

US and Israel clash over West Bank incursions

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Tensions between the US and Israel have reached a new height, following Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's refusal to withdraw troops from Palestinian-controlled areas.

Israel has made its most far-reaching incursions into most of the major Palestinian-controlled conurbations on the West Bank—Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Kalkilya, Jenin, Nablus, and Ramallah. The Likud-led government has used the pretext of the assassination of far-right tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), to launch its latest assault on Palestinian Authority areas, killing over 25 people.

US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker issued a strongly worded statement, in which he insisted, "Israeli defense forces should be withdrawn immediately from all Palestinian-controlled areas and no further such incursions should be made. We deeply regret and deplore Israel Defense Force actions that have killed numerous Palestinian civilians over the weekend. The deaths of those innocent civilians under the circumstances reported in recent days are unacceptable."

The State Department urged, "Both sides have to step back and consider where their actions are leading. Failure on the part of the Palestinian Authority to confront terror in a decisive manner is absolutely unacceptable. Retaliatory actions by Israel cannot produce lasting security."

Sharon peremptorily rejected the US demand to withdraw, saying Israeli troops would only be pulled out if the Palestinian Authority (PA) handed over Ze'evi's killers and dismantled all terrorist groups. A statement from the prime minister's office said, "Israel does not plan to take control of [Palestinian-ruled] areas, but the murder of [Tourism] Minister Rehavam Ze'evi crossed a red line and Israel, like any democratic country, is fulfilling its right to self-defense."

The Israeli right has seized on Ze'evi's assassination to launch a military offensive they hope will end in the destruction of the Palestinian Authority. In the days following Ze'evi's death, Sharon was quoted in the *Yedioth Ahronoth* daily declaring, "We are in a new era. I have

finished with [PA president Yasser] Arafat, I intend to lead the government on another path."

Any attempt to crush the Palestinians militarily will set Sharon on a collision course with leading elements in the US administration, who fear this would provoke massive opposition throughout the Middle East and cut across the US drive to consolidate its domination over Central Asia through its war against Afghanistan.

Sharon therefore still feels compelled to conceal the full extent of his own ambitions, presenting the latest incursions as a limited policing operation. Secretary of State Colin Powell said this week that he had spoken with Sharon and "hopefully the Israelis will be able to leave the territory that they have occupied recently." Sharon had "said he did not plan to stay in those areas," Powell said.

Most players in the Middle East believe such assurances are a snow job.

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told the BBC: "We want to negotiate; we want to go back to the peace process, but Sharon's endgame at this particular time is to destroy it all. To destroy the peace process and destroy the Palestinian authority and that's what he is doing at this particular moment."

The Palestinian National Security Council has banned the armed wing of the PFLP, accusing it of providing Israel with a justification for its incursions into the West Bank. Arafat has met with envoys from the US, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. He appealed to the US consul general in Jerusalem, Ronald Schlicher, for President George W. Bush to insist on an Israeli withdrawal.

The far right believe that things are going its way. On Tuesday night, a large rally in Jerusalem of between 80,000-100,000 people, organised by the Zionist settlers, demanded the overthrow of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli press noted that what had been planned as a protest against Sharon's supposed concessions to the Palestinians became a pro-government solidarity meeting following the invasion of the West Bank.

At the rally, the opposition National Religious Party

(NRP) leader Yitzhak Levy called on Sharon to fire Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, a member of his main coalition partner, the Labour Party. Sharon is reported to be considering whether to bring the NRP into the government, alongside the extreme-right National Union-Yisrael Beiteinu bloc, of which Ze'evi was a leader and which has decided to stay in the coalition, after an earlier threat to quit. This would allow Sharon to hold onto his parliamentary majority, even if Labour left the government. The NRP would receive two cabinet seats, with Levy joining Avigdor Lieberman from Yisrael Beiteinu on the security cabinet.

At the moment, Labour is still playing a key role in government, but it is bitterly divided over the latest incursions.

Its two most high-profile figures, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, are central to Sharon's efforts to head off international criticism of his war drive against the Palestinians. Peres is presently engaged in high-level talks with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, US Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and may meet with Bush himself. His message is to reassure them that Israel does not intend to bring down the PA, while justifying Israel's ongoing military sorties. In a series of public statements, Peres said that Arafat did not follow through on promises to arrest terrorists, while insisting, "We are not fighting against a Palestinian state... And we are not conducting a personal war against Arafat."

He said he understood the US wanted Israel and the Palestinians to silence their guns in order to keep the support of Arab and Muslim states for the international coalition against terror, but, "The only way to do it is to deliver a serious message to Arafat that he has to do what he promised to do."

Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer has condemned the latest US statement for being "out of line". Likud ministers praised him, after he said that Arafat "has no God, no judge. He can't be trusted. He deals only with terror".

Both Labour's leading cabinet members have opposed threats by their party colleagues to resign from the government. But on October 22, the Labour Party coalition faction, with the exception of Knesset member Eli Ben-Menachem, decided to recommend leaving the coalition if the Israeli Defense Force does not withdraw from the West Bank. The party's general-secretary and minister without portfolio, Raanan Cohen, stated, "The Labour Party never gave its agreement to re-conquer the [West Bank] territories, and we will not be part of the national unity government at any price."

Former Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami warned that the party's very survival was under threat. "Labour is no longer

an alternative for a confused nation and a government that does not know its right from its left." Labour is on a "suicide course", he added and only leaving the government prevents the party from being sent to the "political trash heap".

A key element in the right-wing's political calculations is their belief that US opposition to the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians is far from being universal and can be reversed. The Israeli political and military elite are well aware that sections of the Bush administration, grouped around top Pentagon officials Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, are arguing for a US invasion of Iraq to oust the Ba'athist regime of Sadaam Hussein. These forces are sceptical, if not openly hostile towards Powell's emphasis on securing Arab support for the present campaign against Afghanistan. They view this as an obstacle to carrying forward US interests in both Central Asia and the Middle East.

In light of this, Peres has stressed that Israel can still win a sympathetic hearing in Washington, especially from forces outside the State Department. When asked directly by a reporter whether Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld had echoed the State Department's criticism of the Israeli incursions, Peres replied, "I didn't hear a world of criticism... I heard a good deal of understanding."

At the same time, Likud's Zalman Shoval was meeting with the senior director for Near East and South Asia Affairs on the National Security Council, Bruce Riedel, and Assistant Secretary of State William Burns. Following their meeting, Shoval said the US administration seemed to be "backing away" from the idea of presenting a final-status agreement for the creation of a Palestinian state. He concluded from this, "If somebody thinks that the Bush administration has completely changed its direction and has become super-Clinton, it's a mistake."

As one would expect, the most right wing sections of the US media are openly supportive of Sharon's drive against the Palestinians. Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* insisted on October 19, "Israel's war on terrorism does not conflict with America's aims against bin Laden and the Taliban. On the contrary, it underscores the right of all nations to defend themselves against terrorism."



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