

Israel on Jenin: "Nothing to hide"... but no one can look

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The world is witnessing a grotesque diplomatic farce over the proposed United Nations investigation into Israeli atrocities at the Jenin refugee camp. A government that laid siege for eight days to a densely populated area with tanks, bulldozers, helicopter gunships and snipers; blocked ambulances from rescuing the wounded; fired on journalists seeking to enter the combat zone; and for a week after the assault refused to allow access to Red Cross medical teams or UN human rights observers, is blocking the implementation of a Security Council resolution calling for an investigation.

Its prime minister, Ariel Sharon—who previously faced prosecution for his role in the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut—is demanding the right to determine the composition of the investigating team, the selection of witnesses and the parameters of the probe. Behind the scenes the US government is supporting the Israeli effort to scuttle the investigation—or turn it into a harmless whitewash—while the American media churns out reports to defend the politically and morally indefensible.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, for his part, alternates between toothless protests and bland assurances that, in the end, something will be worked out to permit some sort of investigation into homicidal acts against Palestinian civilians that recall US atrocities in Vietnam and have been compared to Nazi depredations against Europe's Jews.

The entire spectacle is a politically salutary lesson in the hypocrisy and brutality of imperialism, and the role of the United Nations as the cat's paw of great power politics—above all, that of the United States.

As of this writing, indications are that the US secured Sharon's agreement to lift the siege on Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters by offering a quid pro quo—stepped up American pressure to tailor any UN investigation of Jenin to Israel's requirements, or sabotage it altogether. The same Israeli cabinet meeting that voted to accept the US plan to free Arafat, voted to bar the UN commission on Jenin. At a UN Security Council meeting called Sunday to discuss Israel's defiance, the US blocked a vote on an Arab-backed

resolution demanding that Israel cooperate with the investigation "without any hindrance or conditions."

All but acknowledging the existence of a quid pro quo, the *Washington Post* reported Monday: "Israeli government officials would not say whether Bush promised to help Israel persuade UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to address Israeli objections to the Jenin inspection team. 'Wait to see if America changes its vote in the Security Council,' the top aide said."

Israel initially opposed the move in the UN to launch an investigation into the siege of Jenin, but Washington concluded that its own interests left it no choice but to officially support a Security Council resolution, passed earlier this month, mandating a probe. The Bush administration has felt compelled to make a series of gestures aimed at placating its client regimes in the Arab world, in large part because it requires their overt or tacit support for its planned invasion of Iraq, while in practice it has backed Sharon's policy of war against the Palestinians.

The Sharon regime—having, no doubt, received assurances from Washington that any investigation would produce a cover-up—then shifted its posture, declaring it would allow a UN team to enter the ravaged camp.

"Israel has nothing to hide," Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres declared on April 19. Indeed, the Israeli military worked assiduously to bury the evidence of its crimes between the end of its assault and the day it allowed outsiders into the camp. Survivors in Jenin report the existence of mass graves, and the Sharon government was only prevented from carrying through a plan to transport bodies for burial in deserted locations by a ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court.

But despite the best efforts of the Israeli military, the scenes of devastation and the stench of corpses rotting beneath houses that were plowed under by Israeli bulldozers—while the inhabitants were hiding inside—provoked an international outcry, with charges of war crimes from many quarters. Fearing the consequences of any genuine investigation—including the possibility that Sharon,

Peres and other Israeli leaders could face war crimes indictments—the Israeli cabinet immediately began a campaign to obstruct the UN probe it had publicly endorsed.

Israeli spokesmen denounced two members of the investigating team appointed by Annan—Cornelio Sommaruga, the former president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Sadako Ogata, the former UN high commissioner for refugees. They demanded that Annan restrict any probe to a “fact-finding” mission that drew no conclusions, and said it had to focus on the “infrastructure of terror” at the Jenin camp. Annan tried to placate Sharon by meeting his demand that military and anti-terror experts be added to the UN team, appointing an American military adviser, retired Army Major General William Nash, who led US troops in the Persian Gulf War, as one of the investigators.

But by the end of last week, Peres had dropped his “nothing to hide” stance and was charging the UN with attempting to “place blameless blame, almost a blood libel, on Israel.”

The Bush administration, while nominally supporting the UN investigation, threw its weight behind the Israeli claim that it had committed no atrocities and targeted only “terrorist” gunmen. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee last week, Secretary of State Colin Powell said he had seen no evidence of a massacre or mass killings in Jenin. He suggested a UN investigation would dispel “the coarse speculation that was out there as to what happened, with terms being tossed around like massacre and mass graves, none of which so far seems to be the case.”

Powell, it should be noted, made no attempt to visit the devastated refugee camp during his visit to Israel and the West Bank earlier this month.

As Israel hardened its opposition to the UN probe, the US media, initially unsure what attitude it should take to an investigation, increasingly fell into line, echoing the Israeli charge that the commission appointed by Annan was impermissibly pro-Palestinian. The *Washington Post* published an editorial on April 26 headlined “Unbalanced Mission to Jenin.” The *Post* all but branded Cornelio Sommaruga an anti-Semite, writing: “Both Mr. Sommaruga and the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] are red flags to Israel, and for good reason.” The editorial went on to declare: “Is there any wonder that the Israelis might be concerned about the mission’s fairness and objectivity?”

The very same issue of the *Post* carried a front-page report based on interviews with Israeli reservists who fought in Jenin, in which the soldiers made damning admissions that confirm many of the atrocity charges against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). One sergeant told the *Post*: “The

orders were to shoot at each house. The words on the radio were to ‘Put a bullet in each window.’”

The sergeant said he was “troubled by the orders, which did not require soldiers to actually see the gunmen they were trying to kill. But he said the Israeli soldiers didn’t hesitate. They pounded a group of cinder-block homes—the apparent source of Palestinian sniper fire—with .50-caliber machine guns, M-24 sniper rifles, Barrett sniper rifles and Mod3 grenade launchers.”

While denying that he had been involved in a massacre, the sergeant told the *Post*, “It is true that we shot at houses, and God knows how many innocent people got killed.”

The sergeant refuted Israeli government assertions that the army had made every effort to allow civilians to leave the camp. “The civilians, they never got a real chance to get out,” he said. He further acknowledged that the IDF used bulldozers to knock down houses after the fighting had largely subsided.

Both he and another sergeant interviewed by the *Post* admitted that Israeli soldiers had forced Palestinian civilians to knock on neighbors’ doors as the troops moved from house to house in search of gunmen.

It is politically instructive to compare the attitude of the US political establishment and media to Israel’s atrocities against the Palestinians to the massive, orchestrated campaign to whip up public support for war against Serbia three years ago. At that time, any and every allegation, or mere rumor, of killings, rapes or expulsions of Albanian Kosovars was retailed by the press and the TV as factual proof of genocidal violence. Milosevic was routinely depicted as the Serbian Hitler.

Milosevic’s repression in Kosovo pales in comparison to Israel’s violence against the Palestinians. US imperialism, however, had decided that the Serb regime was an obstacle to its global interests, and had to be smashed by military means. Israel, on the other hand, remains one of Washington’s strategic allies in the oil-rich Middle East. Hence the US government covers for Israel’s crimes and declares Sharon a “man of peace,” and its media mouthpieces place the onus on Arafat and the Palestinians, while Milosevic sits in the dock at the US-backed war crimes tribunal in The Hague.



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