

Sharon makes clear his expansionist policies for Israel

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Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is intent on crushing any remaining hope of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, short of total surrender to his expansionist drive for a "Greater Israel", the traditional policy of his Likud party.

Sharon has just completed a two-day visit to Germany and France, seeking to secure backing for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. He received a fairly warm welcome from Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder because Germany is seeking to challenge the US as Israel's favoured trading and investment partner and supplier of military hardware. In France, however, which has long-established diplomatic relations with the Arab regimes, Sharon was given a cold reception. President Jacques Chirac warned Sharon not to weaken the position of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, saying that this would be "counter-productive", while a march in Paris of around 1,000 protesters chanted "Sharon, assassin!" and called for him to be tried for war crimes. Sharon did not visit the European Union's headquarters in Belgium, because of a Belgian judicial investigation into possible war crime charges over his role as defence minister in the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut by Israel's allies in the Lebanese Christian militia.

It is only the necessity of fending off international criticism of Israeli repression in the West Bank and Gaza strip that has so far prevented Sharon from pronouncing the latest truce organised by CIA Director George Tenet as having failed. In reality, Sharon is steering Israel towards a full-scale military offensive against the Palestinians.

As Sharon arrived in Berlin, a fierce battle raged in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, with at least 20 houses damaged by Israeli tank fire. The same day, a Palestinian was killed in the West Bank city of Ramallah, during a clash with Israeli soldiers. In a further punitive action in response to the killing of a Jewish settler woman near Jenin last week, Israeli soldiers demolished 30 Palestinian shops in the town.

Sharon's "kitchen cabinet" accepted the Tenet cease-fire three weeks ago on the basis that they had nothing to lose. The arrangement, drawn up by Israel's main sponsors and

protectors, placed the entire onus for ending violence onto the shoulders of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. Any action Arafat failed to stem could then be used by Israel to proclaim that its own efforts to resolve the situation peacefully had failed and that no possibility was left outside of a full-scale military operation against the Palestinians.

In the meantime, Israel has done everything in its power to make sure the cease-fire collapses. Despite an intense round of diplomatic activity that has drawn in US President George W Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, "All the indications are that [the cease-fire] will not hold", said UN Middle East envoy Terje Roed Larsen.

Sharon has refused point blank to negotiate with the Palestinians before they end, unconditionally and unilaterally, their resistance to Israel's brutal occupation. Israel has insisted that the agreed seven-day "test period" before the ceasefire could be declared effective would not start until there was "total quiet". Moreover, any violence during the subsequent six-week cooling off period would set the clock "back to the beginning of the six weeks" time frame. It has now been three weeks since the Tenet cease-fire was formally accepted, though more than 25 people, mainly Palestinians, have been killed since then. In an indication of how hostile Likud is to a cease-fire, whereas the Palestinians have urged Israel to accept that the "seven day test period" is over, the Israeli government has said it has not even begun!

Israel has also maintained the blockade in the occupied territories, completely encircling the major Palestinian towns of Nablus, Hebron and Tulkram. It has given the Jewish settlers a free rein to exact their own revenge, setting up outposts near Palestinian villages and burning crops. On June 25, a full-scale battle broke out at Hebron, where 400 settlers live in a military enclave within the town. Aside from Jerusalem, there are an estimated 200,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza that occupy some of the best land and consume most of the area's water supply.

The proposals for a peace settlement outlined in the report

by former US Senator George Mitchell's committee included a recommendation for freezing construction of Zionist settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. But Sharon has ruled out any removal of settlements and announced that 700 new homes in the West Bank would be built in addition to the 6,000 already under construction. He submitted a formal request for \$500 million to the Israeli parliament to meet the cost.

While Israel routinely talks about the Palestinians' rejection last year of its supposedly generous offer to return 90 percent of the occupied territories, it never explains, and neither does the Mitchell committee, how it arrives at this figure. Greater Jerusalem, whose boundaries have been extended to include new Jewish suburbs in what was East Jerusalem, constitutes 30 percent and the very heart of the West Bank. It is left out of the equation. So too are the Jewish settlements that make up a further 15 percent, and the military roads that connect them, cutting off Palestinian towns and villages from each other and making what remains entirely unviable.

Sharon has made it quite clear in a number of statements that his government intends to continue Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. On a recent cabinet visit to the area, Sharon declared "The Jordan Valley will remain forever under Israeli sovereignty". Just so that his meaning was entirely clear, he added, "When I talk about the valley, I don't just mean a narrow strip but the eastern security strip whose western border is the ridge of hills west of the Allon Road". This effectively means that Sharon has no intention of giving up any of the West Bank.

Sharon has backed this up with a major air assault on Syrian positions in Lebanon. On June 29, Hezbollah guerrillas shot and wounded two Israeli soldiers in the Shaaba farms. This is a tiny area that Israel did not give back to Lebanon when it pulled out last year, claiming that it was part of Syria and that Israel needed it to help protect the Golan Heights, which it had seized from Syria in 1967.

Israel responded by sending in war planes with laser-guided bombs to strike at Syrian positions in Lebanon. This is the second time Sharon has attacked Syrian positions since becoming prime minister. A Hezbollah attack in mid-April that killed one Israeli soldier led to Israeli air raids against a Syrian radar station in the Bekaa valley. Israel responded to a May 14 Hezbollah assault on its army positions with a heavy artillery attack, while Israeli Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Moshe Yaalon warned of a possible war between Israel and Syria.

Israeli aggression has also been constantly stepped up against the Palestinians. On Saturday June 30, two Palestinians were shot dead in the West Bank. On Sunday July 1, Israel launched a helicopter missile attack on a car

that it claimed was carrying members of the Islamic Jihad movement, killing three.

The militant groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas responded by announcing that the Tenet cease-fire was null and void. On Monday, the Israeli army killed a Palestinian taxi-driver on the West Bank, whom it said was suspected of planting explosives by the roadside. The parcel contained groceries.

The most provocative action to date came on the very eve of Sharon's visit to Europe. The Israeli security cabinet was called into session in order to give the army greater licence to carry out targeted assassinations of Palestinian activists. To attend, Israeli Army chief General Shaul Mofaz even cut short a visit to the US, where he was holding talks with Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. After the meeting, Sharon likened Arafat to America's most wanted figure Osama bin Laden, and warned that his government was holding on to the option of launching "an all-out attack" on the Palestinian Authority should the need arise. He asked rhetorically, "Would anyone in the world debate with bin Laden... Arafat is our bin Laden."

The security cabinet decision was immediately criticised by the US, Europe and the United Nations, who fear that Sharon's recklessness in pursuit of the expansion of the Zionist state threatens to increase the violence, draw neighbouring countries into the conflict and destabilise the entire Middle East.

But the next day, Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, a Labour Party *Knesset* (parliament) member, told Israeli Army Radio, "No one can prevent us". He went on to warn the Israeli public that they were heading towards "a long conflict" that would continue until the Palestinians recognised the futility of their struggle. The army has let it be known that 26 Palestinian militants are on a list to be killed and another 250 face arrest. So far the Palestinians accuse Israel of having assassinated about 40 activists since the *Intifada* erupted last September.



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