

# Israel-Palestine Crisis at Boiling Point

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Words can barely convey our outrage at the actions taken by Ariel Sharon and the Israeli government against the Palestinians over the past month. In its most massive military operation since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israel carried out a series of deadly attacks against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank in March that killed over 160 and wounded hundreds. Sharon's bold declaration that the aim of the operation was to kill as many Palestinians as possible was underscored by his refusal to allow ambulances into the refugee camps to remove the wounded, which included many children and infants.

Israel's assault, temporarily cut short by the tepid intervention of the Bush administration, shows that Sharon has not changed one iota since he presided over a massacre in Lebanon in 1982 of over 800 Palestinians. As the Israeli publication HA'ARETZ put it in an editorial on March 5, Sharon's "deeds and failures show that the fate of the Israeli state is to a large extent in the hands of unbalanced people."

It isn't alone that Sharon's government must be overthrown in order to put a stop to this bloodshed. It's that he is a war criminal who must stand trial for the bloody deeds committed over his sordid career.

## **BUSH'S BELATED 'INTERVENTION'**

The Bush administration put the brakes on Sharon's all-out offensive by mildly rebuking him and sending its Middle East envoy, Anthony Zinni, back to the region to impose a ceasefire in mid-March. However, nothing is more illusory than to think that Bush has suddenly become concerned about the Palestinians. The only thing that motivates him is his drive to widen the "war against terrorism" into a permanent war against anyone he deems opposed to U.S. interests. The next target of a potential U.S. military attack is Iraq. Sharon's offensive threatened to undermine U.S. plans by focusing world attention on the Palestinians, at a moment when the U.S. wants everyone to be thinking of Saddam Hussein.

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The plain fact is that if it were not for the *carte blanche* that Bush gave to Sharon over the past year, the massive Israeli assault of the past weeks would never have happened.

Sharon's all-out war on the Palestinians has become a complete siege of the occupied territories, with U.S.-supplied tanks, helicopters, and F-16 fighter planes. Since September 2000, when Sharon started the current stage of the conflict by making an armed visit to one of the holiest sites in Islam, the Harem Al Sharif, 1,200 Palestinians and 350 Jews have died.

The Bush administration responded to this carnage by disengaging from the effort to even appear that it was trying to bring the parties together. Each time the administration made a faint-hearted pretense to "reengage" on the issue of Israel-Palestine, it allowed Sharon to subvert it. That was true late last year, when Israel killed talk of a resumption of negotiations by assassinating a leader of the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas, even though Hamas had suspended suicide attacks against Israel for two months after September 11. That was true last December, when Sharon issued more punishing restrictions against Palestinians just as the U.S. spoke of possibly getting reinvolved. And that was true in January, when Israel announced its interdiction of an arms shipment supposedly intended for the PLO, just in time to derail an earlier mission by special U.S. envoy Zinni.

The more the Palestinian Authority has condemned terrorist attacks, including September 11, the more Sharon has provoked terrorist attacks against Israel through assassinations of Palestinian political leaders, the virtual house arrest of Arafat, and intensified air and ground attacks on innocent civilians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Through all this, the Israeli Labor Party has provided a "left" cover for Sharon by joining his government, thereby destroying its last shred of legitimacy.

After Bush's Jan. 29 State of the Union address in which he named Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as members of an "axis of evil," the administration gave Sharon a green light to do anything he wanted to the Palestinians. Where Bush spoke of fighting a "permanent war" against "terrorism," Sharon now spoke of a "continuous war" against the Palestinians.

The Bush administration then went even further, by outlining a revision of U.S. military strategy in a secret report calling for the use of nuclear weapons against Iraq, Iran and North Korea, as well as Russia, China, Libya and Syria. The document, which proposes developing new nuclear weapons for conducting preemptive nuclear strikes against a host of nations, has shocked even the closest U.S. allies.

### PALESTINIAN QUEST FOR PEACE

Despite these retrogressive moves, the past months have also seen some of the most explicit statements from Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority's security chief Mohammed Dahlan on the terms of negotiations for peace with Israel. In an article published in HA'ARETZ in January, Dahlan clearly stated that if Israel were to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders, recognize Palestinian sovereignty over the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, and help to work out a just resolution for the plight of Palestinian refugees, the Palestinians would make peace. This was followed by an article by Arafat in THE NEW YORK TIMES on Feb. 3 in which he articulated the same position.

The fact that neither mentioned the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel but a just resolution which could involve monetary compensation to resettle the refugees in a Palestinian state gave the impression that a majority of Palestinians may have reconsidered the issue that had broken some earlier negotiations.

It was at this point that Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah announced that he has in hand a new peace proposal in which Arab regimes would recognize and establish "full normalization of relations" (later changed to "full peace") with Israel in exchange for its withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders.

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia, a totalitarian misogynist and fundamentalist regime which has been discredited because of its ties to the September 11 terrorists and its sponsorship of the Taliban, views this proposal as a way to regain credibility and international support. Furthermore, this move also reflects the Saudis' fear of the power of Islamic fundamentalists opposed to them who are using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to strengthen their base.

Nevertheless, the ramifications of Saudi Arabia's proposal are extremely important. The Palestinian Authority, Syria, and Egypt have all backed it. Abdullah has also expressed his willingness to negotiate further to recognize the Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem and the Wailing Wall as Israeli territory.

What was Sharon's response? He launched a brutal attack on the Palestinian refugee camps in Jenin and Nablus. Then, on March 13, Sharon invaded Ramallah and the Jabaliyah refugee camp in Gaza. Ramallah is the nerve center of Palestinian society. It is now practically destroyed. All men from 15-45 were rounded up, blindfolded, stripped to their undershirts, and had identification numbers written on their arms. It was only after a

Knesset member who is a Holocaust survivor objected to this Nazi-like behavior that the army stopped writing numbers on their arms.

### **IF THIS NOT BE MADNESS**

The plain fact is that Sharon is trying to rid the MINDS of Israelis and Palestinians of the very IDEA that they can ever live in peace with one another.

It is true that he says he supports a Palestinian state-albeit a “demilitarized” one on only 35% of the West Bank and Gaza strip, with the militarized Jewish settlements and army bases surrounding them kept intact.

But Sharon is not just trying to hold onto as much territory and settlements as possible. What irked him, like much of the Israeli Right, about the failed Oslo peace process is that it helped bring about a sea change in the thinking of Israelis and Palestinians. Many Palestinians dropped their opposition to Israel’s existence and came out in support of a two-state solution. Many Israelis supported the creation of a viable Palestinian state, something that would have been unheard of a decade or two ago.

As filled with contradictions as Oslo was-most of all because Israel’s rulers never faced up to the fact that no peace is possible without the full dismantling of the Jewish settlements-it did at least open a space in which Jews and Palestinians could consider some kind of mutual resolution of their perennial conflict. The very idea of such an eventuality, however, is what Sharon is determined to destroy. And to a large extent, his acts-and the terrorist attacks by Hamas and others on the Palestinian side-have succeeded in doing so. A recent poll showed that 46% of Israelis support evicting the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza altogether; even more shocking, 31% favor the racist expulsion of all Arabs from Israel!

There is no doubt that those who gain from an escalation of this conflict are the forces of ethnic chauvinism and religious fundamentalism, both on the Israeli and Palestinian side. That is why it is encouraging that in the face of such depravity a growing number of Israeli soldiers have refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza. These “Refuseniks” have now grown to over 900 and have shaken up the political establishment.

Such genuine voices from below, on both the Israeli and Palestinian side, are the only force which can bring about a peaceful resolution. Whatever results from the efforts of the Bush administration to broker a ceasefire in order to help it to get on with “the real business at hand,” its planned attack on Iraq, we cannot entertain any illusion that it will

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restrain the hand of Sharon-or that of other reactionaries waiting in the wings to take over, like former Prime Minister Netanyahu.

We must demand an immediate halt to all Israeli military operations, a full withdrawal from the occupied territories, and for Sharon and his cohorts to be brought to justice at an international tribunal.

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