

Israel targets Arafat's headquarters

US gives green light for war against Palestinian Authority

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On Monday night, after six hours of heated deliberations, Israel's security cabinet designated the Palestinian Authority a terror-supporting entity that "must be dealt with accordingly." A cabinet statement also declared the Tanzim militia and PA Chairman Yasser Arafat's elite Force 17 personal protection unit as terrorist organisations. The statement went on to declare, "the Ministerial Committee for National Security is authorised to decide on operational steps (military, diplomatic, information and economic)".

Labour ministers walked out before the vote on the resolution was taken. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres accused the government of attempting to "destroy the Palestinian Authority".

Within hours Israel fired three missiles just 50 yards from Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's office, while he was working inside. Arafat was not injured, but elsewhere on the Gaza strip, a rocket attack killed two people and injured more than 100, many of them schoolchildren. Three Force 17 buildings, two in the Gaza Strip and one in the West Bank, were among eight security installations also hit by Israeli missiles.

Israel's actions make clear that the security cabinet declaration paves the way for a major military escalation against the Palestinian regime. Moreover, given Prime Minister Sharon's insistence that Arafat is personally masterminding a terrorist conspiracy against Israel, there is a clear possibility that he will be targeted for assassination. It was only as a concession to Labour Party ministers within the coalition government that Arafat was not specifically named within the cabinet statement.

The pretext for the designation of the PA as a terror-supporting entity was provided by last weekend's three suicide bombings that killed 25 and injured hundreds more. But Arafat and the PA bear no responsibility for the terror attacks, which were claimed by both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and were most likely the work of the former in retaliation for Israel's assassination of one of its leaders. The PA condemned the bombings and arrested over 130 Islamic militants, including some of Hamas' top political leaders. But Sharon's government dismissed these measures as window dressing.

Sharon was fully aware that the killing of the Hamas leader, along with a stepping up of Israeli repression last week, was likely to elicit the response it did. Similar suicide bombings followed the Israeli assassination of a Hamas leader in 1996. Once again Sharon

has carried out a provocation in order to further his strategic aim of militarily destroying the PA. The Israeli cabinet met after Sharon gave a televised address in which he made repeated comparisons between Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and the US "battle against world terror". He implied that the PA was the enemy of the Jewish state and that Arafat was personally responsible for "everything happening here". He warned, "Those who rise up against us to kill us are responsible for their own destruction."

Labor and Social Affairs Minister Shlomo Benizri urged Sharon to declare war on Arafat and the PA and was supported by a number of other ministers. Prior to the meeting, the education minister, Limor Livnat, told Israeli television. "We should make a strategic decision as the Americans did. It is not enough to eliminate a terrorism leader; they are doing everything to topple the terror regime. We, too, will have to topple the terror regime."

The green light for Sharon's actions was given by the Bush administration. In contrast to several European powers, including France and Belgium, the White House has rejected any efforts to restrain Israel. Spokesman Ari Fleischer stated, "Israel is a sovereign power," which "has a right to defend itself." His stance echoes that taken earlier by President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Prior to the cabinet meeting, Sharon, who was already in the US, met with Bush. Whereas the Bush administration has in the past demanded that Israeli forces not invade Palestinian-controlled territory, this time statements were supportive of whatever retaliation Sharon decided to take in response to the suicide bombings.

In an ultimatum similar to the one made to the Taliban regime prior to the US bombing campaign, Bush told reporters, "Chairman Arafat must do everything in his power to find those who murdered innocent Israelis and bring them to justice." When a Sharon aide was asked whether Bush had applied any pressure to refrain from retaliation, he insisted, "There wasn't even the slightest disagreement... The US knows we have to wage a battle against terrorism."

For months now, there has been an open conflict between the State Department and Pentagon hardliners, who have been pushing for a resumption of military action against Iraq and opposing Powell's emphasis on maintaining the support of the Arab regimes for the military assertion of US interests in Central Asia. The

hawks within the Bush administration have also become increasingly impatient with efforts to secure a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians as a price for maintaining Arab support. It seems that this stance is winning the day on Capitol Hill.

Powell was cautious in his formulations, stating, “We’re not about to tell Mr. Sharon what he should do,” but warning at the same time, “we’ve always said to both sides, ‘You better think about the consequences of what happens the next day or the day after.’” But Rumsfeld, speaking on NBC’s “Meet the Press”, levelled his fire directly against Arafat. When asked if Arafat was a terrorist, he replied, “If one looks historically, he has been involved in terrorist activities. We all know that.”

In a high-profile supportive move on Tuesday, the Bush administration froze the assets of the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, the Al Aqsa International Bank and the investment group Beit El-Mal Holding Company, which it accused of financing Hamas. The decision links Israel’s actions with the US war against terrorism, as Sharon has demanded. Bush went on TV to tell reporters, “Those who do business with terrorists will do no business with the United States.”

The reckless policy being pursued by the Sharon government and its US backers is preparing the way for a catastrophe of terrible proportions, in which the lives of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Arabs and Israelis are endangered.

The terror bombings carried out last weekend were appalling acts that killed innocent civilians, Jewish and Arab alike, and included many children. In carrying them out, Hamas has once again played directly into the hands of the war mongers within the Zionist political and military elite. But it is wrong to simply attribute terrorism to the actions of a handful of either politically misguided or evil men, as has now become routine practice. Rather, the roots of terrorism must be sought in definite political and social relations—in the despair, indignation and anger produced by Israel’s brutal subjugation of the Palestinians and the failure of bourgeois nationalism to offer a viable means of securing the democratic, social and national rights of the Palestinian people.

Ever since the Oslo Accords of 1993 promised to grant limited recognition to the Palestinians, every effort to secure a negotiated settlement has broken down due to the eruption of right-wing opposition within Israel. The Zionist regime has repeatedly insisted that Arafat assume direct responsibility for the repression of the Palestinian people, in return for the right to govern a truncated and unviable entity on parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip that remains militarily and economically dependent on Israel.

Every demand made on Arafat, together with Israel’s refusal to endorse concessions on such questions as making East Jerusalem the Palestinian capital and allowing refugees the right of return, has served to destroy what remains of his political legitimacy amongst the Palestinian masses and strengthen his fundamentalist opponents. Sharon came to power following his provocative visit to Temple Mount/Al Aqsa in September last year and the killing of protesters, which ignited the present Palestinian uprising and was to lead to the downfall of Ehud Barak’s One Nation coalition. Sharon’s intention from the start was to bury the Oslo Accords, reassert Israeli control over the Occupied Territories and destroy

the Palestinian people as a political entity.

Last September 7, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an article which noted that Sharon’s policy of “targeted killings”, which was supported by the US, was designed to “track down and kill its leading political opponents among the Palestinians” and thereby destroy “the political infrastructure of the Palestinian national movement”.

The article explained that ever since the collapse of the Camp David negotiations, “the Israeli state has pursued a course of military aggression and provocation calculated to arouse Palestinian retaliation, which is then used as the pretext for assassinations and further attacks on the Palestinian Authority. Barak essentially gave his backing to this policy when he defended Sharon’s instigative visit to the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem in late September of 2000.”

We concluded, “By such means Israel seeks to render impossible any organised and politically directed struggle against its occupation of Palestinian lands... In this manner Israel seeks to disperse and ultimately wipe out the leaders of all anti-Zionist organisations in the occupied territories and throughout the Arab world. The message from the Israeli authorities is clear: no one will survive who does not secure the approval of the Israeli state.”

Up until now, Israel’s policy of assassinations has had as its aim the isolation of Arafat from the more militant elements within the Palestinian national movement. There are still those within the Israeli and US establishment who are arguing for this course of action—to place maximum pressure on Arafat to suppress those advocating an armed struggle against Israel. However, there are others making increasingly vocal demands for the targetting of Arafat precisely in order to escalate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to justify a military invasion of the West Bank and Gaza.



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