

Israel steps up assault on Palestinian Authority

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Military reprisals by the Israeli government over the last few days mark a clear escalation of its war against the Palestinian Authority (PA). Tanks and armoured vehicles encircled Yasser Arafat's West Bank headquarters in Ramallah, moving to within 30 metres of his office. Israeli troops backed by tanks and bulldozers entered the *Voice of Palestine* radio station, where they used explosives to blow it up.

The previous day, F16 fighter jets fired missiles at a Palestinian police station in the town of Tulkarem, razing it to the ground. This followed a military blockade of several other West Bank towns, including Qalqilya, Jenin, and Nablus. Ramallah was already surrounded by troops following the Israeli decision six weeks ago to keep Arafat under virtual house arrest.

Official Israeli propaganda says the reprisals are aimed at giving the PA "a lesson it will never forget." Justification for the latest onslaught was said to be the attack made by a Palestinian gunman on a Jewish coming-of-age party in Hadera, in which six people were killed. The gunman was a member of the al-Aqsa Brigade, a militia associated with Arafat's Fatah organization. Al-Aqsa put out a statement afterwards saying the terror attack was to avenge the death of one of its leaders, Raed al-Karmi, killed by Israeli forces earlier last week.

There is an unmistakable pattern to the series of events: the assassination of a Palestinian leader by Israel provokes a revenge terror attack, which is then followed by massive military reprisals by Israeli forces.

Given the level of anger and frustration within the young Palestinian population, the murder of al-Karmi was calculated to produce a tragic response like that witnessed at Hadera. As *BBC* reporter Rachel Harvey pointed out, Israel's military action was then a "carefully choreographed operation."

Al-Karmi's murder was only the latest of a series of political assassinations carried out by Israeli security forces, following Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's declared intention to destroy or demobilize all Palestinian leaders opposed to Israeli rule. The government denied it had carried out the assassination, however the *New York Times* quoted a senior political official who "acknowledged that Israel had had a role in the death."

A report in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported security forces saying they would "continue the retaliatory military

actions it initiated this weekend" and that "targets connected to the Palestinian Authority and Fatah will be the focus of these operations". Apart from al-Karmi, "other leaders of the movement should know that their lives were in danger."

The killing of al-Karmi came after three weeks in which no Israeli citizen was killed in political attacks, following Arafat's call for a ceasefire and a clampdown on militants of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Arafat has attempted to suppress the *intifada*, the uprising of Palestinian youth that began in September 2000 following the collapse of the Camp David Israeli-Palestinian summit and the provocative visit of Sharon to the Al Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In November last year, the killing of Hamas leader Mahmoud Abu Hanoud preceded suicide terror bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa in which 25 Israeli civilians were killed. Such bombings are thoroughly reactionary and do not advance the cause of Palestinian liberation in any way. Moreover, they play directly into the hands of the Zionist leaders. They are a function of the level of despair brought about not only by the intense oppression of the Palestinian population at the hands of Israel but the dead end of nationalist politics. That members of al-Aqsa, rather than the fundamentalist religious groups are now taking such action reflects the impasse that Arafat's leadership has reached in attempting to get US and Western backing for a negotiated settlement.

Whilst Washington still claims to be committed to the Middle East "peace process", the US has increasingly given the green light to Sharon, who stated last month that "Arafat no longer exists" and that the Israeli government would have no further dealings with him.

As in December, when the Israeli government responded to terror attacks with military repression in Palestinian towns and airforce bombing of PA offices and police stations, the US has not criticised the Sharon regime's most recent actions. US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker backed up Israeli claims that Arafat was personally responsible for the outbreak of violence, and called on him to "take immediate action against those responsible for these acts and confront the infrastructure that perpetuates terror and violence."

Last week, during a meeting with PA officials in Ramallah,

Arafat ordered the arrest of Ahmed Saadat, leader of the PFLP. Israel alleges that Saadat is responsible for the assassination of Israeli cabinet minister Rahavam Zeevi in October. The PFLP called the arrest a “very dangerous development” and its deputy leader claimed it would put the PA in “full confrontation with all the national and Islamic factions without exception.” According to the British *Guardian* newspaper, as Arafat’s office was encircled by Israeli tanks, about 4,000 Palestinians demonstrated against the Israeli aggression but also for the release of Saadat and other militants. They chanted “Palestinian Authority, traitors, release the political prisoners.”

Despite Arafat’s clamp down, a US spokesman claimed “there has been no response” from the PLO leader to American demands that he “make a 100 percent effort to reduce violence”. For this reason, Washington declined to send US mediator Anthony Zinni back to the region to attempt to negotiate a further cease-fire.

As the *Economist* magazine explained in a January 18 article, Sharon’s actions are aimed at making clear there will be no end to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—a message that it is conveying by “military assault, economic deprivation and political implosion from within and the slow attritional destruction of Mr. Arafat and his Palestinian Authority.”

Renewed Israeli aggression has not met with support in Europe, however, where there is growing fear that instability and war could spread throughout the Middle East. Visiting the region last week on behalf of the European Union, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique called for “new ways to revive the peace process.” He told the Arabic newspaper *Al-Hayat*, “Israel’s actions could not be justified in any way.”

Earlier this month, Israeli commandos seized a ship—the *Karine A* —that was carrying 50 tonnes of weapons. Israel claimed that the shipment had originated in Iran and was on its way to the PA with Arafat’s personal knowledge. Despite Israel’s vast military machinery, which is employed routinely against Palestinians, the PA is not allowed to import anything more than light arms for its police force. Sharon described the *Karine A* as a “ship of terror” and claimed that Arafat had only ordered the latest ceasefire to buy time for the PA to import arms to tip the military balance in its favour. Whilst having some propaganda impact in Israel, experts have pointed out many inconsistencies in the story. One obvious problem is to explain why the Iranian government should send such a ship through waters continually searched by dozens of US naval vessels searching for terrorists fleeing Afghanistan.

There are mounting suspicions that the *Karine A* incident was set-up by Israel in an attempt to convince US authorities that the PA and Iran should be regarded as the next enemies in the “war against terrorism,” after al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The alleged arms shipment, together with the killing of four Israeli soldiers by Hamas in the south of Gaza, were used by the Israeli government to justify stepping up security operations even before the assassination of al-Karmi.

On January 10, the Israeli army demolished houses in the Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, just over the border from Egypt. It claimed that the houses were empty and were being used to smuggle arms from Egypt. A new “security zone” has now been carved out along the border.

According to a *BBC* report, Colonel Shlomo Dagan, the Israeli army officer in charge of the operation, said “The IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] must raze all the houses within a strip of 300-400m in width. No matter what the future agreement [with the Palestinians] would be, this will be our border with Egypt. Arafat must be punished; after each incident, another two or three rows of houses must be razed.”

An investigation by Israeli human rights group *B’Tselem* found that 60 houses had been completely demolished in the operation. They were occupied by a total of 112 families, numbering 614 people, who have now been made homeless.

The stepping up of Israeli military oppression, backed by the US, puts all out war against the Palestinians increasingly on the agenda. Feeble protests from Sharon’s Labour Party coalition partners have virtually disappeared as Labour lurches further to the right. The party appointed Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, the Defense Minister in Sharon’s cabinet, as its new chairman in December. Ben-Eliezer fully supports the policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders and the blockade of West Bank towns. He echoed Sharon in saying Arafat’s “historical role is over. He failed to take the strategic decision to stop the violence.”



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