

Israel dismembers Palestinian Authority

Pledges “crushing and decisive” military offensive

Chris Marsden
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The “new policy” being implemented by Israel is nothing less than the piecemeal occupation and dismemberment of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Ariel Sharon’s Likud-Labour coalition government first decided on June 18 to reoccupy parts of the PA, ostensibly in response to any and all suicide attacks. Since then, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has occupied Nablus, Jenin, Bethlehem and the area of Betounia near Ramallah, and encircled Qalqiliya and Tulkarm. Factories on the Gaza Strip have been leveled with missiles and rockets.

Thousands of Palestinians have been detained and over 1,500 remain in custody.

When the IDF opened fire on a Jenin fruit and vegetable market it killed three children and a man, and wounded 26 people. Zionist settlers have also rampaged through Nablus.

The Israeli reoccupation will escalate in the coming days. The government has threatened to launch a “crushing offensive” and impose an indefinite reoccupation of Palestinian areas unless suicide bombing and shooting attacks against Israelis stop. Amos Yaron, director general of the Defense Ministry, told Israel Radio, “We have to take much more massive action than we have until now. If this means entering the Territories and staying there for a long time then we will have to consider it.”

The pretext for the offensive has been provided by Palestinian suicide bombings in Jerusalem and an attack on the Jewish settlement of Itamar in the West Bank that have left 36 Israelis dead.

The suicide bombings targeting innocent civilians are desperate and horrible acts by youth who are influenced by political tendencies that have no genuine perspective on which to oppose Israeli oppression. But to place such actions at the start of a causal chain ending in a renewed occupation of the West Bank and Gaza turns reality on its head. Since coming to power, Sharon’s government has consciously pursued a policy of tearing apart the framework for a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians first set out in the 1993 Oslo Accords.

The intervening years have seen the promise of peace and a Palestinian homeland held out by Yasser Arafat’s Fatah leadership result in ever worsening economic conditions, more Zionist settlements and a resumption of military violence that

has left three Palestinians dead for every Israeli killed in retaliation. At least 1,403 Palestinians and 539 Israelis have been killed since the present Intifada began in September 2000.

Now Sharon is seeking to create the conditions where he can finish the job he started and destroy what is left of the PA. That is why his government ignores or dismisses repeated condemnations of suicide bombings by Arafat. He wants Arafat’s leadership to be deposed, not because the Fatah leader is secretly masterminding terrorist attacks, but because Sharon wants the more militant factions within the PA and the Islamic opposition groups to provide Israel with a *casus belli* for the reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Arafat has not only denounced suicide bombings, but also issued a “full and comprehensive condemnation of all kinds of operations that target Israeli civilians” and called for them to be “totally stopped”. “Foreign” forces were exploiting young hopeless Palestinians, he said referring to Hamas’s Arab backers, encouraging them to commit attacks in exchange for money. Whereas he had put Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin under house arrest in Gaza, Israel has not taken any steps against Hamas and Islamic Jihad but only against the PA and Fatah.

He has gone much further than this, however. He has indicated his willingness to accept the peace plan put forward by then US President Bill Clinton in December 2000. He issued a call for “no more war” in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* on June 21. He would accept the Clinton plan “absolutely”, without changes, with the Palestinians setting up a state in 95 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza and gaining sovereignty over Arab quarters in Jerusalem. In return Arafat would abandon the demand for all Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return home and exchange territory with Israel to accommodate Jewish settlements. He promised that this would “mark the end of the conflict between Palestine and Israel.”

Palestinian representatives have already presented the offer to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, accompanied by promises to complete political reforms being demanded by Israel and the US, including holding elections that could replace Arafat within months.

Arafat’s offer will fall on stony ground, however. Sharon has

no intention of agreeing to anything like the proposals formulated under Clinton and his own predecessor, Ehud Barak. His aim is to secure US agreement for an all-out war on the Palestinians and for the Bush administration to make this an integral part of its own plans for a renewed war against Iraq. In a speech to the World Zionist Congress meeting in Jerusalem last week, Sharon reiterated his insistence that the Palestinians should be added to the list of peoples and states to be targeted for US aggression under Bush's supposed war on terror. Speaking of the latest suicide bombing, he told his audience, "this time standing behind the terror is the Palestinian terror authority with the support of a terror axis—Iran, Syria and bin Laden."

Though the Bush presidency still maintains a pretense that it is seeking a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is one that has become threadbare.

Both Bush and his spokesman Ari Fleischer gave their backing to Sharon's latest incursions, just as they have done to every act of aggression Israel has carried out. "The president understands Israel's right to self-defense, particularly in the wake of an attack of this severity," Fleischer said.

The White House made great play of the fact that it too had been thwarted by the suicide bombings in its efforts to secure peace, claiming that it has been forced to postpone a major speech by Bush in which he would propose measures to end the conflict. But the delayed proposals have already been heavily leaked, and they constitute a plan to force the Palestinians into a heavily fortified ghetto, totally subordinate to Israel and its US patron.

Bush's offer is for the recognition of what he cynically describes as a "provisional Palestinian state" on just 40 percent of the West Bank and Gaza. Its final status and borders would not be finalised for at least three years, while the US will demand that whoever is by then in the leadership of the Palestinians ruthlessly suppress all opposition to Israel. A senior US official said that even a provisional state would not be declared until reforms had been implemented, possibly for at least a year.

National security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, provided a further indication of Bush's real intentions. She told the *Mercury News* of San Jose, California, that the administration is not looking to pursue a US brokered peace plan and that a Palestinian state should not be based on Arafat's Palestinian Authority, which was "corrupt and cavorts with terror."

The efforts by Washington to advance itself as an arbiter between Israel and the PA over the past months has been determined by the most grotesque political considerations imaginable. In order to secure the support of its main Arab allies such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia for a war against Iraq, America had to assume a certain distance from Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians.

Powell led support for this approach, while hardliners centred around the Pentagon, and including Vice President Dick

Cheney, favoured an openly pro-Israeli stance as a compliment to its campaign against Iraq.

For their part, the Arab regimes were more than willing to go along with Bush's charade, because they feared the radicalising impact of the Israeli offensive on their own people. But this particular fiction is becoming untenable.

Powell has been not only marginalised, but humiliated by his factional opponents. In an interview with the Arabic newspaper, *al-Hayat*, Powell referred to the possibility of setting up a provisional Palestinian state and said that the US would continue to work with Arafat. In response, Fleischer told the media, "the president has been receiving advice from any number of people, and many of these people give him multiple pieces of advice about the Middle East." Bush had not endorsed a provisional state, he claimed, attributing the proposal to Powell—"the secretary, from time to time, will reflect on the advice that he gets and do so publicly, which is his prerogative."

The Arab regimes have been left with barely a fig leaf to cover their blushes. Egypt's foreign minister Ahmed Maher said of the withdrawn Bush proposals, "This proposal means that today such a state exists, but tomorrow it might not. It's incomprehensible and no one has ever heard of such a thing."

Jordan's King Abdullah felt moved to warn the US of a potential political disaster, thanks to Washington's acquiescence in face of Sharon's efforts to blow apart the PA.

In a candid interview with Belgium's *Le Vif/L'Express*, he said Arafat was no longer "capable of controlling Palestinian public sentiment and extremism...."

"This is what we are telling the Americans: you are asking us to fight against terrorism, but by failing to resolve this Israeli-Palestinian problem you tie our hands behind our backs."

"I told the US president in no uncertain terms that the anger has far from cooled. I stressed that if the confrontations between the Israeli army and the Palestinians dragged on the situation in the Middle East would deteriorate. I explained to all countries with which we are friends that the worst was not behind us."



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