

Israel: US seeks to curb Sharon to further war drive against Iraq

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The partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Palestinian towns of Ramallah and other West Bank areas is a temporary manoeuvre that has been forced on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon by the exigencies of US foreign policy.

The days since March 12 have witnessed the biggest military offensive by Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the two areas were seized in the 1967 war. Fully 20,000 troops—almost every Israeli combat fighter, and many reservists—and over 150 tanks were involved in the invasion of Ramallah, the main commercial and political centre in the West Bank, just north of Jerusalem.

Scores of Palestinians were killed, including Abu Fadi, deputy commander in Ramallah for Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat's Force 17 elite guard, as well as Italian photographer Raffaele Ciriello, who was shot six times in the chest. Male Palestinians were rounded up, blindfolded and handcuffed while they were searched and interrogated. Arafat, along with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, accused the army of "Nazi" tactics, after soldiers wrote numbers on detainees' arms.

Sharon's aim was to inflict maximum damage to the Palestinians prior to the March 15 arrival of US envoy Anthony Zinni. The US gave the green light for Israel's 17-month offensive against the Palestinians and has been the most steadfast backer of Sharon, occasionally voicing a mild rebuke of his worst excesses but constantly blaming Arafat for not bringing armed resistance to an end. But Sharon's constantly escalating offensive against the Palestinians has now become a significant obstacle to the Bush administration's priority of securing the support of the Arab regimes for a renewed war against Iraq.

Vice President Dick Cheney is touring nine Arab regimes, plus Turkey and Israel, to demand the region's key powers line up behind the US. But at every turn, the Arab rulers have made clear the difficulty of doing so, given America's role as Sharon's backer in a conflict that has claimed over a 1,060 Palestinian lives, as well as around 350 Israeli dead.

In Jordan on March 12, King Abdullah urged Cheney to focus on ending 17 months of Israeli-Palestinian fighting and warned him against attacking Iraq. At Sharm El-Sheikh, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt said of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "None of us can tolerate the continuation of that situation."

In response, maximum pressure has been placed on Sharon to retreat at least temporarily from his present full-scale war on the Palestinian Authority.

President Bush gave a press conference in which he rebuked Sharon by saying, "It's not helpful what the Israelis have recently done, in order to create conditions for peace." He complained of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "This is an issue that's consuming a lot of the time of my administration." Sharon has insisted that he is justified in attacking the Palestinians because it is in tune with America's supposed "war against terror". In response, however, Bush declared that "while I understand the linkage" US policy in the Middle East has to "stand on its own."

In short, Bush was making clear that US support was conditional on what benefits its own strategic interests and Sharon was in no position to dictate the agenda.

To back this stand up, the US moved a resolution to the United Nations Security Council that for the first time called for a Palestinian state alongside Israel. It was also the first resolution introduced by the US since fighting erupted in September 2000. Fourteen out of 15 members of the Security Council backed the resolution, with Syria abstaining. It also demanded the "immediate cessation of all acts of violence, including terror, provocation, incitement and destruction" and urged Israel and the Palestinians to take steps towards resuming peace talks.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged Israel to stop "the bombing of civilian areas, the assassinations, the unnecessary use of lethal force, the demolitions and the daily humiliation of ordinary Palestinians."

In Egypt Cheney emphasised America's role as Middle East peacemaker and said Israel as much as the Palestinians bore responsibility for stopping the violence. "I think the burden is on both parties to bring an end to the violence," he insisted. A senior US official on the mission added, "There shouldn't be any doubt in anybody's mind about our strong support for Israel, (but) there is a point where we need now to bring the current violence to an end."

As a further inducement to Sharon to toe the new US line, the Bush administration blocked a request from Israel for \$800 million in additional aid beyond its usual \$3 billion in annual assistance. One congressional aid told Reuters, "It's not going to happen. OMB (the White House Office of Management and Budget) nixed it."

Sharon's coalition partners in the Labour Party took their cue from Washington and began to pressure for a withdrawal from Ramallah. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told the media, "Zinni will not succeed if we do not help him."

Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer immediately became embroiled in a bitter row with Sharon after the Labour Party leader unilaterally decided to call off air strikes by F-16 warplanes and block plans to take-over Arafat's office and central Ramallah. During a cabinet meeting, Sharon accused Ben-Eliezer of "acting against the opinion of the security cabinet." When Ben-Eliezer threatened to resign from the government, Sharon exploded: "Don't threaten me. If you want to leave the government, leave. Let's take a vote, we'll see who's right, who's responsible for taking the decisions, you or me." He insisted that Israel must inflict more casualties ostensibly to force the Palestinians back into negotiations.

In the end both parties issued a joint statement insisting that the IDF would continue its operations, but within 24 hours Sharon had been forced to change his tune. Sharon, Peres and Eliezer took the decision to abandon the previous insistence on seven days quiet before talks could be resumed, to relax restrictions on Arafat's movement within the PA and to withdraw troops from the most sensitive areas without consultation with the rest of the cabinet.

The campaign to pressurise Sharon paid political dividends for the US, in that it smoothed the way for Mubarak to make more supportive noises regarding the planned offensive against Iraq. Egypt would push Saddam Hussein to accept international arms inspectors as "a must" he said. When asked directly if Saddam should be toppled if he did not admit the inspectors, Mubarak replied, "If there is nothing happening, we'll find out what could be done in that direction."

The manoeuvres within Washington reek of the worst form of political cynicism. The Bush administration is seeking to recast itself once again as an impartial arbiter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, only in order to pave the way for a genocidal attack levelled against the Iraqi people that will far exceed the present bloodshed in the Occupied Territories. As the Pulitzer prize winning journalist Serge Schmemmann remarked in the *New York Times*, "The word from Washington, as most people here suspected, was that the general was carrying nothing beyond the Bush administration's desire to keep the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from interfering with business elsewhere—notably in Iraq".

There is no reason to believe that the long-term attitude of the Bush administration to the fate of the Palestinians has been revised. Indeed there is a significant lobby in Washington that wants a more aggressive policy to be pursued. Nevertheless as far as the extreme right in Israel are concerned, Sharon's forced retreat is impermissible and could possibly lead to the fall of his government.

The three party National Union-Yisrael Beiteinu-Tekuma Knesset faction has already decided unanimously to leave the government.

National Infrastructure Minister Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) and Tourism Minister Benny Elon (National Union-Moledet) vowed to fight what Lieberman referred to as the "Peres-Arafat coalition." Lieberman warned that the government would fall, claiming, "When we leave, it will be sealed that by November 2002, there will be an election." Elon posed an alternative possibility, in that until now, "Sharon had manoeuvring room between us and Peres. Now he no longer has protection on the

right, so he will have to prove to his constituency that Peres does not set the agenda. The government may move rightward without us." He called for the Palestinian Authority to be overturned, insisting, "The nation elected Sharon in order to bring a military victory, after it rejected three prime ministers who conceded to the PA."

Amongst the extreme right forces still within the government, such as Likud Education Minister Limor Livnat and Internal Security Minister Uzi Landau, as well as Natan Sharansky of Yisrael Ba'aliya, criticism of Sharon was near hysterical. He was interrupted throughout the Cabinet meeting, prompting him to declare sullenly, "You may want to go to war, but I don't." Later his opponents declared that Sharon had gone mad and lost his head.

Sharon now depends more than ever on Labour for his political survival. The party has responded to his present dilemma by seeking to portray him as a reformed character. Ben-Eliezer said that "Sharon made a clear decision... preferring us over Lieberman and Elon, so we owe it to the prime minister to give him a chance." Labour faction chairman Effi Oshaya praised Sharon, "for choosing a policy of dialogue" and promised, "As long as he keeps it up, he will ensure Labour's remaining in the government." Labour postponed indefinitely a planned debate on whether to remain in the coalition.

The situation is inherently unstable. The far right will be pushing for a redoubling of the military offensive against the Palestinians. If they do not get it, then the campaign for a replacement for Sharon such as former Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu will begin in earnest. Moreover in all likelihood, Sharon's adoption of restraint will be short-lived. His war cabinet announcing his latest measures also discussed and approved the "Enveloping Jerusalem" plan, which aims to seal off Jerusalem militarily from the West Bank. It also began debating the "Seam Line" plan that proclaims sections of the area dividing Israel and the Palestinian Authority to be a "closed military zone."

The tanks that had pulled out of Ramallah, Qalqilya and Tulkarm took up positions outside the areas they had left the very next day and the PA denounced the withdrawal as a trick. Pressure from Israeli workers and peace activists will inevitably mount on Labour to leave the coalition. In the party faction meeting, Labour MPs Eitan Cabel, Avraham Shochat and Haim Ramon insisted that Sharon's decisions had been tactical and Labour should still quit the coalition.



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