

Israeli siege aimed at driving Arafat into exile

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Israel's ongoing siege of Yasser Arafat's headquarters has nothing to do with efforts to clamp down on suicide bombers. Ariel Sharon's Likud-Labour government is not acting in self-defence but waging a war of aggression with the eventual aim of destroying the Palestinian Authority. At the very least, Sharon's aim is to drive Arafat into exile.

The official pretext for the siege of the Muqata'a—the devastated compound where only one building remains standing in which Arafat and more than 200 aides and security officials are trapped—was provided by two suicide bombings last week that killed seven people.

Hamas claimed the bombings, but Israel first imposed round-the-clock curfews on five West Bank centres—Nablus, Ramallah, Tulkarem, Qalqiliya and Jenin—and sent in tanks and bulldozers to destroy the buildings around Arafat's office. Sharon then began to pile on the pressure, making increasingly impossible demands on Arafat. At first Israel claimed there were 20 wanted men in the compound who must be handed over, including the Palestinian West Bank intelligence chief, Tawfik Tirawi. Then the number rose to 50. Finally Israel demanded the surrender of all 200 people inside Arafat's office before they would end the siege, saying that most would probably be released.

On September 22, the Israeli Defence Forces announced over loudspeakers that troops were about to blow up Arafat's office, prompting demonstrations throughout the Occupied Territories in defiance of Israeli curfews.

Cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi of Sharon's ruling Likud commented on September 23 that "Matter of Time"—the name given to the military operation—referred as much to an impending Israeli expulsion of Arafat as it did to a dragnet for wanted terrorists. He said Arafat "will be deported. This man is finished."

That night, Sharon again upped the ante when troops backed by around 60 tanks and armoured vehicles raided Gaza City, killing nine Palestinians. Sharon has warned that Israel was intent on mounting a major offensive against Hamas, stating, "We of course haven't completed

our work in the Gaza Strip. The day will come, as soon as we can get the necessary troops together, that we will of course have to do this to strike at Hamas and prevent its ability to act."

An Israeli official told the media that the military is considering expelling the Hamas spiritual leader, Sheik Ahmed Yassin. No action could have a greater destabilising effect on the Occupied Territories, and Sharon knows this.

Israel's actions have met criticism from France, Denmark and other European countries, as well as Russia and the Arab regimes, which fear that Sharon will ignite the simmering discontent of the Arab masses on the eve of a US war against Iraq. But Sharon has been encouraged to take a defiant stance by the Bush administration in the United States, which for days did not issue a word of criticism while senators and congressmen from both the main parties expressed sympathy with Israel's own "war against terrorism".

It was only on September 22 that White House spokesman Ari Fleischer issued a mild warning, emphasising, "Israel has a right to defend itself and to deal with security," while urging consideration of "the consequences of action and Israel's stake in the development of reforms in the Palestinian institution".

The US then abstained on a United Nations Security Council resolution demanding Israel cease operations around Arafat's compound and that troops withdraw from Palestinian cities on the spurious grounds that the resolution failed to explicitly condemn Palestinian suicide bombings.

It is by no means the case that Washington is unambiguously supportive of Sharon's efforts to blow up the PA. It could have blocked the UN resolution, but allowed it to go through by abstaining. Later that day, President Bush personally criticised Israel's siege for the first time, but again did not call on Israel to withdraw.

There are major tactical disagreements within Washington over US policy towards Israel. Secretary of State Colin Powell and others have repeatedly cautioned

that a full-scale Israeli offensive is detrimental to US efforts to secure Arab and European support for the upcoming war against Iraq. The State Department has been working to isolate Arafat and install a puppet regime—with some success. In recent weeks leading figures, including the previously loyal Nabil Amr, have distanced themselves from Arafat, criticising him for failing to take advantage of the opportunity to secure peace with Israel at Camp David two years ago. On September 10, Arafat's cabinet resigned in order to assert parliament's right to be consulted on the makeup of the cabinet. The head of Israeli military intelligence, General Aaron Ze'evi, described this as an "earthquake in the Palestinian Authority".

But Sharon gives no impression of being satisfied with creating a more servile Palestinian regime. He views the weakening of Arafat's authority as a means of encouraging the more hardline elements such as Hamas to attack Israel and thereby justifying further Israeli military aggression.

His decision to target Arafat's headquarters was not his only effort to stoke up conflict. On September 10, Sharon warned that a planned Lebanese initiative to divert water from a river feeding Israel's largest reservoir constituted a "casus belli", or "grounds for war". Lebanon opened a pumping station on the River Hasbani in the spring of 2001, which supplies between 20 and 25 percent of the water flowing into the Sea of Galilee, to irrigate a drought-stricken village. Army radio said Sharon had notified Washington that Israel could mount military operations should Lebanon begin pumping water out of the Hasbani or its tributary, the River Wazzani. The US has been forced to send in mediators in efforts to calm down the dispute.

Sharon is not in a position to defy the US, should Washington have the political will to rein him in. Rather he is gambling that the hawks within the administration that support his general aim of creating a Greater Israel will win the day as war with Iraq draws nearer.

An article in the September 26 edition of the *New York Review of Books* by Frances Fitzgerald draws attention to the ascendancy of the faction led by Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Policy Douglas Feith and Richard Perle, chair of the Defence Policy Board, who have long expressed a desire to overturn the 1993 Oslo Accords and destroy the PA.

The article notes that in 1996 Perle and Feith wrote an advisory paper for the new Likud prime minister and

contemporary rival of Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, "calling upon him to 'make a clean break' with the Oslo peace process and reassert Israel's claim to the West Bank and Gaza. When Netanyahu did not oblige, Feith published an article calling upon Israel to reoccupy the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority. 'The price in blood would be high,' he wrote, but it would be a necessary form of 'detoxification—the only way out of Oslo's web.'"

Even amongst Sharon's most steadfast Republican allies, however, the recklessness of his policy must create difficulties given its impact on public opinion in the Middle East. A September 21 report in the *New York Times* stated that he had informed the Bush administration that he plans to strike back if Iraq attacks Israel, which would make it all but impossible for Washington to maintain any alliance with the Arab regimes. Sharon's threat prompted Rumsfeld to publicly warn in Congress last week that it would be in Israel's "overwhelming best interests" not to intervene if the US went to war with Baghdad.

More importantly, Sharon has succeeded in polarising Israeli society as never before. He does not act out of strength, but with a viciousness born of desperation. He presides over a regime that rests on a narrow base of support made up of right-wing settlers and religious extremists, who have a vested interest in maintaining Israeli control of the Occupied Territories and a theological belief that it is ordained by god. But for the majority of Israelis, Sharon's military adventure has been a disaster that has exacerbated the social crisis created by his pro-big business policies. His war has thrown Israel into an economic slump that demands ever more savage cuts in public spending. This in turn has led to an upsurge in strike activity, while there are signs that political opposition to the war is developing despite the servility of the Labour Party to Likud.



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