

Israel targets Palestinians, threatens Syria

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Israel is mounting a sustained and bloody military assault on the Gaza Strip that has left more than 20 dead.

The pretext for the latest offensive was provided by the August 31 suicide bombings of two buses in Beersheba, which killed 16 people and was claimed by the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas. But, as so often in the past, such suicide bombings allow the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to implement pre-existing plans for attacking Palestinians.

Sharon has made clear that he intends to inflict maximum damage against Hamas before implementing his supposed “unilateral disengagement” plan, which involves withdrawing the relatively small number of 7,000 Zionist settlers from Gaza while seizing vast swathes of the much larger West Bank and its more populous settlements and permanently annexing them to Israel. Israel will also maintain control of Gaza’s borders, coastline and airspace—making it a glorified prison camp.

Hamas carried out its Beersheba bus bombings in retaliation for Israel’s assassination earlier this year of two of its top leaders, Sheikh Yassin and Abdelaziz al-Rantissi.

The government in Tel Aviv made good its promise to hit Hamas leaders “wherever they are” one week later, around midnight on September 7, when aircraft killed 14 Hamas militants as they were training on a Gaza football field named after Sheikh Yassin.

The attack killed the largest number of Hamas personnel of any of Israel’s so-called “targeted killings” and for the first time was carried out against young rank-and-file members. All those killed were between 18 and 26.

Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri declared, “It is an open war between the Zionists and us.”

Up to 50, 000 people turned out for the victim’s funerals, and schools and shops closed as a sign of respect. Feelings were running so high that Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, who is anxious to secure an accommodation with Israel, stated that a “retaliation will be justified if it happens.”

But it is Sharon who has continued with a brutal assault, not Hamas—which has been severely weakened by Israel’s attacks and seen its activities curtailed by the ongoing

construction of the heavily fortified “security fence” that slices into the West Bank.

Contrary to the hysteria generated by Sharon about the scale of the present threat to Israeli lives—to justify his expansionist aims—the Palestinian Authority leadership has done everything it can to police its people and curtail the ongoing Intifada. And groups such as Hamas—who have no viable political perspective on which to challenge Israel—have proved to be increasingly ineffectual.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is looking increasingly unequal. There have in fact only been 4 suicide bombings this year, compared to 17 last year and 46 in 2002, and the number of Israeli casualties has fallen accordingly. All that has proved possible are sporadic rocket attacks against illegal Zionist settlements, which are met with far more deadly countermeasures. (Israel has killed more than 1,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip alone since 2000, and 3,000 in both Gaza and the West Bank, compared with 930 Israelis—soldiers and civilians—killed by Palestinians.)

In the last three days, Israel has used upwards of 20 tanks and armoured vehicles and attack helicopters to slice the Gaza Strip into three. The Israeli Defence Force took up positions close to Khan Yunis in the south of Gaza and near the towns of Beit Hanoun and the Jabalya refugee camp in the north on September 8—again citing a number of rocket attacks as justification. Armoured bulldozers tore up roads to block off the area.

The next day, Israeli troops then attacked the Jabalya camp. At least seven Palestinians were killed—including a young boy—and 25 injured as Israeli forces advanced into the camp against resistance.

Also on Thursday September 9, troops entered the West Bank town of Jericho, where they killed a member of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Also, a 15-year-old boy was killed by an Israeli army jeep in the Amari refugee camp in Ramallah.

The fighting at Beit Hanoun continued September 10, resulting in scores of injuries and the death of a local Hamas chief—as a result of either a helicopter rocket attack or tank fire.

An eighth unarmed Palestinian man was killed near Israeli

settlements at Gush Katif bloc in southern Gaza.

Israel has completely sealed off the Palestinian territories and is expected to maintain the blockade at least until the end of the Jewish New Year period in late September.

Behind Sharon's claims that his "unilateral disengagement" is about securing peace, he has stepped up both settlement construction and violence against the Palestinians. His land-grab on the West Bank is only a staging post in efforts to realise his goal of a Greater Israel by first confining the Palestinians into heavily policed Apartheid-style bantustan ghettos and—if possible—driving them out altogether.

Just how ambitious his aims are was indicated by his efforts to immediately link the Beersheba bus bombings with threats against Syria. The Israeli chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, said the military would answer the Beersheba bombings with a renewed assassination campaign against leaders of Hamas in both the Palestinian territories and "abroad"—meaning in Syria.

Already last October, following a suicide bombing in Haifa, Israeli warplanes bombed an alleged Islamic Jihad training camp outside the Syrian capital of Damascus.

On September 2, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa warned that Israel's threats after the Beersheba suicide bombings would "exacerbate the deteriorating situation in the region" and lacked "the least degrees of credibility or evidence."

However, Hamas leaders based in Damascus are reported to be moving from place to place in fear of an imminent Israeli attack.

The United States has again indicated its backing for Sharon's stepping up of hostilities against both the Palestinians and Syria.

While failing to criticise Israel, Washington has levelled harsh criticism at Qureia—with State Department spokesman Richard Boucher stating that his comments were "unacceptable." Boucher warned, "We've made very clear these groups [such as Hamas] need to be put out of business. We've made very clear the Palestinian leaders need to take hold of this problem, need to get the authority and take immediate and credible steps to end terror and violence. The time for explanations, excuses and discussion is long past. We think it's time to see some action that sends a clear message that terrorists will not be tolerated."

The US has also done all it can to provoke and exacerbate hostilities with Syria.

On September 3, Lebanon's parliament predictably voted to amend its constitution to allow Syria's handpicked president, Émile Lahoud, to remain in office for another five years after the end of his official six-year term.

Syria has effectively run Lebanon since the end of the civil

war in 1990—a war in which Sharon achieved international notoriety as a war criminal because of his part in the brutal massacre in September 1982 of 2,000 Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla, Beirut.

Boucher declared that the US considered the Syrian action "an affront to Lebanon's sovereignty and political independence." And within hours, the US pushed through a joint resolution with France in the United Nations—passed on September 2 by a vote of 9 to 0 with 6 abstentions—warning against outside interference in the Lebanese elections and calling for the removal of all foreign troops.

Syria—which stations 20,000 troops in Lebanon—was not specifically named in the resolution in order to get the required number of votes, but Damascus was the clear target. The initial draft made clear the severity of the US threat, including as it did a warning that if Syria did not withdraw its troops from Lebanon and all militias were not dismantled within 30 days, "additional measures" could be taken to enforce the resolution. The resolution still asks UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to report to the council within 30 days on implementation by the parties.

Sharon's aim of creating a Greater Israel ultimately demands a conflict with Syria over control of the Golan Heights and essential water supplies. His decision to bomb outside Damascus last year was specifically aimed at provoking hostilities against Syria with the support of Washington—which has denounced Syria as a "rogue state" and "terrorist sponsor," possessing "weapons of mass destruction".

In April 2002, intelligence sources leaked information on contingency plans for a US invasion of Syria drawn up on the orders of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

In May of this year, the Bush administration announced a series of tough sanctions against Syria—denouncing it as "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and the economy of the United States."



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