

Chronology of a pogrom: How Sharon, US prepared assault on Palestinians

The Editorial Board
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Israeli troops continue to fan out across the West Bank, invading one Palestinian city after another—Ramallah, Jenin, Bethlehem, Tulkarm, Qalqilyah, Salfeet—killing and wounding hundreds, arresting and beating thousands. Contrary to the claims of the Israeli and US governments and the American media, this assault is not a sudden reaction to the latest series of suicide bombings, but rather the implementation by the Sharon government of a long-planned strategy.

The tragic death toll in the suicide attacks—tragic in the loss of life both of innocent Israeli citizens, and of the most self-sacrificing sections of Palestinian youth—is the occasion for the Sharon government to carry out measures which have been in preparation for several years, if not the entire period since the signing of the initial Israeli-PLO accord in 1993.

Just as George W. Bush seized on the September 11 terrorist attacks as the pretext for projecting American military power in oil-rich Central Asia and preparing a new war against Iraq, Sharon is using the bombings in Haifa and Netanya as the signal to reimpose Israeli rule on the West Bank and dismantle the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority.

As Israeli military commander Shaul Mofaz was overheard telling Sharon at a press briefing Tuesday, “We’ve got the opportunity right now,” to deal blows to the Palestinian Authority and its president, Yasser Arafat. “I know,” Sharon replied. “Be careful.”

The actions taken by the Israeli forces directly contradict the avowed purpose of their attack. At one and the same time Sharon denounces Arafat for failing to suppress terrorism, while smashing the instruments of power which would be required for that task. Arafat, trapped in his headquarters without electricity, water or direct contact with the outside world, is supposed to prevent desperate Palestinian teenagers from using the only method of resistance to oppression which has been left them.

The claims of Sharon and Bush are absurd on their face. In the conflict which has erupted since September 2000, more than 1,100 Palestinians have been killed, compared to about 400 Israelis. Yet the US posture is to present the side which has lost three times as many men, women and children as the aggressor, while the side which has done the bulk of the killing—and possesses a virtual monopoly of weapons such as tanks, jet fighters, missiles, all supplied by America—is portrayed as acting in “self-defense.”

US Secretary of State Colin Powell admitted that the Israeli actions would lead to more, not less terrorism. “No matter how many tanks go through how many villages, at the end of this process you will still have suicide bombers,” he said. “Ultimately, the Israeli Defense Forces will ... have to leave the occupied territories ... and we’ll be right back to the need for a political process.”

The actions of the Israeli government can be understood only in light of the politics of the extreme-right elements represented by Sharon and his political rival, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which are based on unyielding opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state. The American media, in line with its role as mouthpiece for US government policy, omits any explanation of history or political

background in its depiction of the events now taking place on the West Bank.

The longstanding aim of the Israeli right wing has been to render the establishment of a Palestinian state politically impossible, through the systematic destruction of the social and political infrastructure of the Palestinian national movement. Their method is the “making of new facts” through the use of military force to change the political environment.

Sharon and Netanyahu opposed the 1993 Oslo Accord, and it was a political supporter of their intransigent line, a fascist-minded student, who carried out the 1995 assassination of Yitzak Rabin, the prime minister who signed the agreement with Arafat and the PLO.

Netanyahu was the political beneficiary of that assassination, coming to power the following year. His government, with Sharon as housing and development minister, heavily promoted Jewish settlement on the West Bank. It is an indictment of the Oslo process itself—and the bankruptcy of Arafat’s own policy—that more Jewish settlers came to the West Bank in the eight years after 1993 than in the 26 years of Israeli control that preceded the agreement.

The wave of suicide bombings is an inevitable result of the failure of the Palestinian Authority. This regime has been unable either to effectively resist the expansion of the settlements and the seizure of Palestinian land, or to develop the economic and social life of the territories, which are held in a stranglehold by Israel.

The Sharon government has deliberately provoked these acts of desperation, as the record shows, in order to confuse and intimidate public opinion within Israel and internationally, and to provide a suitable basis for never-ending demands on the Arafat regime. Now this process is coming to a head, with the demonization of the 72-year-old Palestinian leader and open discussion of his expulsion or murder.

The demands issued from Sharon and Bush would make a Palestinian state impossible except in the form of a quisling regime, policing the Palestinian population at the behest of the Zionist regime. They want to make sure that any successor to Arafat is a puppet, if not a direct agent of the Israeli Mossad.

The reoccupation of the West Bank by the Israeli Defense Forces is the culmination of a campaign of provocation and violence which has unfolded over the past two years, since the failure of the US-brokered Camp David talks between Arafat and then prime minister Ehud Barak. The talks collapsed in July 2000, and Barak lost his parliamentary majority the same month, the beginning of the end of his government.

Throughout the entire period from the beginning of the Palestinian *intifada* in September 2000 to the present, three factors have interacted continuously: provocations by the Israeli military and fascist elements, Palestinian resistance to oppression, and the influence of the United States.

September 28, 2000—Ariel Sharon made his notorious visit to the Temple Mount, accompanied by dozens of heavily armed bodyguards, and

protected by hundreds of Israeli troops. Although Sharon was then out of government, the leader of the Likud Party was treated as the de facto representative of the Zionist regime. When riots broke out throughout the West Bank and Gaza in response to this provocation, Barak declared his solidarity with Sharon and denounced Arafat for not suppressing the protests, setting the pattern for the subsequent 18 months.

Sharon made his move, carefully planned for maximum disruptive effect, when Palestinian nationalist feeling had been inflamed by the decision of Arafat to delay again the formal declaration of an independent Palestinian state. The Likud leader also calculated that US intervention against him was unlikely, given the ongoing US presidential election in which the Republican candidate, then leading in the polls, was criticizing the administration for excessive involvement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The timing of the Temple Mount visit was also determined by the need to sabotage back-channel talks between the Palestinian Authority, Barak and the Clinton administration, which had resumed in secret after the Camp David failure. According to a subsequent report in the *New York Times*, a fervently pro-Israeli newspaper, the secret talks had made significant progress, and on September 27 Clinton invited Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to return to Washington. Sharon would certainly have been aware of these maneuvers through his contacts in the Israeli military and intelligence service. The next day his trip to the Temple Mount touched off rioting that was answered by brutal police-military repression. The *intifada* had begun, and the US-mediated talks did not resume until December, with Clinton a lame duck and Barak little better.

February 6, 2001—In a special election for prime minister, called by Barak two years before the end of his term, Sharon won easily and formed a coalition government of his Likud bloc, several right-wing religious parties, and a major section of the Labor Party, including Shimon Peres as foreign minister. Sharon's victory represented, not so much a growth of right-wing sentiment in Israel, as the collapse of the so-called "left," after the failure of the Camp David talks and the upsurge of Palestinian resistance on the West Bank and Gaza, with a death toll, after four months, already mounting to the hundreds. The coming to power of the former general identified throughout the Middle East with the massacres of Palestinian refugees during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the leading advocate of stepped-up Zionist settlement and land seizures on the West Bank, was a clear sign that the Israeli regime would opt for the most brutal methods against the Palestinians.

March 20, 2001—Sharon visited Bush in the White House, where he emphasized Israel's usefulness to the US, and stressed his willingness to combat terrorism and support a hard-line stance against Iraq and Iran. Bush responded by declaring he would not "try to force peace," while a White House spokesman said, "We do have a special relationship with Israel." The nature of this relationship was quickly demonstrated, as the Bush administration sided with Israel in blocking the dispatch of a United Nations observer force to the West Bank and Gaza and permitted Israel to use US-supplied fighter jets to attack Palestinian targets. Bush himself declared that resumption of peace talks depended on Arafat halting all Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. Three weeks later came the first major Israeli ground assault of the *intifada*, the April 13 invasion of the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

July 12, 2001—A British foreign policy journal published an executive summary of an Israeli military plan called "Justified Vengeance," which called for invasion of the West Bank in response to terrorist attacks such as the suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv discotheque. The assault would be launched after the next such suicide attack. It would last up to a month, cause thousands of Palestinian casualties, and end with the disarming or detention of 40,000 Palestinian military and police personnel, virtually the entire apparatus of the Palestinian Authority. The principal method for ensuring the necessary pretext, according to press reports, was continuing

the systematic assassination of Palestinian leaders which had begun the previous fall. The repetitive pattern of events was: Israeli assassination, suicide bombing, Israeli military response. This is a continuation of a longstanding policy of the Israeli state, which has for decades sought to destroy the Palestinian national movement by disrupting its leadership, killing nearly every outstanding PLO leader except Arafat himself.

August 1, 2001—A five-hour meeting of the Israeli war cabinet reaffirmed the policy of systematically targeting Palestinian leaders and militants for assassination, the day after Israeli missiles destroyed a building in Nablus used by the Islamic militant organization Hamas, killing eight people, two of them small boys, two of them senior political leaders of Hamas. The assassinations sparked the largest political protest of the *intifada*, with more than 100,000 people marching in the funeral amid cries for revenge. The assassination not only provoked more Palestinian terrorist attacks, it served to torpedo a new round of diplomatic activity aimed at imposing a settlement on the conflict. At the G-8 summit in Genoa July 21-22, the European powers pushed through a resolution, with reluctant agreement from the US, for the deployment of international monitors to separate the Israeli military and the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza. The Sharon government's brazen, public adoption of murder as state policy effectively halted this European initiative. Six days after the cabinet meeting, the Israeli Defense Force announced it was abandoning any "restraint" and would allow soldiers to open fire on Palestinians without themselves first coming under attack. Sharon gave the policy the Orwellian title of "active self-defense."

August 28, 2001—Abu Ali Mustafa, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was assassinated by Israeli military forces in the West Bank town of Ramallah. One of the top five officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Mustafa was the highest-ranking Palestinian to have been murdered under the Israeli policy of killing Arab leaders. The assassination came a few days after US Vice President Richard Cheney publicly defended and supported the Israeli policy of murdering political opponents. In a commentary published September 7—four days before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center—the *World Socialist Web Site* said that the assassination policy was aimed at destroying "the political infrastructure of the Palestinian national movement." The article concluded, "By such means Israel seeks to render impossible any organized and politically directed struggle against its occupation of Palestinian lands.... The message from the Israeli authorities is clear: no one will survive who does not secure the approval of the Israeli state."

September 21, 2001—A US-imposed cease-fire took effect between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center there was a temporary divergence in US and Israeli policy. Israeli officials denounced Arafat as the equivalent of Osama bin Laden and Sharon moved toward open war, only to be pulled back abruptly by the Bush administration, which wished to ensure the support of Arab states for the impending US military assault against Afghanistan. The US accordingly sided with Labor Party leader Shimon Peres, who publicly accused senior Israeli army officers of plotting the assassination of Arafat, warning that in that event even more radical nationalists and Islamists would replace the Palestinian president. On October 4, Bush traveled to New York City for a speech at the United Nations where he called for the eventual establishment of an independent Palestinian state, the first US president to do so. Sharon replied with a diatribe comparing Arafat to Hitler and accusing the US and Bush personally of Munich-style "appeasement." After Sharon was compelled to apologize and restrict military operations on the West Bank, General Shaul Mofaz, the army chief of staff, publicly criticized the decision and two extreme Zionist parties pulled out of Sharon's coalition government.

October 19, 2001—Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi was assassinated in his hotel room in Jerusalem, allegedly by a Palestinian

gunman retaliating for the murder of PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa. Given that Ze'evi had just recently turned against the Sharon government and sought to bring it down, his sudden elimination from the political scene served to kill two birds with one stone—providing a pretext for further Israeli military aggression, while removing a thorn in the government's side. Ze'evi's National Union party was also something of an embarrassment diplomatically, since it openly called for the expulsion of all three million Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The demand that Arafat order the arrest of all those responsible for Ze'evi's killing has been Sharon's principal demand on the Palestinian Authority ever since.

December 5, 2001—The Israeli war cabinet formally designated the Palestinian Authority a terror-supporting entity that “must be dealt with accordingly.” The cabinet statement also declared the Tanzim militia and Arafat's elite Force 17 personal protection unit were terrorist organizations. Labor ministers walked out before the vote on the resolution was taken. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres accused the government of attempting to “destroy the Palestinian Authority.” The pretext for this action was a series of suicide bombings, claimed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in retaliation for the assassination of a senior Hamas leader, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud. The real reason was the initial military success of the American war against Afghanistan. The Bush administration and its Israeli clients now felt it possible to move more openly against the Palestinians, since the Arab regimes of the Middle East were no longer needed as bases for the bombing campaign, and since these regimes were presumably intimidated by the fate of the Taliban regime. In a television address to the nation, Sharon repeatedly compared Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and the US “war on terrorism.” A day later the Bush administration signaled its support by seizing the assets of the Holy Land Foundation and several other charities that aid war victims on the West Bank.

December 13, 2001—Sharon publicly declared that Israel would no longer recognize or negotiate with Arafat, a formal repudiation of the 1993 Oslo Accords and the perspective of achieving a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. Again a suicide attack, a bus bombing the previous day that killed 10 Israelis, was the pretext for an action which Sharon has repeatedly advocated from the day the Oslo Accords were signed. “From our point of view, Arafat no longer exists. Period,” Sharon told his security cabinet. Arafat was effectively placed under house arrest, not allowed to leave his headquarters compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Three weeks later, on January 3, 2002, Israel claimed to have captured a ship bringing arms supplies from Iran to the Palestinian Authority. Even if true—and there is considerable doubt—the weaponry on board the *Karine-A* hardly compares to the billions in high-tech equipment supplied by the United States to Israel each year.

January 22, 2002—Israeli tanks and armored vehicles encircled Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, the first of a series of occupations of the largest Palestinian city this year. Israeli troops entered the *Voice of Palestine* radio station, where they used explosives to blow it up. Other West Bank towns were placed under blockade, including Qalqilyah, Jenin and Nablus, and fighter jets attacked Palestinian government buildings in Tulkarem. The official pretext was a terrorist attack that killed six people at a Jewish coming-of-age party in Hadera. This followed the assassination of Raed al-Karmi, a leader of the al-Aqsa Brigade, a militia linked to Arafat's Fatah party. The Sharon government denied it had carried out the assassination, but the *New York Times* quoted a senior political official who “acknowledged that Israel had had a role in the death.”

February 5, 2002—Speaking 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, as Israeli defense minister, Sharon orchestrated Israel's invasion of Lebanon

and the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from the country. The 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, aimed at cordoning off the city from what one cabinet minister called “the Arab congestion” around it. Sharon's brazen talk of murder came in response to Bush's January 29 State of the Union speech, where he denounced the “axis of evil,” and made clear that the US was moving inexorably towards war in the Middle East.

March 8, 2002—This was the worst day of violence in the past 17 months of conflict, as the Israeli 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 were 108 Palestinians and 36 Israelis killed in a single week, as the Israeli Defense Force made almost constant incursions into the refugee camps. The escalation of the conflict was Sharon's response to the publication of a proposal by Saudi Arabia to exchange Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories for Arab recognition of Israel. Sharon proclaimed a policy of applying “continuous military pressure” on the Palestinian leadership, 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.”

March 28, 2002—The Israeli Army invades Ramallah and surrounds Arafat's headquarters. In subsequent days, more West Bank cities and towns are occupied in a military operation with no apparent end or limit. More than a thousand Palestinians have been arrested in the first week of the invasion; dozens have been killed and hundreds wounded. Sharon called for Arafat to be expelled from the West Bank and exiled for life. In the right-wing press and from politicians in the Knesset come calls for even more drastic measures: expulsion of all relatives of suicide bombers; the killing of tens of thousands of Palestinians in order to drown the resistance in blood; the deportation of the entire population of the West Bank, several million people; and a crackdown on political dissent and opposition to the military atrocities among Israeli Arabs and in the Jewish population itself.



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