

Israel: Ethnic cleansing is now official government policy

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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his ministers have openly declared that Palestinians must be driven out to make way for Jewish settlements in land occupied illegally since the 1967 war.

Sharon and his cabinet utilised the November 15 ambush of Israeli security forces in Hebron by Islamic Jihad and the ensuing gun battle that killed 12 members of the Israeli armed forces and injured 15, as well as three of the Palestinian attackers, to make their announcements.

Sharon himself called for “territorial contiguity” between Kiryat Arba, a settlement overlooking Hebron, the tiny Zionist enclaves and the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a religious site venerated by both Moslems and Jews, inside the city. 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”. He described this as “an appropriate Zionist response” to such attacks.

Sharon’s newly appointed foreign affairs minister and main leadership rival, Benyamin Netanyahu, was even more explicit. “We are going to cleanse the whole area and do the work ourselves,” he declared.

Israeli security forces immediately imposed a curfew, arrested and blindfolded at least 40 Palestinians, bulldozed the homes of Palestinian families and uprooted their olive groves.

This gave the ultra-nationalist settlers the green light to establish an “outpost”—the basis for a new settlement—on the vacant land and daub it with the racist slogan “Death to Arabs.” The settlers own language echoed the government’s calls for ethnic cleansing. The leader of the Hebron settlement, Zvi Katsover, said, “We have to cleanse the ground to ensure an Israeli territorial continuity between Kiryat Arba and Hebron.” A thousand new homes are to be built in the area. “I trust Sharon to implement the project,” he added.

At a rally in Hebron, Benny Elon, leader of the ultra-right wing Moledet (Homeland) party, declared, “There won’t be just a Jewish neighbourhood here. There will be a Jewish town here.”

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 it’s 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.

The expulsion of communities from their homeland, like genocide,

is recognised as a crime against humanity. The 1948 International Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants, including the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, outlaw expulsions, population transfers, resettlement and forced relocation of any kind.

But the statements by Sharon and Netanyahu elicited no response from Israel’s main backer, the United States, or any other Western power. And even the liberal media did little more than report the words of Sharon and Netanyahu. Not one of the editorial writers of the *New York Times* or Britain’s *Guardian* has seen fit to comment on Israel’s explicit advocacy of ethnic cleansing.

The deafening silence on Sharon’s gross abuse of human rights is particularly marked, given that it takes place against the backdrop of the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague. The central purpose of The Hague tribunal is to find Milosevic guilty of having politically sanctioned the ethnic cleansing of Albanians from the Yugoslav province of Kosovo—to confirm the existence of a “chain of command” between the Serb irregular forces in Kosovo and Belgrade, and so justify the US-led bombardment of Yugoslavia.

That trial has cost millions of dollars, lasted more than nine months and taken evidence from more than 100 witnesses. Despite this, to date the prosecution has failed to demonstrate that Milosevic himself either masterminded the ethnic cleansing or ever explicitly ordered the expulsion of the Albanian population of Kosovo.

There would be no such difficulty were Sharon to be brought to trial for his treatment of the Palestinians, or if Netanyahu joined him in the dock. The Israeli government has explicitly issued instructions to the armed forces and publicly announced policies that are universally recognised as constituting ethnic cleansing. Yet the world’s statesmen, the United Nations, the press and mainstream political commentators keep silent.

The West’s political blind spot serves to underline the hypocrisy of their claim to have gone to war against Milosevic based on moral considerations. The break-up of Yugoslavia was desired by the Western powers in order to secure control of the strategically vital Balkan region.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its statement of May 24, 1999, “Why is NATO at war with Yugoslavia? World power, oil and gold”:

“The immediate material gains that might be plundered from Kosovo are dwarfed by the far greater potential for enrichment that beckons in regions further to the east where the NATO powers have developed immense interests over the past five years.... [T]he dismantling of the USSR has created a power vacuum in Eastern

Europe, Russia and Central Asia that makes a new division of the world inevitable. The principal significance of Yugoslavia, at this critical juncture, is that it lies on the Western periphery of a massive swathe of territory into which the major world powers aim to expand.”

The statement continued, “Involved in the reintegration of the territory of the former USSR into world capitalism is the absorption, by massive Western transnational companies, of trillions of dollars in valuable raw materials that are vital to the imperialist powers. The greatest untapped oil reserves in the world are located in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan). These resources are now being divided among the major capitalist countries. This is the fuel that is feeding renewed militarism and must lead to new wars of conquest by the imperialist powers against local opponents, as well as ever-greater conflicts among the imperialists themselves.”

The same base economic and political considerations that in reality shaped the hostility of the Western powers towards Milosevic’s regime now determine their acquiescence in face of Sharon’s criminal actions. In short, nothing must be allowed to get in the way of the drive by the US and the major imperialist powers to secure control of the oil riches of the Middle East. On occasion Sharon’s actions against the Palestinians have been criticised because they have been considered counterproductive by Washington at a time when it is seeking to secure the support of the Arab regimes for war against Iraq. But fundamentally the US views Israel as the dominant military power in the region and its main and most reliable proxy.

Israel was founded in 1948 on the basis of the forcible expulsion of tens of thousands of Palestinians as the precondition for establishing a religious state with a Jewish majority population. Ever since it has repeatedly resorted to expulsion, population transfer, resettlement and forced relocation of the Palestinians.

In the aftermath of World War II and the Nazi holocaust, the United Nations voted in 1947 for the partition of Palestine into separate states for the Jews and the Palestinians. During the 1947-49 war between the Jews and the Arab states that followed, the actions of Zionist terror gangs played a major role in driving the Palestinians from their homes. In all, some 700,000 Palestinians became refugees in other countries and were not allowed to return to Israel. According to the UN, the original refugees and their descendants now number some four million. Many of those who remained were expelled from their homes and resettled elsewhere within Israel. The Law of Return, passed in 1950, and the Citizenship Law of 1952 granted every Jew the right to immediate citizenship upon arrival in Israel.

In 1967, after the defeat of the Arab states in the June war, there was another population transfer. About 250,000 of the 1948 refugees who had lived in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza for 20 years fled.

Afterwards, there were attempts by successive governments to implement a forced transfer. The Israeli forces expelled Palestinians living near the cease-fire lines and destroyed their villages and towns. Kalkilya was only the most well-known example. The Israeli authorities offered financial incentives and free transportation to Palestinians who were willing to leave, but there were few takers. Some of the refugees in the Gaza Strip were transferred to camps in the Jordan valley. The security forces demolished the homes of suspected militants and those of their families and neighbours and deported them to Lebanon.

In 1982, following the invasion of Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese moved north to the suburbs of Beirut to

avoid the war and Israeli control of southern Lebanon. An international investigation by six jurists, including the cofounder of Amnesty International, found Israel guilty of attempted “ethnocide” and “genocide” against the Palestinian people. The report stated that there were no valid reasons “under international law for its invasion of Lebanon, for the manner in which it conducted hostilities, or its actions as an occupying force.”

Ever since 1967, Israel has illegally built settlements in the territories captured in the June war. More than 200,000 settlers now live in 200 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, while a further 180,000 live in what was once East Jerusalem and its environs. The settlement policy, which escalated after the 1993 Oslo Accords, involved demolishing Palestinian homes, seizing their land by military or legal means, and driving the Palestinians from the towns and villages.

Sharon’s government incorporates or rests on ultra-orthodox and settler-based political movements that explicitly advocate ethnic cleansing under the guise of “population transfer”. The Moledet (Homeland) party is the ideological successor to the proscribed far-right Kach movement of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. Its leader Rehavam Ze’evi was, until his assassination in October 2001, a minister in Sharon’s government. More recently, Gamla, a group founded by former Israeli military officers and settlers and funded by American Jews, published detailed plans for the “complete elimination of the Arab demographic threat to Israel” by forcibly expelling all Palestinians, including Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Palestinian citizens of Israel within a three- to five-year period.

It is these extreme right-wing elements who now determine official government policy.

To the extent that the policies of ethnic cleansing have now become acceptable to the Israeli government, then the same applies to the US and its allies. Washington’s support for Sharon signals that no crimes against humanity are too gross for the US to contemplate in the name of “the war on terrorism”. It is a warning of the kinds of methods that the Bush administration will employ to subjugate the Middle East region and so gain control of its oil riches.



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