

Khan Younis raid escalates Israel's war against the Palestinians

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Wednesday's raid on the Gaza Strip's Khan Younis refugee camp was the first major ground assault into Palestinian-run territory in nearly seven months of conflict. It signals a major escalation in the Likud-Labour coalition government of Ariel Sharon's undeclared war against the Palestinians.

Soldiers killed two Palestinians and wounded 25. Tanks demolished about 25 buildings, which Israel claims were used by gunmen to fire on Jewish settlements.

The raid took place at the same time as an US-convened meeting between the two sides at the home of US Ambassador Martin Indyk near Tel Aviv. Attended by Jordan's Foreign Minister Abdulilah al-Khatib, the talks followed discussions between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Israeli and Palestinian leaders. But there was no agreement on measures to stop the violence, which continued throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip Wednesday night and Thursday.

International reaction was immediate, due to mounting fears amongst the major powers that the Sharon's government's abandonment of any attempt at achieving a negotiated settlement will destabilise the entire Middle East region.

The US and Russia issued a joint statement Thursday, after talks between Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, calling for an end to violence.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan made a similar call, urging security cooperation, the lifting of Israel's blockade of the West Bank and Gaza and the transfer to the Palestinian Authority of all outstanding revenues it is owed. Between 375 and 380 Palestinians, 13 Israeli Arabs and 71 other Israelis have been killed so far.

The Israeli government was unrepentant. In a series of interviews with the Israeli press, Sharon said that the

Khan Younis raid was unexceptional and that the Israeli Defence Force acts in the Palestinian-ruled territories (Area "A") "nearly every day". He warned the Palestinians, "All those who carry out terrorist actions, help them or support them, must know they cannot live in peace even if they are in Area 'A'." He insisted that his hardline stance was working and that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, "is beginning to soften".

A Sharon aide, Raanan Gissin, added that the almost daily use of mortars by the Palestinians amounted to a "declaration of war" against Israel.

The raid on Khan Younis came after a series of provocative actions and statements by the Sharon government. These were aimed at cutting off all chances of a peaceful resolution to the present conflict and making clear Sharon's total break with the compromises reached by his Labour predecessor as prime minister, Ehud Barak, within the framework of the 1993 Oslo Accord.

The siege of the PA has been unremitting, with the Palestinian economy having lost more than \$20 billion in trade and wages in the past six months, according to Finance Minister Maher al-Masri. Unemployment now tops 50 percent due to Israeli closures, up from 11 percent last year. Israel's travel restrictions keep 130,000 Palestinian laborers—or one-sixth of the work force—from jobs in Israel. The UN estimates that one in three Palestinians is poor, living on less than \$2.10 a day, compared to one in five six months ago. A Palestinian economist, Samir Hulaileh, believes two-thirds of the more than one million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip will be living below the poverty line by the end of the year.

At the beginning of this month, the Housing Ministry announced plans to build 708 homes in the Jewish settlements within the occupied territories or on key

border sites. Housing Minister Natan Sharansky said that this is just the beginning.

In an interview with the nominally liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper, to be run in full today, Sharon has said that he has no intention, "absolutely none," of evacuating settlements, even as part of a cease fire agreement with the Palestinians.

"I do not see any reason to evacuate any settlements. So long as there is no peace, we will stay sitting there. If after some time, God willing, there will be peace, there will certainly be no reason to prevent them [the settlers] from staying there."

"Is it possible at this time to relinquish control over the mountain aquifer, which provides us with a third of our water? Is it possible to give up the frontier area in the Jordan Valley? In any case, it's no coincidence that the settlements sit where they are. They guard both the birthplace of the Jewish people and also grant us essential strategic depth to protect our existence."

Sharon went on to declare that Israel would not withdraw from the Golan Heights or the Jordan Valley in order to secure an agreement with Syria either. When asked his response in the event that Arafat unilaterally declares a Palestinian state, he warned, "it would will be a major mistake on his part. It would demand that we take a series of steps to keep in our hands areas essential for us."

If official public pronouncements are warlike in tone, they pale before the statements of right wing figures in the media. The *Jerusalem Post* is filled with calls for a fight to the finish against the Palestinians and a reckoning with Arafat himself.

In, "Should the Palestinians have a state?", Naomi Ragen writes, "I would like to ask all those progressive, liberal people whose hearts yearn to see a Palestinian state set up in the West Bank and Gaza: What is the matter with you? Does the world really need yet another corrupt state of Moslem extremists to misconstrue their own religion, and dishonor the religion and cultural artifacts of others? Do we really need to empower yet another murderous, corrupt, inhumane regime and give it legitimacy?"

Another op-ed piece, "The pharaoh from Gaza", describes Arafat's government as a "dictatorial slave regime, blaming Barak's government for "the legitimization given to Arafat's rule of terror". Chillingly it makes the claim that "Compared to the

crimes of these Falangists, who also support and aid the suicidal terrorists, the slaughter carried out by the Christian Falangists against the Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla in September 1982 seems far less grave."

Michael Freund, a leading Likud policy wonk, calls for Arafat to meet the same fate as Serbia's Slobodan Molosevic: "Morality demands that Israeli security forces should cuff him, read him his rights, and take him away."

Likud and its allies within the military and the fascistic layers of Israel's settler population have been given free-rein by the virtual collapse of the country's official leftist and pacifist movement. Peace Now has, according to one *Ha'aretz* columnist, "all but disappeared from the political map".

The Labour Party has gone much further. In joining Sharon's government, the party gave up all pretence at opposing his policy of building a Greater Israel and their previous efforts towards a political accommodation with the Palestinians. The war against the Palestinians is being conducted under the direct authority of Labour's Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, while Shimon Peres, one of the main architects of the Oslo Accord, now acts as Foreign Minister and spends his time traveling around the world justifying Sharon's actions. Another *Ha'aretz* columnist, Gideon Levy, said that it was as if, "Sharon and the Likud have swallowed up Labour, leaving no trace of the party."

These events have more than confirmed the warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the beginning of the present conflict. It is not possible to reconcile the struggle for democracy, peace and social progress in the Middle East with support for the Zionist state and parties advocating nationalism as the axis of the political life of the Jewish people. To avoid a further descent into a catastrophic war, Israeli workers and intellectuals must strike out on a new course—one based on the unity of the Jewish and Arab working class and oppressed masses on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.



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