

Israel: Sharon government steps up attacks on Palestinians

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The Israeli Defence Forces shot two International Solidarity Movement activists in the town of Jenin on the West Bank. This follows the murder of Rachel Corrie, who was crushed to death last month beneath an Israel armoured bulldozer as she tried to prevent it demolishing a Palestinian house.

It was pure chance that both men survived these latest attacks. Brian Avery, a 24-year-old from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was shot in the face and taken to hospital with serious wounds. Lassel Smith from Denmark was shot in the leg. Both had gone to the West Bank to act as human shields by making peaceful protests.

By targeting foreign volunteers in this way Sharon—who enjoys the full support of the Bush administration, which did not respond to the murder of Rachel Corrie—is sending an unambiguous message to the world that he does not intend to give up any territory to a Palestinian state and that his solution to the Palestinian question is genocide.

His plan to extend the separation fence that is supposedly being built to protect Israelis from suicide bombers underlines his intentions. The fence is officially described as a security measure that is not intended to become a political border, but in the last few weeks Sharon has dramatically revised its proposed line.

Sharon wants to realign the original fence so that it will take in more of the illegal Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank—an estimated 40,000 additional Israeli settlers. Large areas of Palestinian land would be seized and in some cases villages would be cut off from their fields and wells.

He now proposes to build a second fence between the West Bank and Jordan.

The new proposals would put the city of Jericho on the Israeli side of the fence. Large parts of the Jordan valley would come within the fence and more than half the West Bank. In effect the Palestinians would be enclosed with a giant prison camp.

Sharon's plan amounts to the creation of a ghetto like those in which the Nazis imprisoned the Jewish populations of Europe. In the Nazi ghettos Jews were starved and

subject to daily humiliations and brutalities—a pattern being recreated on the West Bank and Gaza.

Since the beginning of the Iraq war nine Palestinians have been killed. Compared to the 80 that were killed in the previous month, this has been taken by some commentators as evidence of the Israeli government's restraint in response to pressure from the US not to alienate the Arab regimes whose help it needs to attack Iraq.

Such as it is, this restraint has been very limited. On Sunday, April 6 two Palestinians were killed and 15 wounded in a raid on the village of Al-Msaddar in the Gaza Strip. The previous day a Palestinian was shot dead near the Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba near Hebron. This followed an attack on the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza Strip in which four men were killed. In Nablus a suspected Hamas activist was shot dead in front of his wife and child, while in Qalqiliya a 14-year-old boy was killed when he opened his door to look at troops outside. Israeli sources claim that he was shot while running away.

In Tulkarm on the West Bank 2,000 Palestinian men and boys were rounded up by the Israeli armed forces. They were held in a schoolyard before being dumped several miles outside the town and told to stay away for three days while the army searched the town.

As US forces find themselves embroiled in vicious street fighting in Iraq, the Israeli military has been quick to offer advice about the techniques they have developed in Palestinian towns and refugee camps. Their methods of demolishing houses with armoured bulldozers and moving from house to house by blowing holes in the walls are of particular interest to the American military.

US marines have been training with the Israeli army at a mock-up of a Palestinian town in the Negev desert and soldiers speaking English have been seen on operations with the Israelis on the West Bank.

US strategists have made a careful study of video footage shot in Jenin when the Israelis attacked the refugee camp there a year ago. While the rest of the world was horrified at the scale of the destruction and the toll in human life, the

Pentagon has been learning the lessons for the assault on Baghdad.

Martin van Creveld, a military strategist from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem who has close ties with the Israeli military, recently told the *Guardian* how he was consulted by the Pentagon. He told them “How to clear streets house by house, particularly using bulldozers; they’re very useful in this kind of war to break houses.”

He warned them against using helicopters in Baghdad as the Israelis have done in Gaza and the West Bank because “The Palestinians are empty handed compared to the weaponry the Iraqis have.”

Not only are the Israelis offering military advice, but they are also urging the US to attack other regimes in the area. Israeli National Infrastructure Minister Yosef Paritsky has called for an oil pipeline to be reopened between Mosul in northern Iraq and the Israeli port of Haifa. Last used in 1948, this pipeline would pass through Syria. It would not be a viable proposition without regime change in that country as well as Iraq.

The advantages for Israel, which currently has to source its oil in Russia because of the hostility of neighbouring Arab states, are obvious. But for the US such a scheme would have advantages in that it would circumvent the Gulf.

Dr. Hooman Peimani told the *Asia Times*, “According to the Israeli minister, the United States will back his project since the pipeline would bring Iraqi oil directly from Iraq to the Mediterranean.”

Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair has warned against extending the war to Syria. Both he and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw have signalled that the British government is not in favour of such a move. This has added to the already acute tensions between Israel and the UK.

In return for Blair’s support over Iraq, Bush has shown himself willing to make a token show of gratitude. He has made a trip to Ireland in support of the devolution process and, more significantly, he has repeated his administration’s support for the Road Map plan for an Israeli/Palestinian agreement. At a joint press conference with Tony Blair, Bush said that he was “strongly committed to implementing the road map”.

But Secretary of State Colin Powell’s most high-profile statement on the “Road Map” for peace was made on March 30 before the leading pro-Israel lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Powell was speaking alongside Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and framed his endorsement of the Road Map in terms that were more than merely acceptable to Sharon. Not only was progress made dependent on Palestinian “reform”—i.e., the demotion of Yasser Arafat in favour of an even more pliant and pro-Western leadership—but it was accompanied by direct threats

against Iran and above all Syria.

“Syria now faces a critical choice,” Powell warned. “Syria can continue to support terrorist groups and the dying regime of Saddam Hussein, or it can embark on a different and more hopeful course.... Syria bears the responsibility for its choices, and for the consequences.”

The “Road Map for peace” sounds more and more like a road map to further wars in the Middle East and offers nothing of substance to the Palestinians. Even if it were implemented it would result in the Palestinians living in a series of bantustans on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that would be no more independent than the so-called homelands that apartheid South Africa set up for black Africans. The Palestinians would continue to be brutalised by the Israeli army whenever it was deemed that the Palestinian Authority had not done enough to suppress the population, which would continue to be economically dependent on Israel.

But even that is not enough for the Sharon government. Dov Weisglass, Sharon’s chief aide, told Israel Radio that the government would reject the Road Map. Israel wants more than 100 changes to the proposals. He made clear that Israel was prepared to break off negotiations if its demands were not met.

As the *Washington Times* states in a recent editorial, the Sharon government has support among the Republican right for its intransigence. It quotes Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy and Joshua Muravchic of the American Enterprise Institute. Both challenge the validity of the Road Map because it criticises Israeli violence against the Palestinians.

Their main objection, however, is that it would give the European Union and the United Nations a role in reaching a settlement. Having denied Europe, the UN or Russia a role in the war against Iraq or the postwar regime that is to be created, the most right-wing elements around the Bush administration are hardly likely to allow them a key role in relation to an Israeli/Palestinian settlement. With the antagonism between Europe and America growing ever sharper, Sharon hopes to exploit this to advance his perspective for a Greater Israel.



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