

International condemnation of Israeli settlements dominates events in Middle East

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Israeli aggression against the Palestinians has intensified during the past week.

In a major escalation of the conflict, Israel used F-16 warplanes for the first time to strike at targets in the West Bank and Gaza, killing at least nine people and injuring 90. Eight people were killed and 54 wounded in an attack on a Palestinian police outpost in the West Bank town of Nablus. Another person died and 14 were injured when Israeli missiles hit a building in Ramallah housing members of the Palestinian presidential security force. More than 20 were injured in further air strikes on the Gaza Strip.

A spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon justified the strikes as retaliation for a Hamas suicide bomb attack earlier in the day at the entrance to a crowded shopping mall in Netanya, a coastal town north of Tel Aviv. Six Israeli civilians were killed and some 45 wounded when the bomber blew himself up. In a separate incident, a Jewish settler was shot dead and two others injured near the West Bank town of Ramallah.

The suicide bombing took place after a week of provocative attacks by Israeli security forces against Palestinians.

In the early hours of Thursday, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) fired machine guns into the Palestinian town of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, wounding four. Tanks and bulldozers entered a Rafah refugee camp, also in southern Gaza, flattening agricultural land and firing shells.

The previous evening helicopters fired rockets at a building belonging to the Preventive Security Service in the Jabaliya refugee camp near Gaza City, wounding 10. In Jenin on the West Bank, a helicopter gunship fired missiles at the main police headquarters causing a power cut.

Israeli forces moved into an area near the Gush Katif settlement and took over a multi-storey building, while bulldozers protected by tanks went into the town of Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza and uprooted fruit trees.

On Tuesday, Israeli soldiers killed four people during mass protests in the West Bank and Gaza to commemorate Al-Naqba Day, which marks the beginning of the exile of the Palestinian people following the founding of Israel in 1948. French TV reporter Bertrand Aguirre was shot in the chest, but escaped serious injury thanks to his flak jacket.

On Monday, Israeli troops had killed five Palestinian paramilitary policemen in the West Bank. The sole survivor, Ahmed al-Najjar, said his colleagues had been killed without provocation. Israeli army chief of staff Shaul Mofaz has said his soldiers did not intend to kill the men, and promised an investigation. The executions were subsequently blamed on an "intelligence failure".

In all, over 430 Palestinians, 87 Israelis and 13 Israeli Arabs have been killed since fighting began last September.

Talking about the week's events, Yasir Abed Rabbo, minister of culture and information in the Palestinian Authority, said that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's strategy was clear, "divert attention from diplomacy by escalating violence and creating an environment that makes any negotiation look like untimely compromise."

This interpretation is plausible. Especially given the hostile response in Israeli ruling circles and the media to the release last week of the report by former US Senator George Mitchell's "fact-finding" committee into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Commissioned in November last year following the Israeli-Palestinian summit at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt, the report's authors also include Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy.

The report was far from being pro-Palestinian, but it did urge Israel to "help rebuild confidence" by freezing "all settlement activity, including the 'natural growth' of existing settlements."

Israel began establishing Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza Strip in defiance of international law, following their seizure 34 years ago from Jordan and Egypt in the "Six-Day War," and has justified their continued existence by maintaining that they are built on "disputed" territory, not occupied land. Sharon is closely identified with the settlement policy, having used his position in Menachem Begin's government as Minister of Agriculture and Chairman of the Ministerial Committee for Settlements to promote their expansion.

Even since the Oslo accords were signed between Israel and the Palestinians in 1994, the number of Israeli settlers on Palestinian land has increased by 72 percent. Today, there are an estimated 200,000 settlers living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The settlements function as armed Israeli encampments. In Gaza they occupy some of the best land and seafront, while they break-up the West Bank into a patchwork quilt forcing Palestinians to pass through a series of Israeli checkpoints.

Sharon, who has stated that by the year 2010 most of the Jews of the world would be living in Israel, has made clear that he has no intention of abandoning the settlements. He condemned concessions offered to the Palestinians by his Labour predecessor Ehud Barak, including the offer of a Palestinian state on 90 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Sharon insists that Israel must hold on to Jerusalem, and he would only allow the Palestinians to control the 42 percent of the West Bank they already have.

According to press reports, this month his government intends to seek a \$375 million increase in subsidies for settlement expansion and to build a “bypass” road around Palestinian East Jerusalem for Israeli settlers.

The release of the Mitchell report last week put Sharon on the back foot, however. On May 11, a US State Department spokesman said Israeli officials had “informed us that the report [of the \$375 million extra subsidies] was inaccurate and we note their explanation.”

The Israeli government's subsequent response was two-fold—stepping up its provocations against the Palestinians, while drafting in Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to legitimise further expansion under the guise of “natural growth”.

As a Labour member of the Knesset (parliament) and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Peres plays a vital role in providing a left cover for Likud's war aims. On May 16, he gave an interview to the liberal *Haaretz* newspaper, in which he explained that Israel was locked in a “battle for its existence”.

“There were similar situations in the past, but then everybody was mobilised... Today, too, everyone must mobilise.”

Peres' task is to ensure that the Western Powers do not give any support to the Palestinians. “They must not tell us ‘there is terror because of your settlements’ ... It is very important there should be no justification or excuses [for terrorism] and I am running from place to place like a madman in order to explain this point.”

Peres regards the US as a firm ally, but “in Europe it isn't easy. There, they accept the equation of settlements versus terror. We must not let this happen in America as well.” He promised that he would try to find some formula acceptable to both Israel and the Palestinians. “The dictionary is very rich,” he said.

However, Peres cannot obscure the real content of the settler policy. Further embarrassment followed on Thursday, when Rene Kosirnik, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation to the region, said, “The policy of settlement as such in humanitarian law is a war crime”.

On Friday, Peres promised that Israel would stop any further seizures of land around the settlements and adopt a stricter policy on new building within their existing boundaries. On

television he said Israel had no wish to expand the settlements: “We are suspected of wanting to grab these lands for our settlements, although this is not our intention.”

All of this rings hollow. Firstly, no new building is in fact needed, as there are tens of thousands of vacant homes. Secondly, the existing settlements cannot be maintained if there is to be any chance of a peaceful resolution. Thirdly, Likud has no intention of honouring such a pledge. The party's minister without portfolio, Danny Naveh, told the press that a freeze on construction in existing settlements was “something which first of all cannot happen in the field and secondly will not prompt the Palestinians in the end to stop the violence.”

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat dismissed Peres' offer. He told the BBC, “We don't hear the word ‘freeze’. We hear a game of deceit [with the Israelis] saying they will continue with the settlements, with the housing units being built within the settlements—and that's Israeli expansion, and that's the real problem.”

Peres' remarks are mainly for international consumption. He admits that his aim is to ensure that US support, upon which Israel is wholly reliant, is maintained, under conditions where sympathy for the Palestinians plight is growing.

Within America, the Bush administration is being pressured to take a firmer pro-Israeli stance. Last week, Secretary of State Colin Powell attended a Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing into the Bush administration's budget request for \$15.2 billion for foreign operations, during which he praised Sharon as “a man who does want peace”, while adding that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was also “anxious to get the peace process started again”.

He met a hostile response on Capitol Hill, with the chair of the subcommittee Republican Senator Mitch McConnell questioning for the first time whether the US should continue to send aid to Egypt, because its government's anti-Semitism was “at an all-time high”. Arafat was condemned for walking away “from the best deal the Palestinians will likely ever see.” McConnell questioned the justification for offering \$75 million in assistance to Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Democrat Party Senator Mary Landrieu also urged Powell to reassess the US relationship with the Palestinians.

Powell was forced to urge Congress not to cut the \$2 billion in aid to Egypt, America's key Arab ally in the Middle East, saying Egypt, along with Jordan, “play an important part in the region”. Powell is expected to meet with Arafat during his trip to Africa and Europe May 22 to 30.



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