

Israeli military lays siege to Arafat's headquarters

WSWS Editorial Board
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The editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the brutal attack by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people and their political leadership. The full responsibility for the continued bloodshed in the Middle East rests with the regime headed by Ariel Sharon and its backers in the Bush administration.

Ever since Sharon's infamous trip to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in September 2000, he has pursued a policy of violence and provocation against the Palestinian people, with the expected result that there have been acts of retaliation for decades of repression, humiliation and denial of their most basic democratic and national rights.

The Zionist regime is responsible for numerous war crimes against the Palestinian people, from the 35-year-long illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, to the deliberate assassinations to destroy the political infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority, to the general campaign of violence and terror.

On Friday morning the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) attacked Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's compound in what is expected to be first phase of a full-scale military siege of Palestinian territories. In a pre-dawn raid in the West Bank city of Ramallah, two dozen IDF tanks and armored vehicles smashed through the walls of Arafat's compound, which stretches over a city block and contains several Palestinian Authority (PA) buildings. The tanks shelled the intelligence headquarters, severely damaging it, and troops stormed into a facility adjacent to Arafat's headquarters. By the afternoon, Israeli tanks deployed near the entrance of the compound moved within yards of Arafat's building and opened fire on it with shells and machine guns, Arafat's aides said.

As we post this article Arafat and two of his aides are reportedly in an office on a lower floor of the building, after his security guards engaged in fierce room-to-room gun battles with IDF forces, which left at least five Palestinian defenders dead and 25 wounded. Two tanks were stationed at the bottom of the stairs, one of the aides said. Electricity and phone lines have also been cut, but Palestinian officials have access to cellular phones, said Arafat aide Yasser Abbed Rabbo.

Describing the scene at the compound, Arafat told CNN by phone that he was under "complete siege." "They have

destroyed completely seven of our buildings. Completely around my office and firing (at) my office with all their armaments," Arafat said.

Rabbo added, "Israeli snipers are on the roofs of all the buildings around Arafat's office, and they are shooting at anyone who dares to move in the compound. Israeli tanks are at Arafat's door, and they are not allowing anyone in or out."

Although the IDF has repeatedly hit buildings in the compound where Arafat has been confined since the Israeli government imposed a travel ban on him last December, this is the first time Arafat's office was directly targeted. Despite Israeli government assurances that no physical harm will come to Arafat, there is little doubt Sharon and his top aides are currently debating whether to kill the Palestinian leader. Just last week the *New York Times* reported that Sharon expressed regret for the pledge he made to the Bush administration not to assassinate Arafat.

"[Arafat's] life is in danger and he is facing, with his freedom fighters, this Israeli aggression, which should be stopped immediately," said Arafat spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh. Arafat, who was on the phone with Arab leaders and US Middle East Envoy Anthony Zinni in an effort to pressure the Israeli government to pull back, told an *Al Jazeera* interviewer, "They either want to kill me, or capture me, or expel me, but I tell them I'd rather be martyred."

When asked by the CNN interviewer if he would rein in terrorism, as US officials were demanding, Arafat said the Palestinians were currently suffering from "the terrorist activities of the Israeli occupation." He said the focus should be on "the problem of our people, of our liberty, of our independent Palestinian state."

Arafat told Abu Dhabi television the assault on his compound was aimed at scuttling the Saudi peace proposal, adopted Thursday by Arab League delegates in Beirut. "This is the Israeli response to any peace attempt. Because they don't want peace, they don't want peace," he said. The invasion came hours after Arafat declared the Palestinians were ready to implement a US cease-fire plan "without any conditions," dropping the demand to link a cease-fire agreement to negotiations to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The military incursion was widely anticipated after Sharon blamed Arafat for the March 27 suicide bombing that killed 22 Israelis in the northern resort town of Netanya. The Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack, which was denounced by Arafat and other PA officials. Throughout Thursday Palestinians on the West Bank hoarded food and other supplies in anticipation of a massive Israeli attack. Earlier this month, Sharon sent 20,000 troops into towns, villages and refugee camps in the occupied territories, in the largest operation since the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

Gun battles were reported elsewhere in Ramallah—a city of 120,000—as troops and tanks took up positions and rounded up as many as 70 Palestinian men, according to IDF spokesmen. One woman was reported killed in her car in the city. Israeli tanks also entered Nablus and Gaza, where the military divided the area into three segments in order to block transit from north to south. In Jerusalem, Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa mosque—one of the Islam’s holiest sites—using stun grenades to disperse stone-throwing Muslim worshippers.

The attack was launched after an all-night emergency session of Sharon and his cabinet. Following the meeting, Sharon declared Friday, “Arafat has established a coalition of terrorism against Israel. He is the enemy and he will be isolated at this stage. Israeli forces are now in Arafat’s headquarters ...and they will pursue the Palestinian Authority in all its territory.” Sharon announced the army was mobilizing 20,000 reservists for an “extended operation against Palestinian terrorism.” This was not the “reoccupation” of the Palestinian territories, he declared, but “a long, complicated war” that “knows no borders.”

Benjamin Ben Eliezer, the minister of defense, declared Ramallah the “capital of terror” and said the military operation would continue elsewhere. “Nobody is immune to the armed forces as long as that person is labeled a ‘terrorist,’” he declared. The army was ordered to “strike everywhere” and destroy as much “terrorist infrastructure” as possible, an Israeli official said, adding, “restraint is dead.” Gideon Ezra, Israel’s deputy minister of internal security, said he believed that the country should set up detention camps for Palestinians caught with illegal or improper papers. Those people, he said, are potential terrorists.

US officials gave Sharon the green light to launch the invasion and remained silent as tanks rolled into Ramallah and other West Bank and Gaza cities. For hours the Bush administration withheld any comment on the Israeli invasion, with a State Department representative saying, “We are monitoring events very closely and are assessing appropriate responses to events in the region.”

While the US was maintaining an official silence the Israeli government was virtually wrapping itself in the American flag, presenting its assault on Ramallah and Arafat as though it were an extension of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Israeli spokesmen made the politically monstrous assertion that Arafat

was no different than Osama bin Laden. Such comparisons are an attempt in advance to prepare public opinion, particularly in Israel and America, for the murder of Arafat and other top leaders of the Palestinian Authority.

Later on Friday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who acknowledged having been in contact with Sharon while the Israeli cabinet prepared to launch military action, blamed Palestinian terrorism for the crisis. Echoing remarks made by Bush two days earlier, Powell said, “The United States condemns these acts and those responsible for them,” and called on Arafat—who by then was surrounded by Israeli tanks—to clamp down on terrorists. While claiming the Bush administration was “gravely concerned” by Israeli actions in Ramallah, Powell said the US understands the need of Israel to protect itself after a string of terror attacks.

Such remarks drip with hypocrisy and cynicism. The Israeli state, headed by someone who is considered by millions throughout the world to be a war criminal, has mobilized its enormous military machine, equipped with the most advanced US weaponry. Powell justifies this while denouncing as “terrorism” acts of resistance that are the product of decades of colonial-style oppression. Only the debased American media could uncritically repeat such outrageous claims.

The Sharon government—and the ultra-right settler elements upon which it rests—has repeatedly voiced opposition to any negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, and has pressed for all-out war. Earlier this week Sharon denounced the Saudi peace plan, telling the *Yediot Ahronot* newspaper, “A return to the 1967 borders will destroy Israel. The entire world is talking about the Saudi plan; everyone enthusiastically recommends endorsing it, and the one that no one asks is Israel. No one!”

For their part, the Arab bourgeoisie hoped the Saudi plan, approved this week at the Arab League summit in Beirut, might provide a framework for closer relations with the US and Israel itself. The Israeli military aggression, coupled with US threats against Iraq, however, threaten to destabilize the entire Middle East and undermine the area’s dictatorial and monarchist regimes. Within hours of the Israeli invasion protests erupted throughout several Arab countries. Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan burned tires to protest the Israeli assault, while in Cairo worshippers demonstrated against Israel and in support of the Palestinians after Friday prayers at the central al-Azhar mosque.



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