

Sharon stirs up conflict in pursuit of Greater Israel policy

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Israel has taken an unprecedented series of measures designed to widen the sphere of conflict beyond the West Bank and Gaza. They are aimed at heightening tensions with its neighbours, Syria and Lebanon, provoking a conflict that can be used as a pretext to launch a supposedly defensive campaign as a cover for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's expansionist policy.

Defence Minister Shaoul Mofaz has moved troops up to Israel's northern border with Lebanon. This follows the death of an Israeli soldier on border patrol near Israel's most northern town of Metullah.

While Israel blamed Hezbollah, the militant Lebanese group, for the attack, Hezbollah denied any involvement in the incident. The Lebanese authorities said that Israeli troops had made an unprovoked attack on two vehicles on a road in the south of the country. The following day, Israel sent jets and helicopter gunships over the border, killing a four-year-old Lebanese boy in the village of Houla.

These events follow hard on the heels of Israel's provocative bombing of Ain Saheb, a Palestinian refugee camp, north west of Damascus, in Syria. The air strike that flattened part of the camp was the first direct attack on Syria for 30 years.

No one should be taken in by Sharon's claim that it was in retaliation for the suicide attack on a Haifa restaurant that killed 20 people and wounded a further 60. The Haifa bombing was carried by a young woman from Jenin in the West Bank in revenge for the deaths last June of her brother and cousin, killed by Israeli troops in their pursuit of Islamic Jihad. She had no connection with the refugee camp at Ain Saheb.

The attack is a signal that Syria is now firmly within Israel's sights and that Israel has the power to hit at targets deep inside the country. "Israel will not be deterred from protecting its citizens and will strike its enemies in every place and in every way," said Sharon at a memorial service for Israeli soldiers killed during the 1973 war.

Sharon acts in the knowledge that he has been given a green light by the Bush administration. Syria has sought a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the raid as an unprovoked attack and an illegal act against another state, but this was blocked by Washington which has signally failed to condemn Israel. President George W. Bush told reporters in

Washington that he had telephoned Sharon and told him, "Like I have consistently done, that Israel's got a right to defend itself, that Israel must not feel constrained in defending the homeland."

Bush's statement will tell Sharon and his right-wing backers that Israel's actions against Syria are deemed to be consistent with America's own intentions in the Middle East and a threat that Syria could meet the same fate as Iraq if it does not cut off all lines of support to the Palestinians—real or imagined.

Israel responded with an announcement that states "harbouring terrorists" were legitimate targets. Foreign Ministry spokesman Gideon Meir said, "Israel views every state harbouring terrorist organisations and the leaders of those terrorist organisations who are attacking innocent citizens of the state of Israel as legitimate targets out of self defence."

It has sent a map purporting to pinpoint "Palestinian terror networks" in Damascus to the press. Israel has in effect served notice that it intends to exploit the excuse used by the US and Britain to launch their criminal war against Iraq to justify whatever military attacks it sees fit.

Hezbollah's general secretary, Syyed Hassan Nasrallah, has responded by warning that it will retaliate if there are more raids on either Syria or Lebanon.

Sharon has long sought to get the US to eliminate his regional rivals, particularly Iraq and Iran, or allow Israel to do so. The war on Iraq, the general talk of a "war against terror" and the citing of Iran and Syria as part of Bush's "axis of evil" have spurred on Sharon's ambitions. Washington has on occasion acted to restrain Sharon, but the Bush administration's reluctance to support him was only tactical because of the need to maintain the support of the Arab regimes.

Sharon has settled on provocations against Syria as the best way of escalating the situation. More importantly from Sharon's perspective, outside of a political conflict with Syria and an invasion of Lebanon, where Syria is the chief power broker, Sharon's project of a Greater Israel is simply not possible.

Anyone who has the slightest familiarity with Sharon's bloody record will recognise his political strategy. Sharon was after all the architect of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

That invasion, which led to the bombing and siege of Beirut,

the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the atrocities at Sabra and Shatilla, was also presented as a defensive reaction to Palestinian raids on Israel's northern towns. It was prepared through numerous provocations against the Palestinians and Lebanon and was designed to torpedo an earlier peace plan that recognised Israel's right to exist and called for a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 war.

Then as now, such a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cut across Israel's plans, only partially implemented in the June 1967 war, to expand its borders to the Litani River. Such "natural" boundaries would be easier to defend and give Israel access to the headwaters of the Jordan River. It was to take 18 years before Israel finally pulled out of Lebanon. But 21 years after the siege of Beirut, as far as Sharon is concerned, Lebanon is still unfinished business.

It was Sharon who, in September 2000, incited the present intifada by entering the Temple Mount with a huge armed entourage. That too was a deliberate provocation aimed at scuppering any final chance of salvaging the 1993 Oslo Accords and expanding the settlements on the West Bank.

More recently, while appearing to assent to Bush's Road Map that called for negotiations for a mini Palestinian state and an immediate cessation of the intifada by the Palestinians, Sharon mounted one provocative attack after another in order to torpedo even a truncated Palestinian state on land that his political constituents, Israel's ultra-nationalists, claimed as their own.

Likewise, in the name of security, he has built a "security wall" that cuts deep into the occupied West Bank, effectively seizing control of large swathes of Palestinian land and confining the Palestinians to a humiliating and squalid ghetto existence.

Regarding Lebanon and Syria, this is not the first occasion in recent times that Israel has upped the ante. In September 2002, Sharon raised the political temperature by threatening military action against Lebanon if it diverted the waters of the Wazzani and Hasbani rivers, tributaries of the river Jordan that flow into Israel.

Israel also accused Syria of supplying Hezbollah militants in south Lebanon with thousands of surface-to-air missiles capable of striking northern Israeli towns and cities and demanded that Syria rein in the Islamic fundamentalist group. Hezbollah is on the US's list of proscribed terrorist organisations.

On that occasion, the US dispatched engineers and envoys to calm the situation and prevent the conflict cutting across its plans for war against Iraq. This time, at least some sections of the Bush administration view the prospect of escalating the conflict with equanimity and Sharon feels he has carte blanche to do as he pleases.

Even more ominously, within days of Israel seeking to widen the conflict, Israeli and US officials have confirmed that US-

supplied Harpoon cruise missiles armed with nuclear warheads are being deployed in Israel's fleet of three Dolphin-class submarines. With one submarine designated for the Persian Gulf, another for the Eastern Mediterranean and the third on standby, Israel, the region's only nuclear power, has the ability to strike not only its Arab neighbours but also Iran. The announcement is designed to browbeat Syria and Iran into meeting US-Israeli demands.

The *Los Angeles Times* cited officials as saying that the sea-launch capability gives Israel the ability to target Iran more easily should it develop its own nuclear weapons. In 1981, Israel, in its raid on Iraq's Osirek nuclear plant, had launched a risky, low flying mission across Jordan and Iraq in a bid to evade their radar systems. Sea power would make a similar operation very much easier.

The rising tensions among Israel's neighbours take place as Sharon has mounted a dramatic escalation in the repression of the Palestinians. Last week Defence Minister Shaoul Mofaz authorised the rapid call up of two infantry reserve battalions of 800 troops each. He has ordered the reinforcement of defensive positions and clamped down on the already draconian travel restrictions on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

On October 10 Israeli armed forces launched a massive two-day invasion of Rafah, the largest refugee camp in the Gaza Strip and home to more than 70,000 people. Eyewitnesses said that more than 40 tanks were seen pulling out of the camp on Saturday night. At first, the troops penned the Palestinians into their homes and then went in and demanded at gunpoint that the residents leave. Thirty minutes later, the tanks had bulldozed the houses. Israel claimed that the houses were used to fire on security forces or concealed tunnel entrances. Eight Palestinians, including two boys aged eight and 15, were killed and more than 50 were injured.

Peter Hansen, commissioner general for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) who went to assess the scene said it looked as though it had been hit by an earthquake. Up to 120 homes were flattened which means, given the shortage of housing and cramped living conditions, that up to 1,500 Palestinians have been left homeless.

For Sharon and the Israeli financial elite, the stepping up of the war against the Palestinians and any military operation against an external enemy also serves another purpose: to smother the mounting class conflict at home, where strikes are a daily occurrence. Under Israeli law, putting the country on a war footing with a major call up of reservists automatically renders strike action illegal.



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