, including the military, the press, the extreme right parties in his coalition and from his main government partner, Labour.

How events unfolded is fairly clear. The IDF began moving in with tanks and bulldozers into a Palestinian-controlled sector of Gaza near Beit Hanun late on Monday last week. Early Tuesday, Brigadier General Ron Kitrey stated that the IDF would stay as long as it took to bring a stop to Palestinian mortar fire, while on Tuesday afternoon, the commander of the operation, Brigadier General Yair Naveh, told reporters that the Israelis would stay for "days, weeks, even months."

Hours later, after US Secretary of State Colin Powell called Israel's actions an "excessive and disproportionate" response to "provocative Palestinian mortar attacks on Israel," the IDF troops started to pull out.

To save face, Sharon's spokesman and Defence Minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, said that the operation was never intended to last more than a day. He was forced to repudiate the earlier statement by General Naveh and accused him of talking out of turn.

Army officers immediately criticised the government for attacking Naveh. They were joined by forces from across the political spectrum, forcing the *Knesset* (parliament) foreign affairs committee chairman Dan Meridor to open an investigation into how the decisions to first enter Palestinian territory and then to leave it were made. Senior government and military officials will be called on to testify.

The attack on Sharon in parliament is being led by the Labour Party, with Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh blaming the prime minister for eliciting a hostile US reaction because of a lack of "all-encompassing military-diplomatic thinking".

Sneh said, "Not only was the cabinet not convened, the kitchen cabinet consisting of the prime minister, the defence minister and the foreign minister was not convened. And the Foreign Ministry was not activated to do the diplomatic softening that is necessary in an operation of this sort".

Ran Cohen, a leader of the liberal Meretz Party, attacked Sharon in chauvinist terms for having "fled from the Gaza Strip because of the Americans," and for "trying to blame it on the army". "What are the prime minister and his office doing now? They now are blackening the army's name for their own mess and anarchy," he added.

Sneh has proposed reopening talks on "concrete measures" to end Israeli-Palestinian violence. He has proposed offering a freeze on Israeli settlement construction and various means to revive the Palestinian economy. "The events of this week and the...hasty withdrawal from the Gaza Strip showed us the limits of force and the thin tissue of international support for Israel," he warned.

The Labour Party's Shimon Peres, who acts as foreign minister in the coalition, has since made public the fact that he is "carrying out discreet contacts with the Palestinians to put out the fire".

Labour is acting under the whip of both the US and Europe, who have called for Israeli restraint and a resumption of talks. Alongside Powell's high-profile statement, the European Union issued its own, describing Israel's attack on Syrian targets in Lebanon and the invasion of Gaza as "excessive and disproportionate".

There is little to indicate that Sharon has either the will to change his overall course towards all out conflict with the Palestinians, or the ability to rein in the fascistic layers on whom he bases himself, even if he wanted to. Last week, Sharon told the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, "I am tired of always hearing people say that Israel uses excessive force" and he has continued to mount less ambitious military incursions into Gaza.

Sharon has done so under the whip of stinging criticism from the far-right settler and religious parties within his coalition, who all came out against any retreat in the military offensive. Yitzhak Levy of the settler-based National Religious Party demanded all "contacts with the Palestinians must be stopped immediately" and his colleague Shaul Yahalom complained, on the eve of its independence anniversary, "the state of Israel is not independent."

This stance was echoed in the right wing press, with the *Yedioth Aharonoth* newspaper sneering, "Now Sharon knows where the limits of Israel's might are... they pass through the White House lawn."

Earlier this month Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the ideological leader of Shas, the most influential of the rightist religious parties, delivered a Passover sermon calling for the annihilation of Arabs. "It is forbidden to be merciful to them. You must send missiles to them and annihilate them. They are evil and damnable," he said.

The extreme right in Israel regard Sharon's election in February as more than just an opportunity to end the efforts to reach a compromise with the Palestinians under the 1993 Oslo Accord. They saw his election as the occasion to settle accounts, not only with the Palestinians but also with everything within Israel itself they consider heretical, crypto-communist and anti-Zionist. Their aim is to expunge all traces of liberal democracy from the Zionist state, in order to fashion Israeli society anew, based on nationalism and religious orthodoxy.

An April 20 op-ed piece by Gerald M. Steinberg in the *Jerusalem Post* illustrates the thinking of these layers. It uses the celebration of Israeli independence, beginning at sundown today and ending at sundown Thursday, to berate the turn away from Zionist orthodoxy in the decades following 1948.

“While the authors of the Declaration of Independence sought to establish a Jewish state based on democratic principles, post-Zionists seek to create another Western liberal democracy where many of the citizens are, for now, Jews.

“In a region dominated by Islamic nations where minorities are persecuted, this is a recipe for collective self-destruction... the principles of liberal democracy and individual equality must be tempered by collective rights and political reality... As Herzl and the founders of Zionism so clearly recognized, Jewish continuity is dependent on the survival of the world's only Jewish State.”

Likud is well aware of Israel's reliance economically, politically and militarily on the US and cannot afford to ignore America's concerns. But Sharon has, to no small extent, made his government a hostage to the extreme right through his alliance with the orthodox and settler parties. The danger for Sharon is they will push his government into conflict with broad layers of Israeli society.

Likud Education Minister Limor Livnat has already called for the teaching of Zionist and Jewish values and removed an official textbook she deemed unfit, as well as a poem by a Palestinian nationalist from the Israeli school curriculum. The most extreme Zionists will only see this as an initial down payment.

Shas has been placed in charge of the Interior Ministry in Sharon's coalition, and used this position to authorise a series of raids on Tel Aviv restaurants and fast-food outlets during Passover. Kitchens and diners' plates were checked for the presence of bread and other leavened products, which were confiscated and the offending restaurants fined. Though the law has existed for some time, it has never been enforced in this way before. This year, however, ministry spokesman Itzik Sudri warned, “This law exists to safeguard the Jewish character of the state, and we intend to enforce it.”

Such actions play well with Shas's own supporters, the poor Sephardic Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin, who suffer routine discrimination in Israeli society. Shas seeks to channel the social discontent of these layers along ethno-religious lines, using the fact that Israel's ruling elite is largely made up of European Jews, or “Ashkenazi”. But their fire is actually aimed at the more politically and culturally advanced layers of the working class and the intelligentsia. Shas regards Tel Aviv as a prime target for their ire because the majority of its population is non-observant. Moreover, in the minds of Shas's clerical reactionaries the city is associated with everything that is presently wrong with Israeli society. Such an offensive may serve to ignite a broad social movement against the government.

Though polls indicate that Sharon's hard line presently has the backing of a majority, this could rapidly change. Most Israelis are not prepared to fight an all out war against the Palestinians. This has already created difficulties for the army. The majority of adult male Israelis avoid the call up for their compulsory three-year stint in the army, or the subsequent service in the reserves. According to the army's own statistics, only half of the men in Israel eligible for call up actually serve in the armed forces, and only one in three men considered suitable for reserve duty until age 50 actually fulfil their legal obligation. With orthodox Jews exempt from military service and thousands more dodging it, the army has been forced to increase

the number of compulsory reserve duty days this year from 30 to 40. But even this will be insufficient if the conflict continues. Some reservists have already mounted a campaign calling for better conditions for themselves and harsher punishment for those who avoid being called up.

Sharon relies on efforts to whip up nationalism and religious extremism in order to encourage support for war against the Palestinians. But this is not the whole story. Likud must also undertake a major offensive against the jobs and living standards of the working class and destroy social services on which millions rely.

The Israeli economy has recently enjoyed a period of growth, but this is already beginning to change. Official projections for GDP growth in 2001 have been slashed from 4.5 percent to between 2 and 3 percent, as the economy begins to slow down. The government faces a revenue shortfall of 3-5 billion shekels (\$7.2m-1.2bn) and must make major cuts in spending. Instead, Sharon's coalition partners have used the crisis since the fall of Ehud Barak's One Nation coalition to push through private members bills that would cost a further 3 billion shekels. On top of this, Sharon faces the cost of waging war against the Palestinians, which by the end of the year could reach an estimated \$1-1.5 billion.

The growing economic crisis in the US and Europe threatens even worse prospects for Israel's export oriented economy. Exports presently account for nearly 40 percent of Israel's GDP, and the US takes 30 percent of all Israeli exports.

This month the Finance Ministry Deputy Director for Economics Vered Dar warned that if the New York's Nasdaq Composite Index continues to tumble, on which close to 100 Israeli companies are listed, and the slowdown in the US and European capital markets continues, Israel will lose billions. If the Index stays at a level 60 percent below its recorded peak, the Israeli hi-tech sector will lose more than \$2 billion. The social impact of this economic time bomb could be massive. Already the Treasury is predicting official unemployment reaching 9.3 percent this year, without the impact of an economic slump being taken into account.



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