

International concern over US support for Israeli war drive

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The statement last week by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that he regretted not having killed Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon two decades ago can only be interpreted as a declaration of intent to remedy his mistake. Why does Sharon, the ageing war criminal, now feel at liberty to speak so openly about regrets that he would once have shared only with his most trusted political and military allies?

The answer is that Sharon believes he now enjoys the tacit support of the Bush administration for his plans to militarily crush the Palestinian Authority.

Speaking recently to the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, Sharon complained, "In Lebanon, there was an agreement not to liquidate Yasser Arafat... In principle, I'm sorry that we didn't liquidate him." In 1982 the then Defence Minister Sharon entered Beirut and expelled the Palestine Liberation Organisation from the country.

Arafat has already been placed under siege in his Ramallah headquarters and is continually referred to by Sharon as the head of a terrorist regime. His *Maariv* interview coincided with the Israeli government announcing a plan to seal off Jerusalem from the West Bank, including the setting up of lookout towers, electronic cameras, trenches and further military checkpoints. The plan, called "Enveloping Jerusalem", effectively asserts Jewish control over the entire city by cordoning it off from what Sharon's Public Security Minister, Uzi Landau, called "the Arab congestion" around it.

Fearing that Israel is intent on launching a final all-out military offensive against the Palestinian Authority, the European powers immediately condemned Sharon's statements. Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique said of Sharon's remarks, "I deplore them and of course they deserve our rejection." In contrast, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher limited himself to the anaemic statement that such remarks "can be unhelpful"—a comment repeated later by Bush.

Sharon will take such statements with a pinch of salt. Differences may remain between Washington and Tel Aviv over whether there is still political mileage to be gained in continuing to threaten Arafat into doing what he is told, or whether to replace him altogether. But less than a day before Sharon decided to speak so openly to a *Maariv* reporter, Bush delivered his January 29 State of the Union speech in which he made clear that the US is moving inexorably towards war in the Middle East.

The most likely target for American military aggression is Iraq. However, Bush's speech lumped Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime together with Iran and North Korea as constituting an "axis of evil" and asserted that they support terrorism and possess so-called "weapons of mass destruction". It is this which accounts for the major shift that has taken place in the policy of the Bush administration towards Arafat—from earlier pledges of support for the creation of a Palestinian state—to descriptions of the Palestinian Authority leader as a virtual terrorist.

At the start of the US war against Afghanistan, voices led by Secretary of State Colin Powell urged caution regarding the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict in order to secure the participation of the Arab regimes in Bush's "coalition against terror".

As the bombing in Afghanistan winds down, however, the most bellicose elements in Washington have become drunk with success. Vice President Dick Cheney, with the support of the Pentagon, appears to be pushing hard behind the scenes for overt support for a military reckoning by Israel with the Palestinian Authority as an essential component of America's own war-drive in the Middle East. Three of the four groups Bush named as being part of a terrorist network, Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad, are Palestinian opponents of Israel.

Sharon has been seeking to convince the Bush presidency that it should abandon the efforts that began under the Oslo Accord in 1993 to secure a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. Sharon hopes to gain US support for his plans to destroy the Palestinian Authority and either expel the Palestinians en-masse or round them up into tiny, heavily fortified ghettos.

Under the Sharon government Oslo is already dead in the water. Israel has consolidated control of the most valuable and fertile parts of the West Bank and Gaza strip. Every day Zionist settlements are constructed or expanded and Palestinian housing and agriculture is destroyed.

The Israeli prime minister clearly hopes that the US's own military ambitions in the Middle East will give him carte-blanche to continue and escalate these policies. He has been given every reason for holding this view.

At the beginning of the year, Arafat had to some degree succeeded in enforcing a cease-fire amongst the various forces that make up the Palestinian Authority regime, even amongst his Islamic fundamentalist opponents. Sharon's government set out to wreck this fragile peace through a series of military incursions and other provocations. Then on January 3 an Israeli commando raid took place on an Iranian-owned freighter, the *Karine A*, that conveniently discovered an arsenal of weapons, which Israel says was going to be used in attacks against Israeli civilians.

Not only did the Bush administration reject Arafat's profession of ignorance of the *Karine A*'s cargo. It sent out US intelligence reports to Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, President Mubarak of Egypt, King Abdullah II of Jordan and other Arab leaders supposedly proving that the weapons had been supplied by Iran, through Hezbollah, but were in reality intended for the Palestinian Authority.

Bush publicly intimated his belief that Arafat was lying when he claimed ignorance, stating, "Ordering up weapons that were intercepted on a boat headed for that part of the world is not part of fighting terror, that's enhancing terror." He organised a meeting of foreign policy advisers to consider imposing punitive actions against the Palestinian Authority, possibly including severing ties with Arafat and naming his Fatah movement and its Tanzim militia as terrorist organisations. Anonymous US officials were cited by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* as saying that there "are not many people left in Washington who aren't fed

up with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, with his lies, and his inaction... the situation is only worsening and could escalate into something much worse."

Vice President Cheney gave an interview to *Fox News* in which he condemned Arafat for conspiring with Iran. He described Iran as "a state that supports and promotes terrorism, that's dedicated to ending the peace process". When asked by presenter Tony Snow, "Are you afraid right now that Iran is now in cahoots with the Palestinian Authority?" Cheney replied, "I am". When asked whether Arafat had been involved in a terrorist mission, he replied, "That's correct... he clearly was a terrorist in the past and was so identified by the United States government."

To cap it all, the man who is supposed to act as US peace envoy to the Middle East, Anthony Zinni, told American Jewish leaders that the Palestinian Authority could be compared to New York's Gambini Mafia family, with Arafat the "capo di tutti capi". Zinni added that he was totally opposed to the right of return to Israel for Palestinian refugees, because it would lead to the elimination of the State of Israel and rejected the Palestinian idea for a foreign observer force in the territories.

These public statements prompted one Israeli diplomat to declare, "It's almost as if the [Bush] administration has accepted the Israeli way of seeing Arafat. So the question now is, how does that affect policy?"

With Washington apparently set on pursuing a strategic offensive with the aim of transforming the entire Middle East into a virtual US military fiefdom, it seems that all previous restraints on Israel are being cast aside. The message being sent to Arafat is a blunt ultimatum. Either brutally suppress all opposition to the Israeli occupation—including the arrest of thousands of political activists—or be prepared to face an assassin's bullet.

America's stance regarding its Arab allies is no less threatening.

Saudi Arabia numbers amongst the most servile pro-imperialist regimes in the Middle East. For this reason its leading spokesmen have felt compelled to warn Bush that his support for Israel, as well as his threats against Iraq and Iran, are threatening to blow apart the social and political fabric of the region.

Saudi Arabia's director of intelligence, Prince Nawwaf bin Abdul Aziz, warned that any US action to weaken Arafat would destroy any prospect of a peace settlement and have serious repercussions for the kingdom.

He warned the US that the vast majority of young Saudi adults already felt considerable sympathy for the cause of Osama bin Laden, if not for his terrorist methods, largely because of America's unflinching support for Israel. "All the governments, the people of the region, believe that America is supporting Israel whether it is right or wrong, and now if something happens to Yasser Arafat, the feeling against American policy will be stronger," he said. "Anybody will be able to use it to damage American interests in the area. You will put Saudi Arabia in a very bad position, because feelings about the Middle East problem are very strong."

Nawwaf also cautioned against a military campaign against Iraq, which he insisted, "will only give Saddam more credit." Even if Hussein was overthrown, he continued, America would only succeed in splitting Iraq into three parts—a Shiite Muslim run government in the south, a Kurdish run government in the north and a Sunni Muslim run government in the centre—which would further destabilise the region.

He concluded, with obvious exasperation, "Some days you say you want to attack Iraq, some days Somalia, some days Lebanon, some days Syria. Who do you want to attack? All the Arab world? And you want us to support that? It's impossible. It's impossible." He was forced to deny reports that Saudi Arabia was seeking a withdrawal of the large US military presence stationed at the Prince Sultan air base.

Saudi Arabia's de-facto leader, Crown Prince Abdullah, followed up by giving an extended interview to the *Washington Post*, warning of the dangers posed by US support for Sharon. He insisted that he spoke as a loyal friend of the US, but, "In the current environment, we find it very

difficult to defend America, and so we keep our silence. Because, to be very frank with you, how can we defend America?"

The Bush administration's response to the political difficulties of the Saudi dynasty and its friendly warnings was openly hostile. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said that Abdullah's comments reflected a fundamental disagreement over policy and, "The president does think it's constructive for other nations to take a message to Chairman Arafat that he needs to do more to combat terror."

On February 1, Bush met with Jordan's King Abdullah II who had apparently been mandated to express the concerns of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab regimes during a 90-minute, early morning meeting at the Oval Office. Bush said that the US did not plan to sever contacts with Arafat, but insisted that the Palestinian leader take "concrete steps" to deal with terrorism.

As well as placing the Arab rulers in a politically impossible position, the Bush administration's stance has angered the European powers. Europe has a strategic interest in ensuring the stability of the Middle East—on which they, unlike America, rely for oil supplies and where European corporations have massive investments.

The European Union has taken the highly unusual step of publicly distancing itself from Washington on Middle East policy. The EU foreign ministers, meeting in Brussels on January 28, declared, "Israel needs the Palestinian Authority and its elected president, Yasser Arafat, as a partner to negotiate with, both in order to eradicate terrorism and to work towards peace. Their capacity to fight terrorism must not be weakened."

The EU's director of foreign policy and security, Javier Solana, told the media that he had advised Powell on January 30 not to sever relations with Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. The EU, he insisted, considers the Palestinian Authority the continuing "interlocutor, the only interlocutor, elected by the people, and we would like to maintain that."

Sweden's Foreign Minister, Anna Lindh, went further, publicly criticising the US for rewarding the violence employed by the Sharon government against the Palestinian *Intifada*, prompting an official complaint by Israel.

The extent of international concern over US policy was such that it dominated the World Economic Forum meeting in Manhattan on February 3.

Jordan's Abdullah II insisted in an open session, "Our objective is and must be a just resolution to the central conflict that has put the brake on progress in the Middle East, and has spread extremism throughout the world."

Turkish Foreign Minister, Ismail Cem, expressed his concern over what he called the development of "a process of mutual suicide" between Israel and the Palestinians.

Solana insisted that the international community "get engaged rapidly" and "in an intense manner." Hubert Védrine, the French Foreign Minister said, "If we want the responsible Palestinian authorities to commit themselves fully to the fight against terrorism, which is also their enemy, they must be given a political space, political oxygen, a political perspective. If you say we won't resume the peace process until terrorism is defeated, the terrorists will be the winners."



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