

# Israeli devastation of West Bank paves way for mass expulsions

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The Israeli military onslaught on the West Bank has left nearly a thousand Palestinians dead, thousands wounded or jailed, and the entire population of 3.2 million under siege. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, his Likud and Labor Party coalition partners, and the Israeli Defense Forces command are guilty of barbarities on a scale not seen since the US war in Southeast Asia.

With the surrender Wednesday of the remaining Palestinian fighters in the refugee camp outside Jenin, large-scale military combat has come to an end on the West Bank. The resistance in Jenin against heavy odds was so determined and heroic that even in the Israeli press the battle has been referred to as the Palestinian Masada.

After losing 13 soldiers to a booby-trap set up by Palestinian snipers, the Israeli Army resorted to even more indiscriminate killing methods in Jenin, retargeting antiaircraft weapons which fire 3,000 20-millimeter rounds a minute and using them to destroy houses in which Palestinian fighters were holed up. An Israeli reservist interviewed on Israeli television described the city as “Vietnam—something like that. There’s nothing there now.” Palestinian spokesmen described the events in Jenin as a massacre in which as many as 500 men, women and children may have lost their lives.

Israeli tanks, armored cars, helicopter gunships and fighter jets continue to range throughout the occupied territory, targeting smaller groups of fighters and destroying buildings, factories, utilities and individual homes. Even the pro-Israeli American press has been compelled to take note of the extent of the damage.

The *New York Times* reported, “The images are indelible: piles of concrete and twisted metal in the ancient casbah of Nablus, husks of savaged computers littering ministries in Ramallah, rows of storefronts sheared by passing tanks in Tulkarm, broken pipes gushing precious water, flattened cars in fields of shattered glass and garbage, electricity poles snapped like twigs, tilting walls where homes used to stand, gaping holes where rockets pierced office buildings.”

When Sharon ordered the Israeli invasion of the West Bank March 29, he declared his purpose was to “uproot the infrastructure of terror.” In practice, the *Times* admitted, “it is safe to say that the infrastructure of life itself and of any future Palestinian state—roads, schools, electricity pylons, water pipes, telephone lines—has been devastated.”

Israeli troops have also ravaged the Education Ministry, the statistics bureau, the local television and radio stations, and the homes of the Palestinian information and culture minister.

The Sharon government now places the total number of Palestinians detained during the two-week assault at 4,185, nearly all men between the ages of 15 and 50. The figure is staggering, not only in absolute terms, but even more as a proportion of the population. It is the equivalent of half a million Americans being seized, stripped, beaten and jailed.

Of these 4,185 Palestinians, only 121 were wanted by the Israeli authorities before the attack began. This demonstrates that the vast majority of those detained are not “terrorists,” even by the elastic Israeli

definition, which includes nearly every Palestinian political activist. Many Palestinians took up arms only when their own towns and cities were invaded by Israeli tanks. Many never took up arms at all. They were arrested because, as teachers, administrators, lawyers, technicians, doctors, college students, they would play an important role in a future Palestinian state.

International aid agencies said that the Israeli military blockade was becoming a catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians confined to their homes by a 24-hour curfew enforced by shoot-to-kill orders for Israeli troops. These imprisoned people lack access to food, running water, electricity, prescription drugs and medical treatment.

Jessica Barry, spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said, “I cannot stress more strongly how serious the medical situation is. People who are sick, people who need dialysis, women who are giving birth need to get to the hospital. It’s truly a humanitarian crisis.”

Reports continue to filter out of the West Bank of specific atrocities committed by Israeli soldiers, who have been encouraged by the Sharon government to regard all Palestinians as their enemies. The Israeli human rights group B’Tselem reported that Israeli soldiers grabbed patients at an emergency clinic in Nablus April 8, rested guns on their shoulders and forced them to walk in front of the soldiers as “human shields.” In Jenin, homes were demolished with bulldozers while their residents were still inside, the group said.

Released Palestinian prisoners told of being ordered to strip naked—allegedly to prove they were not wearing explosives—and then enter homes ahead of soldiers, to draw fire or set off booby traps. The military issued an order prohibiting lawyers from visiting Palestinian prisoners in detention for 18 days after their arrest, an action upheld by the country’s Supreme Court. All these actions are violations of the Geneva Convention and would subject Israeli leaders, civilian and military, to prosecution as war criminals.

It is obvious why the Israeli government has forbidden media access to most of the West Bank, and why Israeli soldiers have shot, gassed or beaten journalists who have attempted to report on conditions there: those guilty of great crimes have something to hide.

It was said of Nero that he fiddled while Rome burned. Colin Powell’s slow-motion trip to the Middle East has something of the same character. He proceeded from Morocco to Egypt, then back to Spain, then on to Jordan, while the Israeli military set fire to Jenin, Nablus, Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities. Powell finally arrived in Israel late Thursday for talks on the Mideast crisis, more than one week after Bush’s announcement that he was sending the US secretary of state to the region.

The events of that week have confirmed that Bush’s Rose Garden speech was not a shift in American policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but merely a cover for continuing US support to the atrocities on the West Bank. The Bush administration was seeking to prop up the reactionary Arab bourgeois regimes in the region, especially Saudi Arabia,

Egypt and Jordan, which have not lifted a finger to defend the Palestinian people.

Powell's trip will do nothing to help the Palestinian people. It will rather serve to provide an American stamp of approval for the "new realities" which the Sharon government is seeking to create on the West Bank. As he arrived in Israel, there was a noticeable softening in official US statements about an Israeli withdrawal. Powell himself made no criticism about Sharon's declaration that the offensive would continue for many more weeks.

The cynical double-standard of the American media is shown by its debate on whether Powell should visit Yasser Arafat in the two rooms he still controls at the Palestinian Authority headquarters in Ramallah, surrounded by Israeli tanks. Arafat must denounce the suicide bombings in Israel to "deserve" a Powell visit, one section of the media declares. Such a statement cannot be believed, and Powell should avoid Arafat, the opposing side argues.

No media pundit asks the question whether Powell should visit Ariel Sharon, guilty of major war crimes in 1982 in Lebanon, and now in 2002 on the West Bank. No one discusses how it is possible to have peace or even dialogue in the Middle East by refusing to speak with Arafat, the longtime leader of the Palestine national movement and the elected president of the Palestinian Authority.

Secretary of State Powell has repeatedly emphasized that whatever the intensity of the current fighting, talks between the two sides must ultimately take place. At one press conference he declared, "However long the Israeli incursions continue, whether they pull out of everywhere today or whether they pull out of everywhere they are now in over a longer period of time, the problem will still be there, people who need to be brought into a negotiating process that will lead to peace."

This conceals the ominous political logic of Sharon's invasion of the West Bank. His goal is to put an end to the problem—i.e., the existence of the Palestinian people on the Israeli-occupied territory. It is not to work out an agreement between two states which will divide the territory of pre-1948 Palestine, but to create the conditions for a new dispossession of a people already dispossessed.

No credibility can be given to the claims that Israeli forces will withdraw from the West Bank after the current offensive is completed. Sharon himself declared, in a rabid, militaristic speech to the Knesset Monday, that "our forces will deploy to constitute a buffer between Palestinian territories and our territories, in order to prevent any penetration in Israeli communities."

The creation of a buffer zone has been widely discussed in Israel in recent months. This would involve expelling Palestinians who live near the border with Israel proper or close to the settlements which dot the West Bank, creating a largely "Arab-free" cordon around these settlements.

There is good reason to believe that the buffer zone proposal is only a pretext for keeping Israeli troops actively deployed on the West Bank, pending much more drastic measures against the Palestinian population. (One Israeli critic noted that the IDF has been unable to patrol the current 200-mile border between the West Bank and Israel, while the convoluted borders of all the buffer zones would be 10 times as long.)

American official and media criticism of Sharon has been limited to suggesting that his attack on the West Bank represents blind reliance on military force, in the absence of a more long-range policy. But there is a political strategy underlying the military aggression, one which cannot, for diplomatic reasons, be stated openly.

The logic of the Sharon government's actions is to create the conditions for the expulsion from the West Bank, not merely of Yasser Arafat personally, but of millions of Palestinians. The Likud Party has never renounced the position, first enunciated by the Zionist terrorist Menachem Begin, that the West Bank is really Judaea and Samaria, part of the

ancestral Jewish homeland, destined for integration into a Greater Israel.

Both Sharon and his chief rival within Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, have long subscribed to the notion that the only defensible border for the state of Israel is the Jordan River. This necessarily requires changing the "facts on the ground" in the West Bank, where 400,000 Israeli settlers are greatly outnumbered by 3.2 million Palestinians.

Sharon's speech to the Knesset was undisguised in targeting the Palestinian people as a whole. He denounced "the murderous insanity which has taken hold of our Palestinian neighbors"—at a time when the death toll of the past 18 months stands at 400 Israelis and nearly 2,000 Palestinians.

He declared, "We hoped that the Palestinians would understand, as they promised, that ruling does not mean a license to kill, but rather the assumption of responsibility for the prevention of killing." Yet Sharon has given Israeli forces precisely a "license to kill" on the West Bank.

Sharon's actions demonstrate the real goal of his policies. In his first year in office, he authorized the beginning of work on at least 30 new Jewish settlements on the West Bank. As many as 400,000 Palestinians, an eighth of the total West Bank population, would have their homes and livelihoods threatened by incorporation into the proposed buffer zones.

The essence of this policy was suggested in the speech delivered by Netanyahu, who has signed on as Sharon's traveling ambassador, to a US Senate hearing in Washington. While Powell was flying to the Middle East, Netanyahu dismissed the mission, saying it "won't amount to anything." He called for the expulsion of Arafat from the West Bank and the overthrow of the Palestinian Authority. His audience of congressional Democrats and Republicans gave him warm support.

Netanyahu concluded his speech as follows: "No part of the terrorist network can be left intact. For if not fully eradicated, like the most malignant cancer, it will regroup and attack again with even greater ferocity. Only by dismantling the entire network will we be assured of victory."

If one substitutes "Palestinian people" for "terrorist network," the real program of Netanyahu and Sharon is spelled out.



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