

War danger grows in Middle East

Chris Marsden
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Less than 24 hours after seizing a large section of the Palestinian-ruled Gaza Strip, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has begun to pull out. The Israeli government initially announced that its forces might hold the area for months but then abruptly ordered the pullout just hours after the US issued a statement criticising the action.

The Israeli army occupied positions in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday after a night bombardment lasting at least four hours. It involved tanks, assault helicopters, missiles, ships and bulldozers, the killing of a police officer at Beit Hanun and the wounding of 30.

Gaza's main police headquarters, two posts of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's elite Force 17 security unit at Deir al Balah and Palestinian navy installations were bombed. Israeli tanks also fired at West Bank villages near the town of Bethlehem.

The 27-mile-long Gaza Strip was carved into three separate areas—Khan Yunis to Rafiah; Gush Katif to Netzarim and Gaza City south—and its main coastal road was dissected by Israeli checkpoints. A bulldozer dug a trench in the coastal road and piled it with stones to prevent travel, with Israeli tanks being placed on all main roads, prohibiting Palestinian movement throughout the Gaza Strip.

A Palestinian spokesman, Hassan Asfour, accused Israel of tactics amounting to re-invasion. IDF Major General Yom Tov Samia boasted, “Quite a large bite was taken out of Area A [Palestinian-controlled Gaza]”. The goal, he said, is for “Arafat to get up in the morning and understand that a strip one kilometre wide and three kilometres long, with all its bases and Palestinian police stations, has been wiped off the map.”

While the Bush administration has routinely backed the repressive measures of the Likud-led coalition government of Ariel Sharon against Palestinian protesters, the latest actions of the Israeli military

threatened to plunge the entire Middle East region into war. Clearly concerned that Israel had gone too far, the US moved rapidly to haul it into line.

Secretary of State Colin Powell issued a statement describing the seizure of part of the Gaza Strip as an “excessive and disproportionate” response. Powell went on to warn that “the situation is threatening to escalate further, posing the risk of a broader conflict.” An hour later, a senior Israeli official announced the army's withdrawal.

Israel said the army occupation was in retaliation for five 82-millimetre mortar shells fired by Hamas militants from Gaza into the southern Israeli town of Sderot, which is just kilometres from Sharon's own “Sycamore” ranch in the Negev Desert. The mortar attack was itself in retaliation for the April 16 bombing raid on a Syrian radar installation in Lebanon, the first since 1996.

Three Syrian soldiers were killed in the raid, which was timed to coincide with a visit to Israel by Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdallah al-Khatib. The first Arab official to visit Sharon since he took office, Khatib was bearing a joint Jordanian-Egyptian proposal for restarting negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. In the event, al-Khatib's message included a condemnation of the Israeli raid on Lebanon and a warning that it “may endanger the overall situation in the region”, while Sharon's spokesman described his proposals as “a non-starter”.

Earlier, Israel's Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer described the Lebanon air strike as a defensive reaction for the killing of three Israeli soldiers and the kidnapping of three others by the Syrian-backed Hezbollah, or the Party of God, since Israel withdrew its forces from Lebanon last May. He warned Syria “the rules of the game have changed... We had no choice but to send a clear message to the Syrians: only you can stop the Hezbollah.”

The leaders of many Arab states were forced to issue strong denunciations of the latest Israeli aggression. Syria put 35,000 troops it has stationed in Lebanon on high alert, calling the attack on its radar installation “a challenge to the will of the Arab nation”. Foreign Minister Farouq al-Sharaa warned that Israel would “pay a heavy price at the appropriate time”. Lebanon's President Emile Lahoud said the air strike could lead to a “general confrontation”. Even Saudi Arabia said Israel was acting in a “despicable” way and urged a firm stance against its warmongering.

Israeli provocations

Since entering office last month, Sharon's government has mounted a series of provocations. He clearly calculated that none of the Arab regimes have the stomach for a fight over the fate of the Palestinians. Thus, with the tacit support of the newly installed Bush administration, he sought to use Israel's massive military superiority to claw back most of the concessions granted to the Palestinians since the 1993 Oslo Accords, and at the same time take the demand for Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights off the agenda of the ongoing negotiations with Syria.

In an interview with the *Ha' aretz* newspaper last weekend, Sharon declared that Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza would never be evacuated, nor would Israel pull out of the Golan Heights or the Jordan Valley, occupied since the June 1967 “Six-Day War”.

When asked by *Ha' aretz* how there could ever be peace with Israel's Arab neighbours on such a basis, Sharon replied, “From the strategic point of view, I think that it's possible that in another 10 or 15 years the Arab world will have less ability to strike against Israel than it has today. This is because Israel will be a country with a flourishing economy, whereas the Arab world may be on the decline.”

Sharon's fantasist predictions of a resurgent Israeli economy fly in the face of reality. But they are necessary in order to reinforce his conclusion that “time is not working against us and therefore it is important to achieve solutions that will take place over a lengthy period.”

Sharon's perspective, therefore, is a decades-long war of attrition, with Israel continuing to exist as a garrison state and taking on all-comers.

The other major factor in Sharon's calculations was the virtual collapse of the Labour Party and of Israel's

peace movement. Having agreed to sit in Sharon's government, Labour has all but disappeared as an independent factor in Israeli political life. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, one of the main architects of the Oslo Accords, was one of just two of the 12 security cabinet members who voted against mounting the air raid on the Syrian radar site, arguing the timing was wrong due to al-Khatib's planned visit. Later, however, Peres publicly endorsed the seizure and division of the Gaza Strip on Israeli Army Radio, stating, “It's forbidden entirely for the Palestinian Authority to have mortars... Truly, there is a limit to everything.”

While Israeli officials have attempted to downplay the army's withdrawal, it is nevertheless a backdown, even if only temporary, revealing the degree to which Israel is dependent on the economic and political backing of the US. Powell called on “all sides to exercise maximum restraint, to reduce tensions and to take steps to end the violence immediately.” But the situation remains a tinderbox.

What Sharon sees as the strengths of his position, contain the seeds of his downfall. Externally, the Arab regimes on which the Western powers rely to ensure Middle Eastern stability are being discredited by their refusal to oppose Israeli aggression. In the face of massive social and political opposition amongst the Arab masses to Sharon's actions, they may be forced reluctantly into conflict with Israel or be threatened with their own downfall. Internally, Israeli society is wracked by division and conflict. The social interests of the mass of working people, Jewish and Arab, and their desire for peace can find no political expression through the Labour Party. Though Sharon is attempting to channel these simmering social tensions behind his nationalist strivings for a Greater Israel, they may yet erupt in forms he is unable to control.



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