

Israel and Washington debate murder of Arafat, destruction of Palestinian Authority

Patrick Martin
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The Bush administration and the Israeli government are preparing for a dramatic escalation of the violence directed against the Palestinian people in the wake of the Israeli decision to invade the city of Ramallah and lay siege to the headquarters of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

In a US television appearance Sunday, chief Palestinian peace negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that Sharon was carrying out plans for the murder of Arafat. Citing Sharon's repeated statements that he regretted not killing the Palestinian leader 20 years ago, during the siege of Beirut, Erekat said, "He will kill President Arafat," adding that in such an eventuality, "I can assure you that what we are witnessing now is but the tip of the iceberg."

Arafat himself, in a telephone interview with CNN, scorned the Israeli claims that he was not being targeted for violence. "Do you think the missiles will differentiate between me and any of my brothers here with me? This is a big Israeli lie."

"What I am facing is not important," the Palestinian leader continued. "More important is what my people are going through day and night. Yesterday they (the Israelis) assassinated nine people. The tanks are surrounding the hospitals and blocking access to the wounded."

Arafat was referring to several instances in which Palestinian fighters taken prisoner by the Israeli Defense Forces were summarily executed. The British newspaper the *Observer* reported that five members of Force 17, the elite unit which guards the Palestinian president, were shot in the head at close range. According to the newspaper's reporter on the scene, "in the few minutes after Israeli soldiers stormed the Palestinian position, five men were wounded and five men were put to death by the Israelis, each with a single

coup de grace administered to the head or throat."

Reporters for American newspapers confirmed the executions. Daniel Williams of the *Washington Post* cited eyewitness accounts of the murders, adding, "There were no signs that the Palestinians had fired from their last position. Their bodies were found in the hallway in front of offices of the Center for the Dissemination of Democracy, but it did not appear that they had tried to take refuge there."

Williams also reported that Israeli soldiers were firing on ambulances and had invaded the ArabCare Hospital in Ramallah, even though "such searches are in breach of international rules of war." Israeli soldiers shot and seriously wounded a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, Anthony Shadid, and the military authorities then closed Ramallah to the press to prevent further coverage of the fighting.

In a brief televised address Sunday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared that Israel was at war with Palestinian militants. "We must fight this terrorism, in an uncompromising war to uproot these savages, to dismantle their infrastructure because there is no compromise with terrorists," he said. "This terrorism is activated, coordinated and directed by one man, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat."

Such demonization of Arafat belies the repeated Israeli reassurances that the Palestinian leader is only being "isolated" by the invasion of Ramallah, and not targeted for death. The only logical conclusion to be drawn from the statements of Sharon and other Israeli leaders is that Arafat will be killed as soon as the green light comes from Washington.

The Bush administration has sent clear signals of its support for the Israeli escalation on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, particularly in Bush's own comments Saturday to reporters called to his ranch in Crawford,

Texas. He placed exclusive blame for the crisis on Arafat and the Palestinian Authority and pointedly refused to criticize any action taken by the Israeli government, saying “Israel will make the decisions necessary to defend herself.”

If the Israeli military has not yet moved to kill Arafat and his closest aides—who are surrounded and effectively under house arrest in Ramallah—it is only because the Bush administration has not yet given its approval to the action. The White House, in turn, is delaying a final decision while it seeks political cover and support from European governments and the Arab regimes in the Middle East.

Washington’s hesitation does not reflect squeamishness over assassination as government policy. The US has openly supported Sharon’s policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders. Its concern is that Israeli violence against the Palestinians not disrupt or cut across plans for American violence against Iraq by provoking political convulsions against the Arab regimes that would serve as military bases and sources of supply for a US attack on Baghdad.

So far there has been a deafening silence from the Europeans over the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and Gaza and its assault on Arafat, while the Arab regimes have issued only token protests over the targeting of Arafat and the Palestinian Authority.

The killing of Arafat would be followed by the complete dismantling of the Palestinian Authority and a return to direct Israeli military rule of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such a course of action is being openly discussed within Israel.

One Labour Party member of the Knesset, Haim Ramon, said, “Sharon wants Arafat to disappear and for a moderate Palestinian leadership to replace him. He will then negotiate and try to convince it to accept a stay in 50 percent of the West Bank. It’s an illusion. It will never happen. What is happening is what we see now: the de facto destruction of what is left of the Palestinian Authority and Israel’s full or almost full re-occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.”

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Sharon’s chief rival within the right-wing Likud coalition, has been publicly campaigning for this policy. In a commentary published in the *Jerusalem Post* Friday, Netanyahu called for seeking “a total military victory ... First, we must immediately

dismantle the Palestinian Authority and expel Arafat. Second we must encircle the main Palestinian population centers, purge them of terrorists, and eradicate the terrorist infrastructure. Third, we must establish security separation lines that will allow Israeli armed forces to enter Palestinian territory, but prevent Palestinian terrorists from entering our towns and cities.”

Netanyahu, whose co-thinkers are well represented in Sharon’s cabinet, called for the Israeli government to follow the US example in Afghanistan—military invasion followed by search-and-destroy operations against resistance fighters.

The call-up of 20,000 Israeli military reservists, the largest such mobilization in a decade, suggests that the Israeli cabinet is moving towards such a decision. The call-up will cost the Israeli economy more than \$100 million a month, a bill that will undoubtedly be presented to Washington for payment.

From the time he took office as prime minister, Sharon’s goal has been to dismantle the Oslo process and the Palestinian Authority that resulted from it. The embrace of this policy by the most powerful sections of the Zionist political establishment only demonstrates that there is no basis for a democratic settlement in the Middle East that preserves a Jewish state, based on the dispossession of the Palestinian Arabs, whether within the borders of 1948, 1967, or the “Greater Israel” advocated by the most extreme right-wing elements.

A just and peaceful settlement requires the abolition of all the reactionary state borders established by British and French colonial rule, as well as by Zionism, and the establishment of a Socialist United States of the Middle East, based on equal rights for all the region’s peoples, regardless of religion, language or national origin.



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