

With US backing, Israel prepares new military assault on Palestinians

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Israel has promised harsh reprisals against what it calls “terrorist targets” in retaliation for the May 7 suicide bombing at a pool hall in the suburb of Rishon Letzion, near Tel Aviv. Fifteen Israelis were killed and more than fifty wounded in the attack.

Most observers predict a major military strike on the Gaza Strip, but whatever happens is certain to be brutal and bloody. It will be carried through with the tacit approval of the United States.

The Palestinian Authority condemned the pool hall suicide attack, with PA leader Yasser Arafat ordering his security forces to prevent “all terrorist operations” against Israelis. “We will not be light-handed in punishing those who have caused great harm to our cause,” his statement read.

Arafat added that he was committed to the US-led “war on terrorism” and appealed to the international community to help his forces “implement my order.” The bombing has been attributed to the Islamic militant group Hamas, but the group has made no official statement. Nevertheless, PA police have arrested 16 Hamas militants.

Arafat’s willingness to abide by US and Israeli demands will not prevent Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon from continuing to implement his long-term aim of destroying the Palestinian Authority. The Rishon Letzion suicide bombing took place 15 minutes after Sharon had sat down to a discussion with US President George W. Bush in the Oval Office. Sharon cut short his US trip and flew back to Israel to convene a cabinet meeting. He told the press that the bombing was “proof of the true intentions of those who lead the Palestinian Authority,” warning, “He who rises up to kill us, we will pre-empt it and kill him first.”

Education Minister Limor Livnat, who travelled with Sharon, said she thought it was “very possible that, in the end, there will be no choice and it will be necessary to

expel Arafat”. Israel’s army chief, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, had earlier warned that if terror attacks resumed, Israel would carry out an offensive at least as extensive as the one leading up to the siege of Jenin.

The US has made no calls for restraint on Israel’s part. When asked whether he urged Sharon to exercise restraint, Bush told the press, “Israel is a ... sovereign nation but whatever response Israel decides to take, my hope, of course, is that the prime minister keeps his vision of peace in mind.”

Bush, who was meeting with Jordan’s King Abdullah II at the White House, made a token effort to appear even-handed, hailing as an “incredibly positive sign” the fact that Arafat had gone on television to denounce, in Arabic, acts of terror, and had ordered Palestinian security forces to prevent attacks on Israeli civilians. This type of political balancing act has led to a great deal of speculation as to the extent of the differences between the Bush administration and the Sharon government. There are indeed differences between the two allies, but only of a tactical character.

The White House is the main sponsor of Sharon, but Bush has spent the past weeks in intensive discussions with various Arab rulers, and Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in particular, attempting to formulate a Middle East “peace plan” that calls for Arab recognition and normal relations with Israel once a Palestinian state is established. Bush has been supportive of the Saudi plan because, though it recognises a Palestinian state, this is understood only as a vassal regime run by the Palestinian bourgeoisie on behalf of the US.

Far from bringing peace, moreover, the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Palestine is meant to clear the way for the long-planned military offensive by the US against Iraq. The Middle East regimes have repeatedly warned the US that they would find it extremely difficult to restrain opposition within the Arab working class

should the US declare war on Iraq while it is openly backing Sharon's bloody incursions into the West Bank and Gaza.

Sharon went to Washington to argue against any limits being placed on his ongoing offensive against the PA. The Israeli security service Mossad had prepared dossiers, supposedly proving not only Arafat's connection with terrorism, but also charging Saudi Arabia with the same offence. In the end the documents were never discussed, but Bush was hardly firm in his commitment to the Saudi proposals. Instead, while reiterating his support for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, Bush generally responded favourably to Sharon's counterproposals.

Sharon said talk of establishing a Palestinian state was "premature" and that there could be no question of dismantling Zionist settlements within the Occupied Territories. He presented what he called a three-stage peace plan, calling for an end to terror and a cease-fire, to be followed by an "interim period" of unspecified duration during which the parameters of peace would be discussed, and then final peace negotiations. This proposal, which amounts to an indefinite delay in any serious moves toward a Palestinian state, is bound up with Sharon's determination to continue his military offensive. What was new was his proposal to reform the Palestinian Authority to make it less "dependent on the will of one man". This, however, was merely another way of denying Arafat's legitimacy.

In various interviews with the press, most notably with William Safire of the *New York Times* and Jim Hoagland and Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post*, Sharon said that he had proposed to Bush that Arafat's role be diminished within the PA to that of "symbolic leader". Real power should be turned over to a prime minister "ostensibly subordinate to Arafat", but in reality more powerful, he said. Sharon had also proposed the creation of "a unified internal Palestinian security force under a suitable figure".

Sharon said Bush had been receptive to his proposals and had not urged major changes in Israel's approach. "I felt no pressure whatsoever," he said. According to Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper, sources in Sharon's entourage said that Bush had specifically agreed that peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians had to wait until internal reforms within the PA had brought about a governing body that "would be headed by a different person or different people" than Arafat.

No such position has been officially taken by the Bush administration, but there were clear indications that

Sharon's account was not too far off the mark. Bush himself told the press that he did not advocate either the Saudi or the Sharon positions. He added, "I still haven't changed my position" on statehood, but he agreed with Sharon that the first priority was to reform the PA.

He announced that he was sending CIA Director George J. Tenet back to the Middle East to help "design the construction of a security force, a unified security force, that will be transparent, held accountable."

Others within the Bush administration are even more open than the president in outlining their aim of creating a US-Israeli puppet regime to rule the Palestinians. Last weekend, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said that whereas it was up to the Palestinian people to choose their own representatives, "We are going to be very clear that the Palestinian leadership that is there now, the Authority, is not the kind of leadership that can lead to the kind of Palestinian state that we need."

Regarding Sharon's supposed dossier on the Palestinian leader, she added, "I assume that the Israeli prime minister is going to give the documents that he believes to be true. That's good enough for us."

The Arab bourgeoisie, for obvious reasons, cannot openly be seen to be supporting the agenda of the US and Sharon, but there is common ground regarding their plans for the Palestinians and the desire to reach an accommodation with Israel. One senior Arab official was quoted in the US media as stating that their goal was also to turn Arafat into, at best, "a figurehead in a modernised Palestinian Authority". Such off-the-record remarks led Sharon to express his own optimism regarding the possibility of building a new "coalition for peace" that could include Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, one or two of the Arab emirates and, perhaps, Morocco.



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