

Sharon pledges more to come after Israeli military kills 14 in Gaza Strip

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Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has dismissed international criticism of the October 7 raid on Khan Younis and pledged, “There will be other anti-terrorist operations of this sort in the Gaza Strip”.

Fourteen people were killed in the raid, ostensibly targeting Islamic fundamentalist Hamas, of which only one had any known links with a militant group.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) sent 40 tanks, helicopters and bulldozers into the town of 100,000 inhabitants in an operation denounced by the Palestinian Authority as a massacre and a war crime. The dead were aged between 14 and 52. The IDF fired a missile directly into a crowd killing 10 people.

Palestinian witnesses said that as troops withdrew towards the end of the four-hour raid, local residents came out of hiding to see what had happened. It was at this moment that the Israeli helicopter chose to fire its rocket. The army claims that it fired at armed militants sheltering amidst the crowd, but even if this were true it does not justify a missile attack.

Troops later fired machine guns and assault rifles at a Khan Younis hospital, where hundreds of people had gathered to learn about the fate of family members. One man was killed and three people injured, including a 14-year-old boy hit in the neck and a paramedic struck in the chest.

In total, around 110 Palestinians were wounded—some as young as eight—including 25 who were in critical condition. Emergency department head at the Nasser hospital, Dr Mohammed Abu Dallah, said 27 operations were carried out, some simultaneously in the same room. “Blood covered everything,” he said.

The US was forced to join a chorus of international criticism of Israel, with State Department spokesman Richard Boucher saying that Washington was “deeply troubled” by the raid. The European Union, Russia,

Egypt and United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan all voiced strong criticism.

But Sharon brushed this aside, telling the press, “I think that the operation was a success... Most of the casualties there were terrorists and are terrorists but still there were some civilians. Therefore I express my sorrow for that.”

Israel claims that the raid was prompted by an attack on a Jewish settlement in the northern Gaza Strip using a homemade Palestinian rocket that caused no injuries. But it is part of a pattern whereby Sharon has constantly sought to escalate the conflict with the Palestinians so as to force the US to take on board his own regional ambitions in making plans for war on Iraq.

The raid coincided with a visit by the foreign policy chief of the European Union, Javier Solana—first to Israel the previous day to speak with the two leading Labour Party members in Sharon’s cabinet, Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and that same day to Palestinian Authority Yasser Arafat’s headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah. Solana is seeking to win agreement for a peace plan drawn up by “the quartet”—the United Nations, the US, Russia and the EU. The “road map for peace” is a flimsy affair that promises a final settlement in three years, which, as far as the US is concerned, is aimed at neutralising the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the short term to facilitate war against Iraq.

Solana condemned the Israeli raid, stating, “I think that it is even more dramatic because of the efforts that the Palestinian people were making in order to get out of the way of violence in recent weeks,” he said.

Palestinian Cabinet Minister Saeb Erekat said, “Every time we witness efforts to revive the peace process and

put it back on track, like those being exerted now by Solana, the Israeli government moves to conduct such war crimes and murder innocent civilians because the end game of the Israeli government is to resume full occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.”

Sharon wants US endorsement of his reconquest of the West Bank and Gaza, for this to be designated as part of the so-called “war against terrorism” and to stymie any compromise with the Palestinians unfavourable to Israel.

To this end, he has pushed for Washington to endorse his version of the demand for Palestinian Authority reform—which focuses on the removal of Arafat from office. President Bush has declared his support for this latest example of “regime change”, but favours this being achieved through the encouragement of a pro-US opposition within Palestine itself.

Sharon, however, sees regime change coming about through somewhat more direct means. He has worked to isolate Arafat, while the IDF escalates its killing of civilians and Islamic militants alike. This in turn will prompt retaliation by Hamas and others, whose suicide bombs Sharon views as the best form of public relations in winning support for Israel in the US.

For 10 days last month Arafat was placed under siege. This week, the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* reported that the army has repeatedly carried out manoeuvres, practising an operation forcing Arafat into exile. He is to be snatched and taken out of the country by helicopter to what is described as “an isolated location without any population or settlement in the near vicinity”.

Washington has sought to restrain Sharon, who some in the Bush administration such as Secretary of State Colin Powell view as a wild card that can mess-up America’s regional ambitions in the Middle East. In the past weeks, the US has been directly involved in efforts to calm tensions over water supplies between Israeli, Lebanon and Syria. Various top Washington officials have urged Tel Aviv to maintain a diplomatic silence on US plans for war against Iraq and to back down from threats to become directly involved should war break out.

Nevertheless there is a powerful pro-Sharon lobby that is pushing hard for a more hardline pro-Israeli stance, no matter what difficulties this may cause for America’s Arab allies.

An October 6 article by Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* is one of many noting the curious alliance between hard-line Zionist Jews and Christian evangelists largely based on mutual hostility to Islam. The Christian Coalition is holding a “Christian Solidarity with Israel” rally this week, with speakers including Rev. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Tom DeLay, Jesse Helms and Oliver North.

The Christian far-right is a powerful voice within the Republican Party, but Dowd also notes that Democrats fear Bush “may be able to use a victory over Saddam to fulfil one of the Republicans’ fondest dreams: a realignment of Jewish voters from liberalism to conservatism.”

It may be felt necessary for tactical reasons to tone down the pro-Israeli stance of the Bush administration and attempt to call Sharon to heel, but Washington still wears its real heart on its sleeve.

Immediately prior to the Gaza raid, it was the US that was responsible for the most provocative act to date. On October 1, Bush signed a new US law which called for Jerusalem to be regarded as Israel’s capital, as part of a much broader bill. Under its provisions, Congress demands that the US embassy be moved from Tel Aviv and for Jerusalem to be listed as the Israeli capital in all official documents.

Arafat called the US stand a “catastrophe that Muslims and Christians should not let pass in silence.” He responded by signing into law a nearly two-year-old bill naming Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital.

On October 4, around 2,000 demonstrated against the legislation in Gaza City. At the end of Friday prayers, Palestinians worshipping at the Al Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques in Jerusalem’s disputed Old City threw rocks at Israeli soldiers. Israeli troops responded by firing stun grenades and some 50 soldiers charged into the grand mosque compound known as al-Haram al-Sharif to Muslims and the Temple Mount to Jews.



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