

Israel steps up its war against the Palestinians

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28 October 2003

The Sharon regime in Israel—secure in the knowledge that it has Washington’s unconditional support—has stepped up its military attacks on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and the West Bank, occupied illegally since 1967. In the process, it has signalled its contempt for international conventions on human rights, the United Nations General Assembly, and indeed the formal strictures of the US-brokered “Road Map” for peace in the Middle East.

Far from dismantling the “security wall” it has erected in the West Bank, the Sharon government has vowed to press on with it. And it has announced that it will also go ahead with the expansion of the Zionist settlements.

As usual, the world’s press barely reported the incidents, much less condemned them.

On October 20, the Israeli army launched a series of air strikes on the Gaza Strip that have killed at least 11 people and wounded about 100, mostly civilians. Helicopter gun ships targeted a vehicle driven by a Hamas member and a building that Israel claimed was a Hamas weapons workshop.

The air strikes followed minor Palestinian rocket attacks against an Israeli town near Gaza. They came only days after Israel mounted the heaviest assault on the lives, homes and land of Palestinians in the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza in three years.

The *Guardian*’s Chris McGreal authored an October 27 report that made clear the scale of the violence and destruction perpetrated in Rafah, which has been assailed by the UN as “disproportionate” punishment. He explains that over the past two weeks the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) has mounted what it calls “Operation Root Canal,” which is ostensibly aimed at uncovering and destroying dozens of tunnels that Israel claims are being used to bring in arms to terrorist groups—including surface-to-air missiles.

The operation involves some 65 tanks, armoured vehicles and bulldozers, and left 18 Palestinians dead, including three children, and more than 120 wounded. “Just three tunnels were found, and no weapons. But in the process, the military crushed or rocketed nearly 200 homes, throwing about 1,700 people onto the street. The army claimed it never happened, that just 10 homes were wrecked, and then sent back the bulldozers to grind the evidence that the houses ever existed into the dirt,” writes McGreal.

He notes that Palestinians have killed three soldiers and one settler in Rafah since the start of the Intifada, while the IDF has killed 280 Palestinians.

The magnitude of the Israeli retaliation and the scale of the casualties were so disproportionate to the damage caused by the Palestinians’ primitive weapons that even members of Ariel Sharon’s right-wing coalition cabinet were moved to object—although not to resign from the government.

“We should not carry out mass killings in order to strike two or three terrorists,” the BBC reported Interior Minister Avraham Poraz of

the Shinui Party as saying. Another Shinui Party cabinet member, Yosef Paritsky, the minister of infrastructure, urged Israel to apologise to and compensate the victims. He said, “We are not at war with the Palestinian population.”

Paritsky fools only himself with such comments. He is a member of a government that has been waging a continuous war against the Palestinians that has included political assassinations, the killing and maiming of civilians, collective punishments, house demolitions and deportations. Curfews and roadblocks have made travel to work, school and hospital all but impossible and brought the majority of the population close to starvation.

“Is it conceivable that somebody on our side has decided that all of Palestinian society is the target?” wrote Alex Fishman in *Yediot Aharonot*.

Dr. Shemuel Bar, an Israeli military analyst, evidently believes this to be the case. He was quoted in the *Jerusalem Post* as saying that the air strikes were aimed at creating a “living hell” for Palestinians and fomenting a popular backlash against the Islamic fighters. However, far from turning the Palestinians against the Islamic Resistance Movement, Israeli action has only served to increase support for Hamas, which has grown by 60 percent since the start of the intifada three years ago.

Stung by the criticism, the army has taken the rare step of releasing a short video that purports to show that it did not fire a missile into a crowded area but targeted a car driven by a “group of terrorists” along a quiet road. The car blew up, burning two members of Hamas to death. A man in a nearby car was also killed. But it fails to answer how such a political assassination killed so many innocent bystanders.

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon has rejected Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei’s call for a cease-fire, which would include an end to Israeli raids as well as attacks by Palestinian militants. He demanded instead that the Palestinian Authority, whose infrastructure has been totally demolished by the Israeli army, disarm and disband the militants to prevent all attacks on Israelis. Sharon’s demand for such a crackdown, even if it were possible, would result in nothing short of civil war.

On October 22, the Israeli army shot and killed three “suspected” Palestinian militants, one in Qalqilya and two in two separate incidents in Hebron, the Palestinian town that has a 400-strong Zionist enclave responsible for countless provocations against the inhabitants and guarded by 1,500 troops.

In another incident aimed at provoking the Palestinians into further acts of terrorism that can be used as an excuse to forcibly expel them from the occupied territories, Israeli troops shot dead an elderly Palestinian near Elei Sinai, a settlement in the northern Gaza Strip.

The army at first tried to claim that he was trying to enter the settlement, but later an army spokesperson admitted that the elderly man was known to them and was not considered a threat. Hours later,

Palestinian gunmen killed three Israeli soldiers, two women and a man in an attack on Netzarim in the central Gaza Strip. Security forces gave chase to and killed one of the gunmen, Samir Fouda, a Hamas militant from Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza.

In yet another serious breach of international law, Israeli troops raided two West Bank hospitals and seized suspected Palestinian militants. In the early hours of October 25, Israeli troops pulled up in jeeps, ran into the Anglican Hospital in Nablus, kicking open doors in a room-to-room search and seized Khaled Hamid, a Hamas member who was being treated in the intensive care unit. Dr. Annan Abdel Hak told Associated Press, "I explained to the soldiers how critical his condition is. Then they removed the machines from his body." According to an Israeli army spokeswoman, Hamid had been badly injured when a bomb he was carrying went off prematurely.

On October 21, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the wall that Israel has built around much of the West Bank that cuts deep into Palestinian territory, ghettoises the Palestinians, and effectively redraws the boundaries between Israel and the West Bank. To the north of Jerusalem, the wall will include thousands of Palestinians who do not have permission to be in the city, while to the south it will separate thousands of Palestinians from their families, workplaces and schools. Others will be cut off from the city, jeopardising their citizenship of Jerusalem and right to access. Thus, the wall serves as yet another measure to make life for the Palestinians so intolerable that they will voluntarily leave Jerusalem and the Israeli side of the wall, an example of ethnic cleansing, to give it its proper name.

The resolution demanded that Israel "stop and reverse the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," and said that the barrier was "in contradiction to relevant provisions of international law". But the European powers bowed to US pressure and refused to support Arab demands for it to be referred to the International Court of Justice at the Hague for a legal ruling. Unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding.

The resolution was carried overwhelmingly, but the US joined Israel and the tiny US-dominated but nominally independent entities of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands in voting against it. Israel now has the green light from Washington to press on regardless with effecting a population transfer, seizing Palestinian land and waging war against the Palestinians. So, while under the terms of the resolution, if Israel has not complied with the resolution within a month, UN secretary general Kofi Annan has to come up with suggestions for further action, the resolution is in effect a dead letter.

Although President Bush had said earlier in the year that the wall was a "problem," now the Republican administration has signalled that no crime against humanity or breach of international conventions is too great for it to consider acceptable.

Ariel Sharon, in his address to the first session of the Knesset after its recess, pledged to complete the wall within the next 12 months. Ehud Olmert, the deputy prime minister, responding to the UN resolution, told Israeli radio, "The fence will continue being built and we will go on taking care of the security of Israel's citizens."

In another measure aimed at consolidating Israel's position on the West Bank and further antagonising the Palestinians, Israel's housing minister invited tenders to construct more than 300 new homes in Karnei Shomron, a settlement in the north of the West Bank, and Givat Ze'ev, north of Jerusalem. It follows an announcement earlier in the month of the construction of a further 600 new homes in

settlements in the West Bank. According to Peace Now, more than 1,500 such invitations to tender have been published this year.

Not only is it illegal under international conventions to expropriate and build on land under occupation, this is land that is supposed to be handed over to the Palestinians for a state. While President Bush has called for a freeze on the settlements, this time calling them "unhelpful," Israel clearly believes that there are no serious objections and that this, combined with Washington's preoccupation with Iraq and the 2004 elections, means it has carte blanche to do as it pleases.

At 2.30 a.m. on October 26, the Sharon regime carried out yet another atrocity. Israeli troops got more than 2,000 Palestinian residents of Al-Zahara in Gaza out of their beds and proceeded to blow up in a single massive explosion three 13-story buildings and scores of apartments nearby, making at least 1,000 people homeless. The tower blocks were under construction by the Palestinian Preventive Security, the main security force in Gaza charged with reining in the Palestinian militants.

The Israeli authorities claimed that militants were using the buildings as observation posts. One senior source said that plans to demolish the buildings had been drawn up 11 months ago, but had been put on hold to allow the PA time to stop the militants from using them.

Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, called the demolition a "war crime," saying that more than 140 apartments had been destroyed. Terje Roed-Larsen, the United Nations envoy, also "strongly deplored" the demolitions. "Destroying property as a punitive measure is a clear violation of the rules of international law," he said. "Such actions are also counterproductive towards Israel's legitimate security concerns, for they foster anger and despair among the Palestinians," he added.

Later that morning, Israeli troops shot dead at least one Palestinian near the Gush Katif settlement bloc. A hospital in Gaza City reported that a 17-year-old died of wounds received in the raid by Israeli troops on Gaza last Wednesday, while another man died of his injuries received in the West Bank city of Nablus.



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