

Israel: government of provocateurs denounces settler provocation in Jerusalem

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Far-right Zionists attempted to storm a disputed religious site in Jerusalem April 10. Approximately 50 members of the Revava organisation rallied at Haram al Sharif, home to the Al Aqsa Mosque, in an inflammatory effort to scuttle the pending removal of Israeli settlements from Gaza.

Gideon Ezra, Israel's public security minister, denounced the protest. "I think it's the most sensitive place in the Middle East, and we'll do everything we can to prevent a provocation," he declared.

Carmi Gilon, former head of Israel's Shin Bet security agency, was more emphatic still in response to reports that Zionist groups were planning to launch missile attacks on the mosque. He warned that in this event Israel would find itself at war with the entire Muslim world. "Of all the means ... of stopping disengagement, no doubt the Temple Mount is the doomsday weapon," he remarked, referring to Haram al Sharif by its Jewish name.

These and other statements went largely unremarked and uncontested in the international media, despite the fact that they constitute an unwitting self-indictment of the Likud-led government.

The Sharon government which is today condemning the Zionist demonstration at the Al Aqsa compound as a provocation came to power as a result of a similar provocation on September 29, 2000.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon presently opposes such actions because they cut across his plans to ensure Israeli expansion on the West Bank with the backing of the United States in return for the withdrawal of a few settlements in the Gaza Strip. But as then-leader of the opposition, he toured the very same religious site—"the most sensitive place in the Middle East," in the words of his current security minister—accompanied by a heavily armed guard over one hundred strong. And

when Palestinian worshippers—enraged by the brazenness of the man who was responsible for the massacres of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatilla camps in 1982—threw rocks in protest, Israeli forces opened fire and killed six people.

There is no question that a violent reaction was anticipated by Sharon, who was acting with the agreement of both Ehud Barak's Labour government, which supplied his armed guard, and of Washington. Talks between the Palestinians and the Labour government held under the auspices of the Clinton administration at Camp David had collapsed in July, largely due to Barak's hard-line stance on the fate of Jerusalem. Opposing demands that East Jerusalem should be the capital of a Palestinian state, Barak proposed that sovereignty remain in Israeli hands. United Nations resolutions deem Israel's seizure of Jerusalem to be illegal.

When Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat refused to accept this demand, he was greeted as a hero by the Palestinians. Israel and Washington decided to embark on a new and more repressive and violent policy, escalating the attacks on the Palestinians and isolating Arafat. The go-ahead was therefore given for Sharon's provocation at Al Aqsa, which would create the pretext for the implementation of this policy. The brutal suppression by the Israeli Defence Forces of the protests that followed Sharon's action led immediately to scores of deaths.

With Washington's blessing, Barak blamed Arafat rather than Sharon for instigating what was to become a second intifada, and supposedly abandoning the "peace process." Barak threatened to "order the army and security forces to use all means at their disposal to halt the violence."

The next period saw attempts by Barak to form an

emergency government with Likud, which may have been broached by Sharon prior to the organisation of his provocation. Instead—in the midst of the violence—Sharon won election to office in February 2001, after promising harsher measures against the Palestinian resistance.

Once elected, Sharon declared that Israel no longer had a “partner in peace” in Arafat, who was placed under effective house arrest in his Ramallah compound by the Israeli Defence Forces. A series of other Palestinian leaders and militants were assassinated, while the people of Gaza and the West Bank were subjected to repeated military assaults, sieges, and curfews. More than 3,600 Palestinian civilians and almost 1,000 Israelis have been killed since Sharon’s visit to the Al Aqsa Mosque nearly five years ago, and thousands more on both sides have been wounded.

The Israeli prime minister has continued to use the cover of ongoing violence in the occupied territories to further his agenda of an expansion of the Zionist state. Likud’s version of the “war on terror” has seen the outlines of its “Greater Israel” goal come together. Settlement expansion has been greatly accelerated over the past five years, particularly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where 450,000 Israelis now live. The construction of the separation wall through the West Bank has prepared the way for a massive Israeli annexation of Palestinian territory. All these measures have been advanced in defiance of international law.

In the event, the attempt to rally thousands of supporters for the settler protest last Sunday failed. Of the 50 individuals who turned up, 31 were arrested. About 3,000 Israeli police, including riot officers, blockaded entry points to the shrine.

Four parliamentarians who attempted to show their support for the demonstration, including two Likud MPs, were among those barred from the site. In contrast, around 10,000 Palestinians rallied to the mosque in a counter-demonstration, and hundreds spent the night in the compound in defiance of the Israeli authorities who control the area. At least eight protesters were injured in clashes with police. Armed demonstrations were also held in the West Bank, with 3,000 marching through Nablus and 1,000 in Hebron.

Despite the small turnout to their demonstration, the orthodox, settler and rightist parties declared the event a success and a trial run for future measures in

opposition to the planned removal of settlements from Gaza later this year. When Israeli police and soldiers are ordered to remove the settlers, a number of these groups plan to launch protests and provocations throughout Israel and Jerusalem.

The conflict between the settlers and the Sharon government is of a tactical rather than principled character. The prime minister agrees with the aim of significantly expanding Israel’s borders and developing the settlements, but he knows that such a program requires some level of diplomatic manoeuvring. His promise to remove settlements in Gaza involving a couple of thousand people has been used to divert attention from a far more significant land grab and continuing settlement programme by tens of thousands on the West Bank, extending from East Jerusalem.

The Bush administration has tacitly accepted the Israeli takeover of East Jerusalem and settlement expansion in the West Bank; neighbouring bourgeois nationalist Arab states are strengthening their ties with Israel; and Mahmoud Abbas’s Palestinian Authority is doing everything it can to suppress Palestinian resistance to the occupation and secure some form of negotiated agreement with Tel Aviv. Under these conditions, the Sharon leadership considers provocations such as that carried out last weekend counterproductive—at least for the present.



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