

# Growing evidence of Israel's plans to invade the West Bank and Gaza

Chris Marsden  
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Israel's military top brass has planned a military invasion of the West Bank and Gaza. Its aim would be to crush the Palestinian Authority (PA) and bring down its leader Yasser Arafat, drive him into exile and kill or detain the PA armed forces.

According to a report in the British journal *Foreign Report*, published by the intelligence group Jane's, Israeli generals presented the plan in the form of an executive summary to the government last weekend. Entitled either "The destruction of the Palestinian Authority and disarmament of all armed forces" or "Justified Vengeance", according to different reports, the plan was presented by Israeli chief of staff Brigadier-General Shaul Mofaz.

An assault would be launched, using the pretext of the next big suicide bomb attack in Israel that caused widespread deaths and injuries.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) generals are said to envisage a military operation of up to one month, with thousands of Palestinian casualties and hundreds of Israelis killed. The majority of the Palestinian armed forces, estimated at 40,000 personnel, would be disarmed, and either killed or held in detention camps.

The offensive would begin with heavy air raids by F-16 and F-15 warplanes against all the main PA installations in Gaza and Ramallah. Israel would then deploy around 30,000 paratroopers, infantry and armoured brigades. The plan estimates a maximum of round 300 Israeli soldiers killed if Palestinians mount any serious resistance.

The IDF plan estimates that international reaction would be minimal and would come too late, after the Israeli position on the ground had been strengthened immeasurably. Some kind of peace force would possibly be sent to protect the Palestinians, but only after a "fait accompli" had been created.

The blueprint is said to dismiss the possibility of a serious response being mounted by Israel's Arab neighbours. Military intelligence sources state their doubt that Egypt, Jordan or Syria wishes to go to war on behalf of the Palestinians. Egypt might send troops into Sinai, in response to which Israel would call up its reserves. Iraq may mobilise its forces, but they would be destroyed by Israeli warplanes before they could even reach the Jordanian border.

The Likud-Labour coalition government led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has denied the report, but the denials have been far from uniform.

Israeli Foreign Minister, Labour's Shimon Peres, denied the Jane's report was genuine, telling Israeli Radio, "I'm so happy to see that such an important journal has such a fertile imagination. It simply didn't happen." Sharon went on to warn against a belief that there was a military solution to the present conflict, or that replacing Arafat would make things easier for Israel.

US State Department spokeswoman Susan Pittman on Thursday also said Israel "has not told us of any such plan, and we have stated repeatedly that there is no military solution to this conflict."

The denial by Likud was much less emphatic, however. Raanan Gissin, the spokesman for Sharon, said, "There are three options: surrender to Arafat, to go ahead with this plan—to occupy—or to continue the current course of restraint and self-defense. The government has said it's committed to peace but this situation can't last forever."

Other reports indicate that Jane's report is credible. A military official told PA news that a large-scale attack was already planned for June 2, the day after a suicide bomber killed 21 young people outside a Tel Aviv disco, but was held off following Arafat's

announcement of a cease-fire.

On behalf of the Palestinians, Planning Minister Nabil Shaath said, "I know that both President Bush and [French President Jacques] Chirac spoke very clearly to Sharon about this issue and warned him against the great dangers of such a policy... One has to take this seriously because other threats have been carried out." Mohammed Dahlan, head of the Palestinian Authority's Preventive Security in Gaza, also charged that Israel is seriously considering taking military action to topple the Palestinian Authority. Commentators have noted similarities between the invasion plan and the one that was implemented by Sharon as Defense Minister in Lebanon during 1982. Then, too, the goal was to destroy PLO infrastructure and weapons, and to expel or kill Arafat and his armed forces.

According to the Qatari daily *Al-Watan*, Israel recently relayed to European officials a list of eight possible successors to Arafat. Citing unnamed sources in London, *Al-Watan* said the list includes Palestinians who would be more flexible on the peace process than Arafat including Arafat's deputy, Abu Mazen.

The most telling argument in favour of the plan's existence is that the right wing and the Israeli media have been openly discussing and in many cases demanding a military invasion for weeks.

The most vocal demands have come from the Zionist settlers on the West Bank and Gaza. The Yesha Council representing the 200,000 settlers whom have acted as Sharon's political bedrock of support up to now, issued a statement calling on the prime minister to "order the army to... dismantle the Palestinian Authority, the largest terrorist organisation in the world."

In the Knesset, Ministers Rehavam Ze'evi and Avigdor Lieberman, Tzahi Hanegbi, Uzi Landau, and other Likud ministers have all called for a military strike.

On Thursday July 12, MK Michael Kleiner (Herut) called on Israel to either assassinate or topple Arafat. He suggested replacing Arafat, even if it meant the Hamas would take his place, because Hamas is recognised as a terrorist organisation so Israel's future actions against the Palestinians would not be condemned.

The last few days have witnessed a sharpest escalation in the fighting since the latest cease-fire

came into effect. On Thursday, Israeli tanks fired shells at two Palestinian police posts in Nablus, killing a Palestinian intelligence officer. Settlers smashed Palestinian property and burned West Bank fields. Palestinians opened fire at an Israeli vehicle, wounding three, including a baby. An Israeli was critically wounded in another road ambush near Hebron and a gun battle lasted into the early hours of Friday.

On Friday, clashes in Hebron left one Israeli dead and 23 Palestinians wounded after Israeli troops entered the Palestinian-controlled part of town and destroyed three police posts. A Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli troops in a separate incident in the Gaza Strip.

Speaking while on a visit to Rome, Sharon warned that Israel's military response would escalate. His security cabinet had approved a number of steps, he said, and, "I estimate that a certain amount of time will pass and we will carry them out."



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