

Sharon seeks destruction of Palestinian Authority

Chris Marsden
19 December 2001

With the declaration last week that Israel would no longer recognise Yasser Arafat, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has publicly refuted the 1993 Oslo Accords and the perspective of achieving a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

The Likud-led government, with the support of the far-right settler and ultra orthodox parties, has long sought a pretext to implement the military destruction of the Palestinian Authority and any organised political leadership and infrastructure for the Palestinian people. Israel ended all contact with Arafat on December 13, citing his alleged failure to deal with terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, following the previous day's bus bombing that killed 10 Israelis. "From our point of view, Arafat no longer exists. Period," Sharon told his security cabinet. A cabinet statement held Arafat "directly responsible" for the attacks, "and therefore is no longer relevant to Israel, and Israel will no longer have any connection with him." The next day, Israeli helicopters targeted Arafat's West Bank headquarters in Ramallah. Israeli military incursions and killings have since taken place throughout the West Bank and Gaza every day.

A week prior to the bus bombing and the issuing of the cabinet statement, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit had spoken on the phone with Sharon, who told him Israel wanted to be "rid of" Arafat. "It became very clear that Israel was inclined towards war," Ecevit said. Sharon told the *Bild* newspaper on Friday last week that Arafat was "history" and threatened a permanent deployment of Israeli forces in the Palestinian territories. He said that he was already negotiating with alternative local figures who might replace the Palestinian leader in what would amount to a coup to set up a client regime.

The entire course of Sharon's political career, and above all his actions since the start of the present conflict, have been aimed at provoking a decisive military confrontation with the Palestinians that would enable Israel's armed forces to retake control of the Occupied Territories they had first seized in the 1967 War. Sharon has spent over a year attempting to bury the Oslo process and prevent the formation of the Palestinian entity agreed by the Labour Party at Camp David last year. It was Sharon who provoked the present *Intifada*, with his September 28, 2000 visit, under heavy armed guard, to the Al Aqsa mosque/Temple Mount complex. At every major turning point since he came to power on February 6 this year, he has continued this policy of provocation. Sharon has deliberately fostered unrest and set out to destabilise the PA regime: ordering the assassination of Arafat's more radical or Islamic fundamentalist critics, bombing the West Bank and Gaza and sending tanks and troops into nominally Palestinian-controlled territory in at least nine major incursions.

To claim that Arafat is still seeking the destruction of Israel and is masterminding a terrorist offensive behind closed doors, as Sharon does, is patent nonsense. At Camp David, Arafat tied his political future to securing a political compromise with Israel that would lead to the creation of a truncated Palestinian entity in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

His efforts to preserve this compromise have largely discredited him amongst the Palestinian masses, leading to pitched battles against his police when they have tried to round up leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Even within the US, where the media is overwhelmingly pro-Zionist, some commentators have acknowledged that Sharon is the main instigator of the present conflict and that his aim is to destroy not just Arafat but the Palestinian Authority as a whole.

H.D.S. Greenway of the *Boston Globe* explained on December 10, "...When Sharon says that 'Arafat is guilty of everything that is happening here' and that 'Arafat is the greatest obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East,' he is speaking of his version of peace. It was Hamas that sent the suicide bombers, but it is Arafat, not Hamas, that stands in the way of Sharon's worldview. For only Arafat has the international standing and command of what is left of the Palestinian peace camp to stand as a negotiating partner. That helps explain why Sharon has been undermining the Palestinian Authority ever since he came to power. Get rid of Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, the reasoning goes, and you get rid of what is left of the dangerous Oslo process."

Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* drew a connection between Hamas and Sharon because both want to turn the clock back "a decade, before Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization agreed to recognize each other at Oslo... Sharon and those who egg him on want to lead Israelis into a new era of bloody struggle that will consolidate their control over far larger stretches of territory than could ever be obtained in a negotiated deal."

In Europe, criticism of the Sharon/US stance is more widespread. The BBC's correspondent in Jerusalem, Barbara Plett, stated that Israel's attacks "are clearly designed to systematically destroy the Palestinian Authority infrastructure". The *Guardian's* Suzanne Goldenberg wrote on December 15, "Underlying the Israeli raids is a long-term plan by the Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to weaken Mr Arafat to the point that Palestinians feel encouraged to rise up and end his rule. Then, Mr Sharon's argument goes, a leader will emerge who will be willing to make peace on Israel's terms."

Within the Bush administration, however, even the mildest criticism of Sharon has been abandoned, in favour of overt support for his latest offensive. Sharon's government has clearly been emboldened by this US backing, to the point where Public Security Minister Uzi Landau declared, "Now we are standing before a golden opportunity—a window of opportunity that must not be missed—to strike at the [Palestinian] infrastructure of terrorism, to its very foundations."

Sharon saw the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center and Bush's declaration of a "war on terrorism" as an opportunity to solicit support for his own efforts to crush the Palestinians militarily. Initially, Sharon met with opposition from within the Bush administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell, in particular, was concerned that

Sharon's bellicose stance would undermine Washington's efforts to secure a broad agreement amongst the Arab regimes to support the US offensive against Afghanistan. The military successes against the Taliban regime, however, have strengthened the more hawkish and pro-Israeli elements grouped around Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, who view Israel as the most dependable US ally in the Middle East and one that must be cultivated, particularly under conditions where there are plans for military action against Iraq.

A December 17 article in the *Guardian* bemoaned the growing control of foreign policy by "the Washington hawks", citing the views of "Doug Feith at the Pentagon, and Frank Gaffney, his former colleague at the Center for Security Policy (CSP)."

Gaffney wrote on the CSP website: "The so-called Middle East *peace process*, which began with secret Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Oslo, has materially contributed to the present, catastrophic situation... Successive concessions made in the name of advancing the *peace process* by both Labour and Likud-led governments of Israel have not appeased demands for further concessions, only whetted Arab appetites for more."

During Arafat's speech to mark Eid al-Fitr on Sunday, the Islamic celebration coming at the end of the holy month of Ramadan, he once again called for an end to terrorist killings, "especially the suicide attacks that we condemn always". He also urged a resumption of peace talks and pledged his belief in the right of the state of Israel to exist. In the past few days he has shut down 14 Hamas and Islamic Jihad offices in the West Bank and arrested an estimated 180 militants. This time, Powell responded extremely negatively. Recalling US Middle East envoy Anthony Zinni back to Washington, Powell told the media that terrorist attacks by the Palestinians had "blown up" America's peace initiative. He openly defended Israeli reprisals that have killed more than 60 Palestinians—in comparison with the 40 Israelis killed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad—insisting that Sharon "has a responsibility to defend the people of Israel".

Powell has spent the past week co-ordinating efforts to ensure the isolation of Arafat by placing maximum pressure on the European powers and the Arab regimes. A US official said that Powell had urged the European Union (EU) not to invite Arafat for talks, but to "hold his feet to the fire" instead. The US has also used its veto in the United Nations Security Council to block a resolution calling for international monitors to be sent to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was the second US veto this year against a resolution proposing the sending of an observer force.

The European Union also issued a statement insisting that Arafat "dismantle" Hamas and Islamic Jihad and issue a public appeal in Arabic for an end to the *Intifada* against Israel, but there are clear tensions between the US and Europe over the blank cheque Washington has handed Sharon. Unlike Washington, the EU urged Israel to stop assassinating Palestinian militants, withdraw its tanks from Palestinian cities, and insisted Sharon should not destroy the Palestinian Authority, which was an "indispensable partner for peace". European envoys have continued to pursue contact with Arafat, the French and Russian envoys visiting his Ramallah headquarters last weekend, followed by an EU delegation this week.

French President Jacques Chirac criticised Israel for attempting to destroy "what subsists of the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo accords." It was France that proposed the UN resolution on sending observers, which condemned all acts of terror but which US ambassador to the UN, John Negroponte, accused of being one-sided and an attempt to "isolate politically" Israel by throwing "the weight of the Council behind the PA".

There is no reason to believe, however, that the European powers will continue to support Arafat in order to oppose US ambitions in the Middle East region. They too may look to some other element within the PA as a counterweight to both Israel and the US. On December 18, the *Guardian*, which just days earlier had been defending Arafat, called on him to stand

down voluntarily, "before he is pushed" and to make way "for a stronger, less compromised leader who is a fit match for Mr Sharon and his ruthless kind."

Arafat's personal fate is bound up with the failure of the political perspective of bourgeois nationalism.

It was following the defeat suffered by the Arab armies in the Six-Day War in 1967 that Arafat's Fateh faction took the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). It advanced the perspective of armed resistance to the Israeli military and independence from the various Arab bourgeois states that had either used the Palestinians as a pawn in their own designs or had made their peace with Israel.

But the PLO subordinated the struggle for the national and democratic rights of the Palestinians to a pro-capitalist perspective that accepted the existence of the Arab regimes and the system of states founded inside the boundaries drawn up by the region's former colonial rulers. It therefore rejected any genuine revolutionary mobilisation of the oppressed masses of the region. As such it could never make a genuine appeal for the unity of the Palestinian and Israeli working class against their common oppressors.

The PLO's perspective of "armed struggle" was dependent on Soviet backing, but in return the Stalinist bureaucracy insisted that Arafat did not challenge the Arab regimes that were friendly to Moscow and opposed any manifestation of political independence within the Arab working class and oppressed masses.

Once the Kremlin bureaucracy under Gorbachev began its push to restore capitalism in the USSR and seek a final rapprochement with the US, Arafat's perspective lay in tatters. Having lost the possibility of Soviet backing, he was to lose the support of the Arab regimes, which virtually unanimously lined up behind the US during the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991.

Arafat then trod the same path, offering himself and a future Palestinian regime as a loyal client of Washington. As early as 1988, he had opened formal talks with the Reagan administration. The precondition for the setting up of a Palestinian entity was his delivery of a statement dictated by the US State Department, in which Arafat agreed to guarantee the security of Israel and renounce "all forms of terrorism."

Thirteen years later, Arafat's hopes of securing US patronage have been dashed. Meanwhile, the Palestinian people live in utter squalor on the most inhospitable parts in the West Bank and Gaza, suffering levels of poverty worse than they had faced in 1988. After the killing of almost a thousand Palestinians at the hands of Israel since last September, they now face the very real prospect of a pogrom being launched by Sharon, one worse than those he presided over at the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps in 1982, and for which he was indicted for war crimes.

The Islamic fundamentalist opponents of Arafat offer no genuine alternative. Behind their religious obscurantism, they too advance a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective, and are politically in thrall to Iran or one or more of the Arab bourgeois regimes. Only the construction of an independent party of the working class, pledged to the unification of the Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle for the Socialist United States of the Middle East, offers a way forward.



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