

US Vice President Cheney endorses Israel's assassination policy

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Last week, US Vice President Dick Cheney gave an extraordinary public endorsement to Israel's policy of assassinating Palestinian activists. He told Fox News on Thursday, "If you've got an organization that has plotted or is plotting some kind of suicide bomber attack, for example, and they [the Israelis] have hard evidence of who it is and where they're located, I think there's some justification in their trying to protect themselves by pre-empting."

Since the talks leading up to the Oslo Accord in 1993 under President Bill Clinton, the US has attempted to play down its traditional pro-Israeli stance, so that it can pose as an "honest broker" in seeking a political settlement to the Middle East conflict. Cheney's statement, therefore, was a major diplomatic blunder for the US, and embarrassed many of its key Arab allies in the Middle East on whom it relies to police the working class and oppressed masses, and secure its continued access to the region's oil reserves.

President George W. Bush was forced to defend his Middle East policy, in the face of calls from Egypt, Jordan and others for a firmer stance against Israel. During his month-long vacation in Texas this week, Bush told reporters that the onus was on "both sides to break the cycle of violence."

Cheney's remarks serve to expose the fact that US policy in the Middle East remains partisan towards Israel, and dedicated to securing a settlement that favours the Zionist state. But there are indications of certain divisions within the administration between the State Department and the White House concerning the degree to which the US must distance itself from the overt war mongering of the Likud-led government of Ariel Sharon in order to preserve its alliances with the Arab regimes.

The day before Cheney's interview, Secretary of State Colin Powell had phoned the Israeli prime minister to criticise Tuesday's attack on a Hamas office in the West

Bank city of Nablus. Israeli helicopter gunships had blasted the offices, killing three Hamas leaders, Jamal Mansour, Jamal Salim and Fahim Dawabshe along with five others, including two children. The bombing provoked angry demonstrations.

To date Israel has assassinated over 50 Palestinians in such targeted attacks.

The Bush administration was forced to launch a damage limitation operation, which focused on a denial of any split over US Middle East policy. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said that the Bush presidency "at all levels, deplores the violence there and that includes the targeted attacks". "It is the policy of the United States to oppose these killings. The vice president, the president, secretary of state, are all in unison about the need to stop the violence in Israel," Fleischer said.

Some have questioned whether the claim that Powell's more placatory position is for public consumption only, to appease America's Arab allies and critics in the Democratic Party and in Europe. Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, insisted "Cheney reflected analytical honesty, not the diplomatic posture." But divisions within the administration over the Middle East and other major foreign policy matters are real. Powell has expressed concern over the impact on US-European relations of an increasingly unilateralist and bellicose stance regarding the planned National Missile Defence, the Kyoto protocols on fossil fuel emissions, the Balkans, China and Korea.

Powell has been repeatedly contradicted by leading figures within the Bush camp. The most high profile instances involved Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld over China. When Powell spoke of improved relations with China during a recent trip to Beijing, Rumsfeld responded in an interview in which he blasted those who exhibited weakness toward China. Even before the latest

outburst by Cheney, the Bush administration was already feeling the need to emphasise its unity on foreign policy and downplay allegations of unilateralism.

At the end of July, Powell emphasised that the Republicans were “committed to alliances and international agreements.” He was joined by Rumsfeld, who added, “Colin Powell and I talk every day and meet several times a week, and I don’t know that there are differences between us.”

Whatever the extent of the internal tensions within the Bush administration, Cheney’s comments gave succour to Sharon’s Likud-Labour coalition at a time when Israel’s security operations have come under sharp criticism from several European countries. This week, Sharon called a special meeting to discuss ways of preventing Israel from losing what he termed the “propaganda war” against the Palestinians, during which leading Likud members complained of a “wave of anti-Semitism” sweeping Europe, in fact a reference to deepening criticisms within the European Union concerning the Israeli policy of “extra-judicial” killings.

In Tuesday’s *Jerusalem Post*, the retired head of Israeli military intelligence, Shlomo Gazit, warned that whereas he believed that a “focused elimination” policy against Palestinian militants was justified, it was damaging the nation’s image. “The use of heavy weapons—attack helicopters or tanks—against a single terrorist creates the image of an Israeli Goliath fighting a Palestinian David,” he said.

Under these circumstances, Cheney’s statement will be used by Sharon to support his efforts to step up Israel’s assassinations. In an interview with Italy’s *La Stampa*, Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Yasser Arafat said that the Israeli cabinet had approved a plan called “Oranin”, Hebrew for “inferno”, aimed at killing many leading Palestinians. Israel has denied this, but in his own interview with Fox television on Sunday, Sharon defended assassinations as a “defensive counter-terrorism measure”. He said that Israel had sent the Palestinians a list of “about 100 terrorists” it wants the PA to arrest. Sharon indicated that if this were not done, then Israel would continue to “exercise our right of self defense.”

On Monday August 6, Israel officially demanded the PA arrest seven alleged militants, and it must be assumed they are now on an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) hit list. The next day, the IDF announced that it was abandoning its supposed policy of “restraint,” in force since May, and would allow its soldiers to open fire on Palestinians without themselves first coming under attack. Sharon has

described this new policy as “active self-defense.”

One further point must be stressed regarding the far-reaching implications of Cheney’s statement. His apologia for state-sponsored assassination says more about the attitude of the US ruling elite to these methods than any number of official denunciations of such practices when carried out by others. In the first instance, Cheney only acknowledged publicly what the political establishment and its military and security apparatus discuss among themselves behind closed doors. Secondly, however, his justification for Israel’s actions echoes that employed openly by the US to sanction its own political crimes abroad.

The US has routinely asserted the right to target its opponents, whether individuals, organisations or entire peoples for the ultimate sanction. In April 1986, US fighter planes bombed the palace of Libya’s Colonel Gadhaffi, killing 15 civilians including one of his daughters. In August 1998, US planes bombed civilian targets in Sudan and Afghanistan, killing over 30 people and destroying Sudan’s only medical pharmaceutical facility. These criminal incidents were justified as a legitimate response to a terrorist threat, in a manner virtually identical to that employed by Israel regarding the Palestinians. The justification offered for the bombing of Baghdad and Belgrade during the wars against Iraq and Serbia, the labelling of entire nations as “rogue states” or “terrorist nations”, falls into the same category. The US political elite is not alone amongst the imperialist powers in this regard. Britain in particular gave its full support to each of these US actions; and MI6 whistle-blower David Shayler alleges the UK attempted its own assassination of Gadhaffi.



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