

Sharon calls ceasefire but says Israeli settlements will continue

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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called a ceasefire yesterday, but for propaganda purposes only. He explicitly rejected calls for a freeze on building Zionist settlements in the Occupied Territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Sharon said that while no new settlements would be built, existing ones would be allowed to “grow”.

The Israeli army's new rules of engagement also allow them to open fire if they consider there is a threat to life—which has been used to justify many Israeli actions over the past eight months of conflict.

A Palestinian Authority spokesman said that Sharon's position “represented a rejection of recommendations stated in the Mitchell report.” In contrast, Washington welcomed Sharon's statement, and urged the Palestinians to make a similar ceasefire declaration.

The Bush administration is responsible for Sharon's latest public utterance. The US has been forced to step up its efforts to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians in an effort to prevent the Likud-Labour coalition plunging the entire Middle East into war. But it has done so based on Washington's continuing support for Israel.

President Bush came to power after criticising Clinton and the Democrats for embroiling the US too closely in efforts to secure a negotiated settlement giving the Palestinians a limited form of self-rule. Since then the Republicans have spent four months giving tacit endorsement to Sharon's efforts to defeat the Palestinian intifada through military means. They have decided to intervene only because this policy has backfired, to such an extent that the survival of both the Israeli state and essential supplies of Middle East oil are threatened.

The US intervention came after numerous warnings from policy advisors, international politicians and the world's media that Sharon's constant escalation of military aggression against the Palestinians was spiralling out of control; particularly following the Israeli attack on Friday May 18 in which F-16 fighter bombers were used against Palestinian towns for the first time, killing 12 Palestinian Authority police officers.

Sharon was heavily criticised by the United Nations, Russia, and the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana. Speaking from Cairo, Egypt, on Monday Solana called for an immediate ceasefire followed by confidence-building measures to prepare the way for negotiations.

President Mubarak called on Israel to accept a Jordanian-Egyptian initiative as a basis for the renewal of talks. He warned that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was threatening the regional interests of the international community. The Middle East “situation will continue to deteriorate and become even more complicated,” he warned. “I am afraid it could reach a point of no return... It will be a disaster for Israel and us in the Arab world.”

The *New York Times* and Britain's *Guardian* newspapers both

expressed fears that Israel's survival was in question should Sharon be allowed to continue his undeclared war against the Palestinians. America's “paper of record” warned on May 19, “Whatever illusions the Bush administration may entertain about a more detached American role in the Middle East should be erased by the rapidly escalating violence in the region... No president can afford to let the Middle East descend into turmoil. Protecting the welfare of Israel has been a central American commitment since the Jewish state was founded during the Truman administration. All presidents since then have tried to overcome the hostilities in the region, well aware that turbulence and military conflict in and around Israel can ripple through the region, creating instability, slowing economic progress and threatening to disrupt the flow of oil to the West. Mr. Bush must do no less.”

The *Guardian*, in a May 21 editorial generally sympathetic to the Zionist state, nevertheless wrote: “We are forced to confront some uncomfortable truths about how the dream of a sanctuary for the Jewish people in the very land in which their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped has become poisoned. The establishment of this sanctuary has been bought at a very high cost in human rights and human lives. It must be apparent that the international community cannot support this cost indefinitely.”

Having already faced criticism from the European powers and Russia for abandoning efforts to reach a negotiated settlement, the fear of losing US backing also prompted sections of the Israeli ruling elite to call for Sharon to be reined in.

In the Israeli media, politically diverse journals including the pro-Likud *Jerusalem Post* came out against Sharon's decision to utilise F-16s. The liberal *Ha'aretz* journalist Doron Rosenblum said that the move symbolised “the political and military bankruptcy reached by the Sharon government.”

Former Air Force commander Eitan Ben-Eliyahu warned, “Under the present circumstances, I would not send an F-16 into the skies because the consequences could be extremely harsh.”

The US has no viable proposals for halting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however. Secretary of State Colin Powell hurriedly put together a top-level team, including US Ambassador Martin Indyk, Envoy Ron Schlicher and Ambassador William Burns as his special assistant, instructed “to begin working immediately with the parties to facilitate implementation of the [Mitchell] report's recommendations.”

The report, co-authored by former US Senator George Mitchell, Solana and others, is little more than a restatement of the need to end the present fighting and make efforts to secure a negotiated settlement. Though noting many of the criticisms made of Sharon's deliberate provocations and the brutal actions of the Israeli Defence Force, it

supports Israel's demand that Arafat ends all protest against Israel before talks can resume.

The Mitchell report has been rejected by the Israeli government, because it advises a freeze on the building of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a "confidence building" initiative. It makes no proposal for their eventual removal.

Sharon shows no signs of retreating in face of growing international criticism, despite his latest ceasefire announcement. He bases his government on the most extreme right wing elements within the political and military establishment, and on the 200,000 or so Israeli settlers in particular—who view any compromise with the Palestinians as treachery. His continued efforts to build Jewish settlements on the territories promised to the Palestinian Authority under the 1993 Oslo Accords are part of his ongoing efforts to wreck any possibility of a peace agreement. The settlements serve to divide up the proposed Palestinian state and allow for a permanent armed Israeli presence located on much of the most fertile and coastal land.

On Sunday, Sharon had replied to criticism about the use of F-16s by threatening, "We will do what it takes and use everything at our disposal to protect the citizens of Israel." His stance continues to be supported by the Israeli right and the dominant sections of the Labour Party.

The decision to use the fighter-bombers was taken by Sharon's inner cabinet of Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of the Labour Party. But on Sunday, the broader security cabinet convened and authorised the "kitchenette" to make further decisions whenever a reaction or military operation needs an immediate decision. Health Minister Shlomo Benizri, of the extreme right religious party Shas said Israel "has to stop apologising after every military action."

Former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and a Likud leadership challenger to Sharon, has also called for Israelis to unite behind the government. He told the BBC, "If we respond proportionately we will lose...the response to terror must be disproportionate."

Attacks on the West Bank and Gaza Strip have continued unabated. While the talks were held, a five-hour gun battle took place outside Jerusalem, with further clashes in the Palestinian territories and Israeli raids into the Gaza Strip. But the Israeli right wing will not stop there. They are demanding even harsher measures, and not just against the Palestinians.

On Monday, Likud *Knesset* (parliament) deputy Yisrael Katz introduced a private bill to bar from the *Knesset* "any person or list, who supports terror organisations and identifies with any Arab states." The bill won a significant majority on its preliminary reading, with most Labour deputies supporting it, a handful abstaining and only one joining the opposition of Arab lists and the liberal party Meretz.

Last week, National Infrastructure Minister Avigdor Lieberman instructed his staff to cut off all relations with Arab local authority leaders and politicians who took part in Al-Naqba Day ceremonies on May 15, commemorating the disaster that befell the Palestinians following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Lieberman said his decision was to "punish" Israeli Arabs who "turn our Independence Day into their Holocaust Day." He explicitly said the order has no time limit. His ministry has responsibility for sewage, water, electricity, and the Israel Lands Authority, which sanctions all house-building projects.

The two proposals essentially constitute a declaration of civil war against Israeli Arabs, who make up a fifth of the population.

The government is also pushing through measures that will put it on a collision course with broad sections of the Jewish working class. On Monday May 21, a finance ministry proposal for a four percent (\$677 million) across the board budget cut to free up funds for defence was passed.

Opposition leader Yossi Sarid of Meretz said the cuts would mean more unemployment and poverty, and less education, health and welfare. Interior Minister Eli Yishai of Shas warned that the cuts would primarily affect the weaker sectors of society and this would eventually lead to the fall of the government.

Sections of the political establishment are aware that Sharon's war aims could have the effect of both provoking war with Israel's Arab neighbours and destabilising Israeli society. Moreover, with Labour having taken its place within the coalition government there would be no safe conduit through which to channel the social and political discontent this would unleash.

Conscious of this danger, on May 8, former Labour ministers Yossi Beilin, Yael (Yuli) Tamir and Labour *Knesset* deputies Ophir Pines-Paz, Eitan Cabel, Yael Dayan, Shlomo Ben-Ami and Colette Avital joined together with Meretz, Peace Now leaders and various activists in forming a "peace coalition". The new bloc functions as a loyal opposition to the government, and favours the Egyptian-Jordanian proposal and the Mitchell report as a basis for negotiations. It calls on the government to freeze building in the settlements, in return for a Palestinian cease-fire.

The "peace coalition" is planning to hold anti-government protests during cabinet meetings and encourages *Knesset* deputies to vote against government policies, but only on Palestinian questions and the Jewish settlements. Nevertheless, Labour whip Effi Oshaya reacted angrily, warning, "any anti-government activity is a betrayal of the role of emissaries of the party they accepted upon themselves."

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