

# Israel to expand Jewish settlements in Hebron

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26 November 2002

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has seized on the November 15 ambush of Israeli security forces to announce that Israel would expand the ultra-orthodox Zionist settlements in the West Bank city of Hebron, tearing up the 1997 Hebron Protocol and paving the way for the expulsion of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat from the West Bank.

The ambush and the ensuing three-hour-long gunfight killed 12 members of the Israeli armed forces, including the regional brigade commander, a colonel and members of his entourage, and injured 15 more, as well as three of the Palestinian fighters.

The Islamic Jihad group claimed responsibility for the attack against the Israeli Defence Forces. The small militant Palestinian group, whose stated mission is to build an Islamic republic in the entire territory of Palestine, said that it was in response to the war crimes committed by Israel. "This is retaliation for the daily crimes and ugly massacres committed by the Zionist occupation against our people," an armed man told news agencies.

Israeli officials initially tried to portray the attack as a massacre of Jewish settlers walking home after Friday night prayers. In reality, the attack took place 15 minutes after the security guards had escorted the settlers back home from the daily pilgrimage to the Cave of Machpelach and targeted only military personnel.

Even after it became clear that all the Israelis who were killed and injured were security forces, border patrolmen or settlement security officers, the government refused to explain why it had said that the casualties were civilians.

The death toll was one of the highest ever inflicted against security personnel. It included the military commander in Hebron, the most senior Israeli officer to die since the Palestinian uprising began in September 2000, and was a major political embarrassment for the government. Hence Sharon's efforts at a cover-up, while at the same time using the incident as an excuse to justify his expansionist policy.

Sharon said that it was vital that there should be territorial contiguity between the 7,000-strong settlement of Kiryat Arba, on an eastern hilltop overlooking the city, the tiny Zionist enclaves and the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a religious site venerated by both Moslems and Jews inside Hebron. In other words, the Palestinians living between the settlement, the enclaves and the Tomb would be forced to leave their homes to make way for the settlers—a policy known throughout the world

as ethnic cleansing.

He told army commanders in Hebron that Israel had to "take advantage of the opportunity" to minimise the number of Palestinians living among Jewish settlers and establish "Jewish points of presence". This was the first time that Sharon had publicly stated that it was the government's policy to build new settlements or expand existing ones, although his actions have long ago made this clear.

Sharon's new hard-line defence minister, Shaul Mofaz, sent in tanks and armoured personnel carriers to take control of the city, thereby ripping up the Hebron Accord. The protocol was signed in 1997 by the then prime minister and now Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Yasser Arafat, who agreed to the division of the city in return for being allowed to transfer his headquarters from Gaza to Ramallah. Under the accord, 80 percent of the city would be under Palestinian control. Israeli soldiers would, however, remain in the religious and commercial centre of the city to protect the Jewish enclaves, even though some 30,000 Palestinians live in this part of the city. Thus Israel controls not only East Jerusalem but also Hebron, the second largest city in the West Bank.

Netanyahu was reported to have justified this reoccupation of the city with the comment "all the accords agreed by Israel have been annulled by Arafat." Playing to the extreme right wing, Netanyahu called for the expulsion of Yasser Arafat. He promised further tough measures against Hebron. "We are going to cleanse the whole area and do the work ourselves," he said.

According to the Israeli news agency Y-net, Sharon told his weekly cabinet meeting, "Today it is clear that the Hebron Protocol is void. It is not being adhered to anyway and has no significance." Implicit in his statement was a threat to Arafat and his continued existence in Ramallah. While Sharon has always wanted to get rid of Arafat, he has thus far felt constrained from doing so by his backers in Washington.

Israeli security forces imposed a curfew and arrested and blindfolded at least 40 Palestinians. They bulldozed the homes of three Palestinian families and uprooted olive trees in the area where the ambush occurred, just as they are being harvested. Olives constitute the Palestinians' main source of income.

The settlers wasted no time. Dozens of youth moved three shipping containers to where the homes and olive groves had been and established a new "outpost"—the basis for a new

settlement. Zvi Katsover, a leader of the Hebron settlement, said, "We have created a new settlement outpost, and it would have been a historic sin not to have made use of this occasion," he said. "We have to cleanse the ground to ensure an Israeli territorial continuity between Kiryat Anba and Hebron," he continued. Katsover said that they would build 1,000 homes in the area. "I trust Sharon to implement the project," he added.

"This is more ours than Tel Aviv," Meir Menachem, a teacher of history and Judaism and a leader in Kiryat Arba told the *New York Times*. "This is our land, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We returned here after 2,000 years, and we don't have any other place to go," he stressed. "Until the Messiah will come there will be no peace," he concluded.

"There won't be just a Jewish neighbourhood here," declared Benny Elon, the leader of the radical right-wing "Homeland" party. "There will be a Jewish town here," he added at a rally in Hebron.

According to the *Guardian*, Jonathan Stern, 19, from Kiryat Arba, said the houses and trees where the attackers hid would be removed. "This whole area will be cleared in a couple of weeks. We will only live in peace when the Palestinians are expelled from here. The government will realise this when they have exhausted every other option."

According to the *New York Times*, "In a turbulent crowd, they [the settlers] pounded on the doors of nearby Palestinian houses and then smeared the pale stone with blue graffiti: 'Every Arab killed for me is a holiday,' and, over and over, 'Vengeance.'"

Later the government issued an order for the demolition of a further 15 Palestinian homes on the route from Kiryat Arba to the Jewish enclave in Hebron. In addition, Israeli helicopters fired missiles at and destroyed a Palestinian metal workshop in Gaza City, injuring two Palestinians.

The Bush administration, in an attempt not to jeopardise support for its war preparations against Iraq, cautioned Sharon against retaliating with force against the Palestinians. The sincerity of its commitment can be judged against the announcement that Bush had authorised an increase in military assistance to Israel, subject to approval by Congress, which the Republicans now control. Military aid for 2004 is set to rise to \$2.16 billion from \$2.1 billion for 2003.

Hebron has long been the arena for bitter clashes between the settlers and the local Palestinian population. In 1994 Baruch Goldstein, a US-born religious fanatic from the Kiryat Arba settlement, shot dead 29 and injured more than 100 people praying in the Mosque built over Machpelach, the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Goldstein's grave became a flower-strewn shrine for Jewish extremists.

Israel has 1,000 soldiers, a small brigade, stationed inside the city of Hebron to ensure the security of just 450 settlers who live there alongside more than 130,000 Palestinians. Hebron is the only place in the West Bank where Zionist settlements are located inside Palestinian neighbourhoods, thereby creating tensions and ugly, often violent confrontations on a daily basis.

The settlers loot and destroy Palestinian property and land, and abuse the Palestinian population of Hebron with total impunity. The Israeli armed forces ignore the settlers' crimes.

Last June, Israeli forces took over most areas of the West Bank, including Hebron. The troops scaled back their operations last month and stopped patrolling most Palestinian-ruled parts of Hebron.

The settlers are far from popular. A recent poll reported that 72 percent of Israelis support the evacuation of "illegal outposts" and 62 percent approve the use of force to evacuate the settlers. The secular majority loathes the settlers' ultra-nationalist and religious ideology. The defence of the settlers has led to a massive increase in the number of desertions among Israel's armed forces, which depend upon reservists.

Gideon Levi, a journalist who covers the Israeli injustices towards the Palestinians, wrote in *Ha'aretz*, "For the past two years, the Palestinians have been imprisoned in their places of residence in a manner without precedent in the history of the Israeli occupation. Hunger, humiliation and daily danger to life—far greater than the danger Israelis face—are their lot. When they gather these days in the evening for the meal that breaks the month-long Ramadan fast during the day, they see tanks in the streets and desperate poverty in their homes. These are classic conditions for the growth of terrorism."

Adam Keller, a spokesman for the Gush Shalom peace movement, said, "This evening, we joined a *Peace Now* vigil outside the Defence Ministry, to protest that mad idea, that abuse of bloodshed as a pretext for an act which can only lead to further bloodshed. To call for withdrawal and the dismantling of settlements at Hebron in particular and in the occupied territories in general. The idea is to continue with these vigils every day at 6 p.m., for the rest of this week. Not that anybody can entertain any illusion: Sharon, if re-elected in January—as the opinion polls at present give him a good chance to be—will for sure construct the settlers' promenade of death and other costly follies."

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Husam Khader, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, called for an end to the violence, including suicide bombings inside Israel. He said, "We need to stop the attacks because they are uniting the Israelis against our legitimate rights and our national cause. On the other hand, the brigades must step up their attacks against the occupation forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."



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