

Israel: Sharon government faces widespread condemnation

Chris Marsden
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Israel's bombing of a Gaza City apartment building, killing 15 people including nine children, has provoked outrage amongst Palestinians and met with international condemnation.

The murderous action, when an F-16 jet dropped a one-tonne guided missile on the apartment building, supposedly targeting the military leader of Hamas, Salah Shehadeh, was initially hailed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as a "great success" but is now causing major problems for the Israeli government.

On July 23, around 300,000 Palestinians took to the streets in a three-mile long funeral procession for the 15 people killed in the strike, including Shehadeh, his wife and daughter. As the crowds chanted for revenge, the most evocative image was of a man holding aloft the dead body of his two-month-old baby wrapped in a flag.

Hundreds of masked militiamen were in attendance representing all the main Palestinian factions, including Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat's Fatah, Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Statements of condemnation were issued by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko, China's foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan and Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

This left the United States with no option but to criticise its Israeli client, particularly since both the F-16 fighter and the smart-bomb were made in America.

Even then President Bush himself made no public remarks, merely issuing a statement through White House spokesman Ari Fleischer that the action was

"heavy-handed" and "does not contribute to peace".

The purpose of the US rebuke was to distance Washington from what is clearly a war crime, at a time when preparations for a war against Iraq are at an advanced stage but Bush's Arab allies are faced with growing anti-American sentiment.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, were said to have recommended the issuing of a public rebuke, while an unnamed official said, "We had to show the Sharon government there are some redlines."

Even so, Fleischer still sugared the pill, explaining, "The president is and will always be a great friend of Israel," "has deep understanding for what Israel has been going through," and "is the first to defend Israel's right to defend itself."

Sharon's initial bellicose response to criticism had to be tempered as realisation dawned of the extent of his political miscalculation. Israeli President Moshe Katsav (Likud) called the bombing a "mishap". Ephraim Sneh, a Labour member of the Israeli security cabinet, told the BBC, "maybe there was some miscalculation or mistake." The Israeli Defence Forces and the Shin Bet security service opened investigations into the raid, said to focus on intelligence failures that supposedly led to the conclusion that Shehadeh was alone in the building.

However, the issue that would not go away is how anyone could believe that dropping a one-tonne bomb on an apartment building would not result in civilian casualties.

The excuses and attempts to scapegoat the army came thick and fast from Sharon's office. It was claimed that an assessment presented to the security cabinet prior to the decision to attack had said the bomb would have a "minor effect" on nearby buildings. Israel Radio quoted Sharon as telling aides in an emergency closed meeting,

“Israel did not know that there were civilians in Shehada’s house. Had it known this, it would have found another way to hit him.”

More than such transparent evasions, however, Sharon is relying on the direct complicity of the Labour Party in the atrocity to help subdue political criticism.

The decision to order the air strike was taken jointly by Sharon and Labour Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer on the evening of July 22.

Sharon’s and Ben-Eliezer’s office made a point of telling the media that Labour Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was also party to the decision to assassinate using an F-16, in case he decided to backtrack from his initial supportive comments made immediately following the bombing. Peres and his office were unavailable for comment.

Criticism was therefore confined to the small left faction within Labour and the liberal opposition party Meretz. Even then, most criticised the atrocity as a tactical mistake that harmed the Israeli war effort.

Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee Chairman MK Him Ramon said criticising the attack, “is not only a moral question. It is a substantive question in the struggle against terrorism. Without international support in general and US backing in particular, we don’t have a free hand to act against terrorists and terrorism.”

Labour MK Yossi Beilin said he believed Sharon and Ben-Eliezer when they said they would have cancelled the raid rather than harm civilians, but “this does not lighten the severity of the act itself.” He called Israel’s policy of political “liquidations” merely “questionable”, but added that such assassinations “must be limited to cases in which we are really intervening in a ‘ticking bomb’. This, regrettably, was not the case here.”

Yossi Sarid, the leader of Meretz, did not distinguish himself either. He also directed his fire against the tactical wisdom of the bombing, stating, “the attack came at an inappropriate time, during which there was relative calm in the territories and international efforts were being made to resume peace talks.”

Dr. Mustafa Barghouthi, president of the Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, issued a press release on the attack, its motivation and the tragic consequences of Israel’s policy since the beginning of the Intifada. He said that Israel had repeatedly stepped up assassinations

to provoke protests and suicide bombings and so legitimise its own acts of repression.

According to Barghouthi, “133 people were killed in assassinations, 48 of them were not even targeted, and most were children like the ones killed in yesterday’s attack in Gaza... these acts are further proof, if further proof is necessary, that Sharon is increasing the level of aggression and violence even further. He already has complete control of the West Bank, and his attack in Gaza is inevitable.”



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