

Israeli attacks on Palestinians aimed at provoking all out war

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28 July 2001

The past two weeks have seen a series of Israeli provocations against the Palestinians aimed at inciting retaliatory attacks. The Sharon government hopes any such “suicide” missions would generate sympathy for Israel and provide the excuse for a full-scale military offensive and re-occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

On July 17, following a suicide bomb attack in Binyamina that killed two Israeli soldiers, Israel sent in two armoured battalions and a paratrooper company to reinforce its positions on the outskirts of Bethlehem and Jenin in the West Bank. This followed the July 12 publication by defence experts Jane’s Information Group in London of Israeli war plans to re-invade the West Bank and Gaza and resume its military occupation of these areas it originally seized in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Later the same week, in a helicopter gunship attack on a house in Bethlehem, Israel assassinated five Hamas members and wounding ten other Palestinians, including a number of children. Israeli security forces have re-entered territory formally under Palestinian Authority (PA) control and deployed tanks and bulldozers to demolish at least a dozen houses in the Rafah area in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, making whole families homeless. This came less than 24 hours after the demolition of a similar number of houses in a refugee camp in East Jerusalem made scores of people homeless.

Also last week, a vigilante group of Israeli settlers from the 400-strong Zionist enclave in the city of Hebron in the West Bank killed three Palestinians, including a baby. Violence continued over the weekend when Israeli soldiers killed a Palestinian in a gun battle in the Gaza Strip. There were further sporadic outbreaks of shooting and explosions in both the West Bank and Gaza.

Earlier this week, security forces assassinated a senior member of Hamas in the West Bank town of Nablus. The attack was the latest instance of Israel’s policy of assassinating those it claims are engaged in “terrorism,” a term Israel routinely uses to describe the actions of anyone resisting its occupation and suppression of the Palestinians in the territories captured in 1967.

Israel has not only targeted Hamas but also Arafat’s own supporters. Security forces arrested Enis Mahmoud Namoura, one of Yasser Arafat’s bodyguards and a lieutenant in one of

the Palestinian security forces, claiming that he was an expert bomb-maker who had denoted devices using cellular phones.

Following the June 1 suicide bombing at a disco in Tel Aviv that killed 19 young Israelis, the Sharon government claims to be acting “with restraint”. However, since the subsequent CIA-brokered cease-fire of June 13, Israeli security forces have killed more than 60 people, including 11 children, and injured more than 200. They have demolished more than 160 homes and shops, leaving more than 500 Palestinian men, women and children homeless. This has taken place while Israel has imposed widespread curfews and tightly closed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip, meaning that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are unable to travel, either to work or to obtain basic requirements such as healthcare.

The Israeli security cabinet has approved a plan costing an estimated \$477 million to deploy patrols, dogs and electronic sensors to effectively imprison all Palestinians within the areas under PA control and prevent them from crossing into Israel. According to the cabinet, the plan “entails stepped up actions to foil infiltration and prevent people from staying in Israel illegally. These actions will include increased operational activity and vigorous enforcement efforts in the seam line area, with an emphasis on dealing with infiltrators and employers, as well as people in Israel illegally and Israelis who provide lodging for them.”

Israeli Defence Force Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz welcomed the plan, describing the Palestinian Authority as a “terrorist entity” and that many of the PA’s security branches were participating in “terrorist activities”.

Prime Minister Sharon has been confronted with increasingly vocal demands for all-out war from the more fascistic layers of Zionist settlers within the Occupied Territories and his own Likud party. Last week, the self-styled Rabbinical Council of the Occupied Territories said it was overturning a religious ban on visits by Jews to the Temple Mount. It called on Israelis to join a mass visit to the Wailing Wall on the Temple Mount on the July 29 Jewish religious holy day. It was last September’s provocative visit by Sharon to the Temple Mount, a shared holy site for Jews and Muslims, which sparked the popular uprising of the Palestinians, the *intifada*.

A further provocation came last Friday, when the rightwing

Zo Artzaeinu group placed an advertisement signed by the group's leader and three colleagues in the *Makor Rishon* newspaper calling on anyone who has the opportunity, to murder the Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Sharon undoubtedly agrees with the aims of the settlers, but must seek to placate the fears of the US and European powers regarding the regional implications of a further escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Last week, Washington put US troops in the Arabian Peninsula on heightened alert, and both the US and European leaders at the G8 summit in Genoa called for international observers to go to Israel-Palestine.

It is for this reason that Sharon finds himself in the unusual position of coming under attack from the right. He faced sharp criticism during a raucous Likud Party conference earlier in the week, with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a possible challenger to Sharon, calling for stronger military action to end the conflict. "Restraint causes more escalation", Netanyahu said. Sharon faced constant heckling and interruptions throughout his televised speech. He said when he came to power, he had two choices: war with the Palestinians (which prompted cheers from the audience) or "a policy of active defence," military strikes at terrorist suspects and the securing of roads through Israeli-controlled territory. He spoke of his plan to react decisively to each incident in turn, rather than leading Israel into a conflict that could threaten regional stability.

The Labour Party has sought to justify its entry into coalition with Likud, on the grounds that it can act as a "moderating influence" on Sharon. In recent weeks, Labour has emerged as the most vocal defenders of the war criminal Sharon. Responding to right wing criticism that the government had been too restrained in dealing with the Palestinians, Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh (Labour Party) boasted that the success the Israeli Defence Forces had enjoyed in fighting "terror" over the previous three weeks had no parallel anywhere in the world. The government's policy of "intercepting terrorists"—rightfully regarded as state-ordered assassinations in other countries—"is the right way to fight terror, and is not a policy of restraint".

Foreign Secretary Shimon Peres, the 77-year-old veteran Labour leader, has played the key role in deflecting criticism and legitimising the Sharon government. In doing so he is inexorably paving the way for war. When the Israeli Defence Forces sent reinforcements into the occupied territories, Peres issued a statement saying, "We do not intend to re-conquer the territories."

Arafat's own authority is being undermined by the continued Israeli attacks, and the demands he police the Palestinians, stop the resistance to the 34 year Israeli occupation, and arrest suspected terrorists, and threatens to lead to civil war among the Palestinians.

The leadership of the *intifada*, made up of 14 Palestinian factions including Arafat's own organisation Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, has issued a statement vowing to target "every

soldier and settler" in revenge for the killing of the five Hamas men last week, and proclaiming the end of the cease-fire declared by Arafat.

Last Monday, violent clashes broke out in the Gaza Strip between Palestinian police and demonstrators protesting outside the home of military intelligence chief Moussa Arafat. About 20 of the demonstrators, including members of Fatah and Hamas, fired shots at Moussa's house as about a thousand people, many of them supporters of the Hamas-dominated Popular Resistance Movement (PRM) protested against the arrests of eight of their members by PA security forces. It appears that at Israel's insistence, Arafat had sought to dismantle the PRM Committees established to fight the Israeli occupation. The previous day, Palestinian police had shot and wounded three members of the PRM at a Palestinian checkpoint. The PRM called on Palestinians not to accept the Palestinian Authority crackdown and accused the PA of collaborating with Israel.

But popular antipathy towards the PA and Arafat goes much deeper than opposition to the CIA brokered cease-fire. The incident undoubtedly reflects the widespread opposition to Arafat's role as Israel's proxy policeman of the Palestinians.

Autonomy and ultimately independence were expected to alleviate the wretched living conditions of the Palestinian masses. Instead, only a handful of businessmen and bureaucrats around Arafat have prospered, while the majority of Palestinians face increasing impoverishment. More than 30 percent of Palestinians now live below the poverty line. More than 45 percent of the total population are living in squalid refugee camps and shantytowns, without access to clean running water or sanitation. The border closures, curfews and blockades imposed by Israel ten months ago have brought the economy to a halt, food has become scarce and many are now close to starvation. Rather than being the first step on the road to liberation, the Palestinian Authority more resembles a massive prison camp.



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