

Israel escalates war of terror in Gaza

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This last week has seen a massive escalation in Israel's criminal war of terror against the Palestinians in Gaza. Distraught Palestinians are fleeing their homes with such possessions as they can carry as Israel mounts a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's purpose is to establish the necessary "facts on the ground" that will weaken the militant groups, drive many Palestinians into exile, enable Israel to "disengage" from an emasculated Gaza and maintain control of what would be a glorified prison camp from outside its borders. In short, Sharon's pledge of a Gaza withdrawal would be only a staging post in bringing to fruition his vision of a Greater Israel that extends to the Jordan river.

The Israeli offensive has been met by fierce Palestinian resistance and has led to some of the worst casualties and destruction since the uprising began in September 2000. At least 31 Palestinians have been killed, including children as young as 11, and scores more have been injured.

More than a thousand people have been made homeless in the past week as Israel creates what Defence Minister Shaoul Mofaz has called a "new reality". Israel has bulldozed homes in order to create a no-man's land or buffer zone between the southern border of Gaza, outside Rafah, and Egypt, that Israel would continue to control after withdrawing from other parts of Gaza.

Israeli Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Moshe Ya'alon told the cabinet that since the Supreme Court's ruling on Sunday May 16 that the army had the right to demolish homes near the Egyptian border as a defensive measure, the army would press on with widening the buffer zone from 200 metres to 250 metres. He said that hundreds of Palestinian homes were targeted for demolition. According to an Israeli radio report, the army was also planning to dig a moat along the road on the Egypt-Gaza border.

On May 17, army bulldozers dug up the road out of the Saladin district of the Rafah refugee camp to prevent distraught Palestinians whose homes were slated for destruction from leaving with their belongings. Israeli helicopter gun ships pounded Gaza City for the third night running. Their targets were the buildings housing the political offices of Fatah, the political base of Yasser Arafat, president of the Palestinian Authority, and another used by the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The previous night missiles were fired on the offices of *al-Resala*, the weekly newspaper that supports the militant group Hamas. The previous day, Israeli forces fired missiles at the office of Mohammed al-Hindi, leader of the militant opposition group Islamic Jihad, injuring seven people.

On May 15, a fierce gun battle took place as Israeli forces used armoured bulldozers to demolish at least 80 houses and apartment

blocks in Rafah. The 400 tents, set up in schools and public squares to provide shelter for those made homeless, were soon filled. There have already been 600 homes destroyed since last October, which has left thousands homeless. According to the United Nations, more than 12,000 people in Rafah have been made homeless since September 2000: one in 10 of the population.

Sharon's security cabinet explicitly ordered last weekend's incursions and house demolitions in revenge for the deaths of 11 Israeli soldiers when their vehicles were blown up in two separate and well-organised ambushes on May 11 and 12. These were the heaviest losses suffered by the army since the start of the intifada.

The Zeitoun neighbourhood of Gaza City has seen some of the worst fighting. On May 10, Israeli forces invaded Zeitoun. The next day, eight Palestinians were killed and more than 100 injured in prolonged battles. A helicopter gunship launched a rocket attack that killed at least three more Palestinians as troops conducted house to house searches. Then, on May 13, Israeli forces mounted a campaign of demolition and intimidation, blowing up homes and destroying whole streets and a major highway in Zeitoun. The same day, helicopters fired missiles on Rafah, killing 12 Palestinians and injuring scores more. Gunboats fired repeatedly on the coast by Gaza City as the funerals of the Palestinians took place. Israel closed internal checkpoints in the Gaza Strip and journalists and aid workers were refused permission to enter.

Ahmed Qureia, the Palestinian prime minister, accused the Israeli government of practising "ethnic cleansing crimes and collective punishment of innocent civilians".

Paul McCann, a spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), said that in the space of 48 hours in Zeitoun 15 people had been killed and 226 had been injured. Sixteen families had been made homeless and a further 32 families had had their homes damaged. "It is impossible to believe that every one of these houses shelters militants or the entrance to a tunnel," McCann said.

Even before these latest demolitions, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees had said that Israeli military raids in the first nine days of May had left 1,000 people homeless. Some 131 homes had been razed to the ground in what it described as "one of the most intense periods of destruction" since the start of the Palestinian uprising.

Peter Hansen, UNRWA's commissioner general, said that the Palestinians were suffering a form of collective punishment forbidden under international law. "The overwhelming majority of the more than 17,000 Palestinians who have lost their homes in Gaza since the start of the intifada have been guilty of nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said.

Since September 2000, the Israeli armed forces have killed more than 3,000 Palestinians, at least 500 of whom were under the age of 18. At least 142 were the subject of targeted assassinations: 83 by the air force and 59 by ground forces. A further 98 Palestinians were killed in the course of these assassinations. During the same period 911 Israelis have been killed, illustrating the disparity in fire power between the two sides.

The Sharon regime has stepped its war of terror in Gaza secure in the knowledge that it has Washington's unconditional support, no matter what crimes it commits against the Palestinians.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell made a mild critique of Israel's actions, while insisting that "Israel has a right to for self-defence". But his real hostility was reserved for the Palestinians, accusing Arafat, who is a virtual prisoner in his derelict compound in Ramallah, of undermining American efforts to strengthen the Palestinian security forces and curb attacks on Israel.

Sharon's wider political objective is to create the conditions for support both at home and abroad for his land grab in the West Bank, while appearing to make concessions in Gaza by withdrawing just 7,500 settlers and temporarily pulling out the army. This follows his deliberate wrecking in September 2000 of the 1993 Oslo Agreement, because the establishment of even a truncated Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza that would entail the surrender of any of the illegal settlements was too much for Sharon. For the same reason, he then torpedoed the US "Road Map", spawned by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq as a sop to his Arab coalition partners and to Britain.

In its place, Sharon proposed and won on April 14 US endorsement of his plan for a "unilateral withdrawal" from Gaza, in return for an even more truncated Palestinian state than that envisaged under Oslo made up of less than half of the West Bank. Israel would continue to exercise military, economic and political control over this Palestinian ghetto. Above all, the US agreed that the Palestinian refugees, who had been driven out or had fled their homes during the 1948 and 1967 wars, would have no right of return to their former homes in Israel.

The Likud Party's rejection on May 2 of Sharon's disengagement plan—because it entailed the surrender of a few settlements in Gaza and some isolated outposts in the West Bank—has only served to increase international support for Sharon. His disengagement plan is now routinely contrasted with the insistence by the tiny minority of fascistic settlers on all-out war until all the Palestinians have been driven out. Only last week, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, fresh from a meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei in Berlin, called Israel's proposed withdrawal from Gaza "an opportunity for progress". "We happen to believe that there is nothing wrong with unilateral steps in the right direction. Not everything in the world needs to be negotiated," she continued.

Despite Blair's support for the "Road Map", he dutifully fell in line with Bush and backed Sharon's disengagement plan—calling on the European Union to finance it.

The EU's initial stance was to criticise Bush and Blair's endorsement of Sharon's proposals. But in practice, the EU has followed where Bush has led in backing Sharon. Within days of

the Likud "no" vote, the EU joined the rest of the "Quartet"—the US, Russia and the UN—in effectively endorsing Sharon's land grab as "a step towards achieving the two-state vision" and even agreed to become "trustees" for Jewish assets in the Gaza Strip should Israel withdraw. This would mean deploying an international police force to protect public utilities, preventing the settlers from destroying their homes prior to their withdrawal, and helping yet again to finance the rebuilding of airport and seaport in Gaza that Israel destroyed.

Spain's new Socialist Party government has been widely advanced as the flag bearer of a more critical and independent European stance on the Middle East. But Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos has agreed to promote Bush's alliance with Sharon on the West Bank land grab, calling the proposed Gaza withdrawal the "new dynamic that has begun".

Within Israel, Sharon has also sought to turn the Likud "no" vote to his advantage and has been able to do so thanks to the politically criminal support extended to him by the Labour Party.

Should Sharon's shaky coalition of right-wing forces fall, Labour has already indicated it would join his government—provided only that the corruption charges against the prime minister are dropped.

The overwhelming majority of the Israeli population, in the absence of any principled alternative, sees Sharon's plans as the least bad option and support a pull out from Gaza. More than 100,000 people demonstrated in Tel Aviv on May 15, Israel's "Independence Day", calling on Sharon to pull out of Gaza. The rally's organisers, led by the Labour Party, used it to boost illusions in Sharon's so-called disengagement plans. Shimon Peres, the 80-year-old party leader and former prime minister, said that 80 percent of Israelis who backed a Gaza pullout should not be held hostage to the one percent of the population who had rejected it in the Likud referendum. "We have come here to say tonight, 'This minority, this one and only percent, will not send us back to the wars, to the bloody path,'" he said.



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