US foreign policy shift destabilises Israeli government

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This week's visit to London by Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat is the latest manifestation of a US-led drive to renew efforts to secure a negotiated settlement in the Middle East in order to maintain Arab support for Washington's war against Afghanistan.

To do so the Bush administration has carried out a political *volte-face* that has strained its previously supportive relations with Israel to breaking point. Indeed the very survival of Ariel Sharon's Likud-Labour coalition government has been placed in question.

There are many factors that have brought the US into conflict with the right-wing forces grouped around Sharon.

The Likud leader had thought that the US response to the September 11 attacks would dovetail with his own efforts to deal with the Palestinians militarily, proclaiming the suppression of the *intifada* to be the frontline of the international war against terrorism.

The basis of Sharon's calculations can be summarised as follows: a Republican administration with a powerful right wing lobby, which had been sharply critical of the efforts of the Clinton presidency to secure a Middle East settlement and had indicated its desire to utilise September 11 as a pretext to resume US efforts to bring down Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in Iraq, must look with favour on his own efforts to bury the 1993 Oslo Accords and establish some form of Greater Israel.

Sharon had good reason to make these assumptions. It is public knowledge that the Bush administration is split over whether or not to launch a war against Iraq. Key Pentagon figures such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and others have pushed for this almost from day one.

However, at least in the short term, Sharon had badly misread the situation. Those presently dictating the political agenda in Washington, whose most prominent spokesman is Secretary of State Colin Powell, believe that Israel's war drive against the Palestinians must not be allowed to ignite the simmering social tensions in the Middle East, already at boiling point due to the US war against Muslim Afghanistan. This would cut across America's number one priority of securing its own military hegemony over Central Asia, which contains vast and as yet untapped reserves of oil and gas, and would also threaten its already established domination over the Middle East.

Israel plays an important role for the US as a compliant regional military power, one that is dependent on the US for its continued existence. But Sharon was asking the US to endanger the survival of friendly Arab bourgeois regimes, which, as was demonstrated during the Gulf War in 1991, are just as vital to US interests in their role as policemen of the mass of Arab workers and peasants.

Sharon's desperate reaction has posed great dangers to the strategic interests of the US. For weeks he has been pushing hard to make a conflict with the Palestinians unavoidable, by constantly escalating the violence on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Sharon was forced by Washington to accept a negotiated truce on September 26, but since then more than 25 Palestinians have been killed in a series of military incursions by the Israeli Defence Force.

The Israeli foreign minister, Labour's Shimon Peres, is supportive of some form of negotiated settlement with the Palestinians and considers Sharon's willingness to court US anger extremely reckless. On October 1, Peres publicly accused senior army officers of plotting to kill Arafat. In an interview in leading Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronoth* he accused the deputy chief of staff, Major-General Moshe Yaalon, of wanting to physically eliminate Arafat. Peres warned that this would be contrary to Israel's interests. "Let's suppose we take him out, what will happen then? Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah will come instead. Arafat accepts Israel's existence. He wants to speak to us and wants to be accepted in the West. They will want to establish a single state between Iraq and the Mediterranean."

A foreign ministry official was also quoted making an extraordinary warning of a possible military coup: "One gets the feeling that the army can't live with a ceasefire and is not prepared to accept that control is in the political echelon's hands."

The extent of Sharon's miscalculations were confirmed by President Bush's statement that he recognised the right to a Palestinian state, and the leaking to the US media of plans attributed to Powell for a resumed Middle East peace initiative, including a renewed proposal of joint Israeli-Palestinian sovereignty over Jerusalem. This led Sharon to explode on October 4, accusing the US of "appeasement" and warning that Western democracies should not now "commit again the terrible mistake made in 1938 when European democracies sacrificed Czechoslovakia for a temporary solution".

Sharon's remarks were met with an angry rebuke in Washington, but on October 5 Israeli tanks and troops occupied the Palestinian neighbourhoods of Abu Sneinah and Wadi al-Harria, strategic positions in the divided West Bank city of Hebron, where some 400 Jewish settlers live under heavy guard surrounded by 130,000 Palestinians.

During the past week, senior US and British officials have given repeated, though qualified assurances that there are presently no plans for extending the war against terrorism to Iraq. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has toured the Middle East to discuss with the Arab states—although he was asked not to visit Saudi Arabia by the royal family because of their fears of a popular backlash. After he returned to Britain on October 11, and following discussions with Egypt's Hosni Mubarrak, Blair warned that the West was losing what he called

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the “propaganda battle” to Osama bin Laden. He stressed that restarting the Middle East peace process was crucial to defusing tensions with the Arab regimes.

This paved the way for Arafat to visit London on Monday October 15, and culminated in Blair’s statement that he was in agreement with establishing a Palestinian state and that the peace process must restart, “because that is the only way.” Arafat urged Israel to immediately resume negotiations.

The diplomatic initiatives launched by Washington and London in the Middle East have plunged Sharon’s government into what could prove to be a mortal crisis. On Monday, Israeli forces withdrew from Hebron following security talks with the Palestinian Authority. Israel was also reported to have agreed to the lifting of roadblocks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, to re-open border crossings with Egypt and Jordan and to resume gasoline supplies to the Palestinian Authority as a gesture of good will. The withdrawal could hardly be called a climbdown on Sharon’s part; and was at the most a minimal gesture in the face of US demands.

However, Sharon has made clear that he is still intent on maintaining his bellicose stance. On Sunday, the army shot dead an Islamic militant in the West Bank town of Qalqiliya. Abdel Rahman Hamad was accused of planning the suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv disco in June. Then on Monday, as Israeli troops withdrew from Hebron, Hamas activist Ahmed Marshoud was killed in the West Bank city of Nablus when a car bomb exploded as he walked past. Leading Sharon to declare, “This is not the first and not the last.”

Repeated criticisms of the US Middle East initiative have been made inside Israel. Dan Naveh, a Likud cabinet minister, told the media, “What I hear about what is being said by the American government these days is a program Israel cannot accept.” Sharon’s spokesman Ra’anan Gissin said that US ideas would “not have any immediate practical implication” and that Jerusalem “will not be re-divided.” Shimon Peres said more had to be done before talks could get under way. Tel Aviv even made a fresh criticism of Washington, with Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer accusing the US of ignoring the threat posed by Iran, in its efforts to rally Muslim support behind its anti-terrorism campaign. “We are talking about an extremist Islamic country, which for some reason does not get enough attention from the Americans at the moment,” he said.

None of this prevented an angry response to the withdrawal from Hebron by the most extreme right-wing forces on whom Sharon’s government rests. Some two-dozen Jewish settlers were arrested overnight during clashes with the withdrawing Israeli forces. Even more ominously, Army Chief of Staff General Shaul Mofaz publicly criticised the government’s decision, prompting a threat to fire him by Ben-Eliezer.

This was followed by the resignation from the coalition of the National Union and Yisrael Beitenu bloc, which controls seven seats in the *Knesset* (parliament). The two parties are based on ultra-Zionist settlers in the Occupied Territories, and are led by Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze-evi and National Infrastructure Minister Avigdor Lieberman respectively. Lieberman has repeatedly called for Sharon to send the army into Gaza, occupying the entire territory for 48-hours and destroy the Palestinian Authority, while Ze-evi’s party calls for the removal of all Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza.

Their departure cannot itself bring down Sharon’s coalition government, which has a majority of 76 in the 120-seat *Knesset*. But Sharon is now totally reliant on the support of the Labour Party. Sections of Labour may possibly consider it necessary and expedient to bring down Sharon, in order to champion more strenuously the agenda being demanded by Washington. In such circumstances, the reaction of the Zionist right and sections of the military cannot be predicted. Circumstances may of course also move in Sharon’s direction, particularly if the balance of power shifts within Washington. Sharon is reported to have made a number of attempts to bypass Powell and speak directly to Pentagon figures close to Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz.

In any event, the US is pinning its hopes for securing a negotiated peace on a regime that is bitterly divided over whether such a settlement can be reconciled with Israel’s own national interests. Moreover, Washington’s other potential partner, Arafat, is in no better position.

There is no reason to believe that there is mass support amongst the Palestinians for a resumption of negotiations with Sharon. Protests against the US bombing of Afghanistan are growing in size and intensity, and are taking on the character of protests against the Palestinian Authority itself. The *Christian Science Monitor* quoted leading Palestinian analyst Khalil Shikaki, the director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, warning, “This whole thing could collapse in a minute... Yasser Arafat is in a very fragile situation. The popularity of the Islamists is increasing. There is no sense yet of a viable political process. Every day that passes increases the fragility of Arafat’s situation.”

As Arafat was holding discussions with Blair, thousands of protestors took to the streets of Gaza in a funeral procession for 19-year-old Haitham Abu Shamaleh, who was killed on Saturday. He is one of three victims shot by Palestinian Authority police—two others were killed during an October 8 Hamas demonstration in support of Osama bin Laden. The funeral became the largest ever protest by Palestinians against Arafat, as the crowd chanted, “We tell all those corrupt members of the Palestinian Authority, your turn to be punished is approaching.”

Each day that passes confirms the reckless and incendiary character of the US drive for global hegemony. The Bush administration may be motivated by a desire to secure an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict in furtherance of its own strategic interests, but this is precisely why it cannot elaborate the framework for a lasting peace. The domination of the Middle East by imperialism and its political agencies in the Arab and Israeli bourgeoisie is incompatible with the development of genuine democracy and the utilisation of the region’s plentiful resources to meet the social needs of its peoples.

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