

Sharon government escalates military offensive against Palestinians

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Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has dramatically escalated Israel's ongoing military offensive against the Palestinian people. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has renewed its assassination campaign against Palestinian militants throughout the Occupied Territories, and has launched repeated missile attacks against infrastructure in Gaza.

Israel's latest wave of illegal and provocative military operations underscores the real nature of Sharon's "unilateral disengagement" plan. Far from improving the plight of the Palestinian people, the withdrawal of the Zionist settlements from Gaza has left behind an ethnically homogeneous ghetto that enables the IDF to conduct operations without having to concern itself with the security of the 9,000 Jews who formerly occupied large tracts of Palestinian land.

The latest upsurge in violence began on October 24, when Israel assassinated Lu'ay Al-Sa'adi, an Islamic Jihad leader in the West Bank. The execution in the town of Tulkarm came after a series of Israeli operations against militant groups. In the past month, an estimated 800 Palestinian militants have been arrested and more than 30 killed.

The Israeli operations have been conducted in flagrant violation of the negotiated "period of calm," which was supposed to hold until the Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for January of next year. Under the terms of this provisional truce, Palestinian resistance organisations would refrain from carrying out operations against Israelis, and Israel would in turn suspend its assassination campaign.

In response to Israel's provocations, an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber blew himself up in a market in the northern Israeli town of Hadera on October 26. Five Israelis were killed and dozens wounded. Sharon immediately seized upon the bombing to further escalate his attacks on the Palestinians and announced a "wide-ranging and continuous" operation.

The next day, two Israeli missiles hit a vehicle carrying two Islamic Jihad members in the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza. The attack was launched in a crowded district when the two militants were leaving a local mosque following

evening prayers. Seven people were killed, including three children, and 19 injured, mostly civilian bystanders.

An unnamed Israeli officer told the *New York Times* that the military operations are specifically designed "to send a message" to the Palestinian leadership and people.

The Sharon government closed off every entry point from Gaza and the West Bank into Israel and shut the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt after the Hadera bombing. Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz met with senior army commanders and was reported to have considered launching a ground assault in the West Bank.

Israeli soldiers have enforced a strict curfew, and additional road blocks and checkpoints were erected throughout the West Bank, whose northern and southern parts were separated. In northern West Bank, Israel has also enforced a blanket ban on the use of private Palestinian vehicles.

Even so, Palestinians in Gaza are bearing the brunt of Sharon's attack. Israeli forces are massed on the northern border of the territory, and the military has warned that it is prepared to invade. A weeklong wave of Israeli missile attacks has hit the territory. Roads and bridges have been destroyed, water lines severely damaged, and the electricity network has been repeatedly hit, causing power blackouts.

Most of the missiles have targeted the northern part of the territory, but Palestinian sources also reported strikes in the south. According to *Al Ahram Weekly*, air strikes on October 25 hit two buildings run by an Islamist charity in Rafah on Gaza's southern border, seriously injuring five civilians, including a four-month-old baby.

These attacks on civilian infrastructure are in blatant violation of international law. The nature of the military strikes and choice of targets disproves Israel's claim that its actions are aimed at disrupting Palestinian rocket attacks launched from northern Gaza into Israel. Islamic Jihad and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade fighters have aimed a number of crude and generally ineffective Qassam rockets at southern Israeli towns. The Sharon government has utilised these attacks (which have not resulted in any Israeli casualties) to

launch a wide-ranging offensive against the entire Gaza population.

Additionally, low-flying Israeli fighter jets have been used at night to create deafening sonic booms over Palestinian territory. Sajidra Srour, a director of a kindergarten and nursery in Gaza City, told the *New Standard* website that the sonic booms cause children to scream in fear and frequently wet themselves. "It works," she said of the Israeli tactic. "People are terrified."

The use of sonic booms was never possible when the Zionist settlers were living in the territory.

The fighter jets have also been used to drop thousands of leaflets over Gaza, blaming Palestinian militant organisations for Israel's military operations and demanding residents call a special telephone number to inform Israel of resistance activities.

Sharon rejected an Islamic Jihad ceasefire offer on October 30. The organisation said it would suspend its attacks if Israel did likewise. Only hours after this offer, Israeli troops launched an operation in the northern West Bank village of Qabatiyeh and shot dead two Islamic Jihad fighters. More Qassam rockets were launched from northern Gaza in retaliation.

Parallel with its military operation, the Israeli government has launched a concerted international diplomatic offensive. The attacks on Islamic Jihad are bound up not just with the Sharon government's expansionist interests in the West Bank, but are also driven by broader geo-political strategic interests in the Middle East.

The Israeli government has accused both Islamic Jihad and Hamas of receiving money and training from Iran, through the intermediary of the Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah. Sharon has also accused Syria of assisting their operations.

Israel has long hoped for the overthrow of the Syrian and Iranian governments, and Sharon is doing everything he can to encourage the joint provocations being mounted in the region by the Bush administration and Britain's Blair government.

Israel has not produced any concrete evidence of Iranian and Syrian involvement in terrorism, but this has not deterred Washington from employing the allegations for its own purposes. The "Quartet" of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations issued a statement on October 28 demanding that the Syrian government close Islamic Jihad offices that allegedly operate in Damascus and prevent its territory being used by terrorists.

"At this point I'm not going to draw any specific link between the Hadera bombing and any particular orders that may or may not have come out of Damascus," State Department spokesman Scott McCormack later declared.

"I'm not trying to draw that line at this time. But I think it is very clear that you have senior leadership of some of these groups, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, resident in Damascus."

The Sharon government welcomed the statement. "The minute the international community issues a statement like this it is no longer Jerusalem against Damascus, but now the whole world is involved," foreign ministry spokesman Mark Regev stated.

While the major powers rushed to condemn the Hadera bombing and used it to escalate tensions in the region, no one has condemned Sharon's terror campaign. Washington issued its ritualistic appeal for Israeli "restraint," which Tel Aviv knows from long experience can be safely ignored. The US also repeated its demand that Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas immediately disarm militant groups.

Abbas's repeated efforts to placate Israeli demands and the Bush administration have only encouraged Sharon to press forward a political offensive against the Palestinian Authority. Sharon announced that he was indefinitely suspending any meetings with Abbas in the aftermath of the Hadera bombing. Abbas and the PA had previously agreed to twice postpone a scheduled meeting with Sharon, after Sharon made clear that he was unwilling to consider making even token concessions.

The marginalisation of the Palestinian Authority was always central to Sharon's disengagement plan, which was meant to bring negotiations with the Palestinians to an end and give Israel free rein in both Gaza and the West Bank. While the prime minister has up to now deferred to Washington's insistence that Abbas not be entirely shunned, his government hopes that this charade can finally be dispensed with. As Israeli Defence Minister Mofaz put it most bluntly, "I am not certain we may ever be able to reach a peace agreement with the current Palestinian leadership; we will have to wait for the next generation."

In the meantime, Israel's land grab in East Jerusalem and the West Bank will continue unabated—and unopposed by the major powers.



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