

Sharon's bloody offensive plunges Israel into turmoil

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9 March 2002

Israel has been dragged to the brink of disaster, after more than a week in which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has ratcheted up the military offensive aimed at destroying the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Friday March 8 saw the worst day of violence in the past seventeen months of conflict, as the army raided Palestinian towns and refugee camps killing around 40 people. Tanks prevented ambulances from coming to the aid of the injured and dying. There have been 108 Palestinians and 36 Israelis killed in the past seven days, as the Israeli Defence Force has made almost constant incursions into the refugee camps.

Sharon's aim, as so often in the past, has been to provoke retaliatory action by the Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Hamas, and whip up anti-Palestinian xenophobia, in order to counter demands for some form of negotiated settlement. This time, however, his plans appear to have backfired. Terror attacks against Israelis have indeed escalated, but the impact has not been what Sharon expected. International criticism of the Israeli government has never been greater—with even the United States being forced to censure his government. Domestic reaction has also become polarised to an unprecedented degree threatening the survival of the Likud-Labour coalition government.

As far as the European powers are concerned, Sharon has for some time been viewed as a political liability. They fear the radicalising impact of over a thousand Palestinian deaths on the Arab masses in the Middle East and have urged a return to negotiations.

Sharon's latest escalation of the conflict was his response to a proposal by Saudi Arabia to exchange Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories for Arab recognition of Israel. The Saudi regime depends on its supposed role as defender of the Islamic faith in order to mask its pro-imperialist role and has always expressed verbal intransigence towards Israel. But it has faced growing opposition from its own subjects for being too pro-American and threats from the US for not doing enough to clamp down on fundamentalist groups. The royal family has made known its belief that it could not survive a wave of popular anger should the US wage war on Iraq while it is supporting Israel's slaughter of the Palestinians. Therefore the Saudis took the unusual step of spearheading what was to all

intents and purposes a combined Arab peace proposal. Israel would not have to accept a Palestinian political and administrative presence in Jerusalem, or dismantle all Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza.

The Arab regimes calculated that if Sharon refused to consider such an offer, then he would be cast in his correct guise as the villain of the piece by proving that his real aim was to permanently annex the Occupied Territories.

The move was immediately backed by European Union foreign policy supremo Javier Solana and Russia. With his back to the wall, Sharon upped the ante. The first incursion into the refugee camps came just hours after Saudi Arabia presented its new peace initiative at the United Nations. Sharon proclaimed a policy of applying "continuous military pressure" on the PA regime, insisting, "Only after they are beaten will we be able to hold talks... The Palestinian Authority will not fight terror because they are the terror."

The only succour offered to Sharon came from Washington, with State Department spokesman Richard Boucher stating that the Bush administration respected Israel's right to defend itself, while appealing for "every effort" to be made "to avoid harm to civilians." The same day, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer blamed former President Clinton for the current violence in the Middle East, because he had raised expectations "to such a high level that it turned to violence."

As the death toll has mounted, the US pro-Sharon position has become untenable. First Secretary of State Colin Powell called on Sharon to "take a hard look at his policies... don't think declaring war on Palestinians will work." Then Bush announced that his Middle East envoy, Anthony Zinni, would visit Israel next week—abandoning Washington's previous insistence on an end to armed resistance by the Palestinians before the resumption of peace negotiations.

Domestically, Sharon now faces mounting opposition from the left and the right.

Within Likud Binyamin Netanyahu is stepping up his hitherto abortive leadership challenge by claiming that Sharon has made too many concessions to the "peace camp". Likud Minister Dani Naveh, who represents the Netanyahu camp, said the government had to take a decision "to put an end to Arafat's regime."

This position is echoed in the right wing media, a typical example being the February 27 op-ed piece by Daniel Pipes in the *Jerusalem Post* insisting, “Victory consists of imposing one’s will on the enemy... History teaches that what appears to be endless carnage does come to an end when one side gives up. It appears increasingly likely that the Palestinians are approaching that point, suggesting that if Israel persists in its present policies it will get closer to victory.”

The fascistic settler parties are clamouring for war. Reserve Brigadier general Effie Eitam, a potential future leader of the religious nationalist right, told Israel Radio that if the government did not take a decision to destroy the PA, “we will bring a war upon ourselves.... More force, and more force—as much force as we have” was needed.

Criticism of Sharon on the grounds of his having failed to act decisively finds no small degree of popular support. There are reports of growing numbers of Israelis applying for private gun licenses. But another hitherto inarticulate or suppressed sentiment is also coming to the fore. For the first time since Sharon came to power, he is facing widespread opposition from broad sections of the Israeli population who are demanding an end to the conflict.

Many people are now prepared to challenge Sharon’s transparent provocations. Adam Keller, a spokesman for the Peace Block movement told a *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent, “During Ariel Sharon’s year in power, whenever a peace initiative dared rear its head, the government and the army were quick with a major bloody provocation—which never failed to precipitate an also bloody retribution from the Palestinians side, which entailed a new revenge and then a new cycle of revenge upon revenge upon revenge, until the peace initiative is drowned in blood and forgotten.”

Keller added, “This week the Saudi Crown Prince suggested having the whole Arab world recognise Israel in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. Sharon responded by sending two full infantry brigades, plus numerous tanks and helicopter gunships, to invade and occupy two refugee camps, killing more than 20 ‘armed militants’ in two days and wounding several hundred more... Many of the dead and wounded turned out, on closer examination, to be unarmed civilians, among them children and aged civilians.”

The initial focus of the growing opposition to Sharon’s war has been provided by the protest by more than 300 reserve soldiers who have signed a petition first launched on January 25 saying they will not take part in “missions of oppression” within the Occupied Territories. Polls show extraordinary levels of support—between 15 and 33 percent—for an action that has been denounced as treasonous.

Opposition to Sharon is highly confused and presently is not politically distinguished from the positions being advanced by section of the Israeli ruling class and supported by the European Union and others. Many newspapers and even layers

of the military have warned that Sharon has gone too far and is in danger of unleashing forces that may yet destroy the state of Israel. Some have called on the government to resign. Nevertheless there is a pronounced class-based element to the present movement, which began as a rank-and-file rebellion against the official pro-war policies of Labour and the capitulation to xenophobia of much of the old peace movement.

Sharon has only been able to pursue his aggressive militaristic agenda because of the political disorientation created in the working class by the failure of the previous One Nation Labour-led coalition to deliver on its popular mandate for peace. Instead of opposing Sharon, Labour joined his coalition and took up key positions such as Shimon Peres becoming foreign minister and party leader Binyamin Ben-Eliezer as defence minister.

Even the opposition within Labour, led by Yossi Beilin who is in favour of pulling out of the coalition, and the liberals of Meretz and Peace Now are far to the right of popular sentiment. At a recent pro-peace demonstration attended by 15,000-20,000 people, neither Beilin nor Meretz leader Yossi Sarid would take a stand in defence of the reservists’ protest.

Fear of a sharp political polarisation within Israel is another key concern motivating the European powers in pressing for the United States to end its support for Sharon.

Labour has so far refused to heed calls for it to leave the government, but this is being argued for strenuously by sections of the Israeli and European media. The liberal *Haaretz* called the partnership “shameful”, while the *Financial Times* of London argued, “A Labour return to opposition would allow it to regroup and offer a more convincing alternative vision for ending the conflict. Opinion polls suggest that Israelis are confused. They need to examine carefully the option of negotiations. Many Israelis back harsher measures against Palestinians while also reacting positively to any peace initiative. Unless Labour rebuilds its own approach, the alternative to Mr Sharon will be Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister with equally hardline views. A stronger leftist opposition could have the added benefit of influencing Washington.”

The *Financial Times* stresses only the danger of a further lurch to the right, but the discrediting of Labour as a viable alternative to Likud and the Zionist right opens the way for a major political realignment within Israel on the left involving a unified offensive against war by Jewish and Arab workers.



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