

# Middle East ceasefire aimed at securing Arab support for US war drive

By Chris Marsden  
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There can be few diplomatic acts to rival the cynicism evinced by the US in imposing yet another fragile ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). The main purpose of this latest truce is to help ensure the acquiescence of the Arab states in a devastating military assault against Afghanistan.

The ceasefire declared by PA leader Yasser Arafat on September 18 was made by a man who clearly feared for his life. The Bush administration's threat to target any regime that harboured or gave support to terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 bombings left Arafat ashen-faced. After a handful of militant Islamists were shown celebrating the bombing of the World Trade Centre, former Israeli Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu seized every opportunity to mount a propaganda offensive aimed at justifying the use of Israel's overwhelming military superiority to crush the Palestinians. "We must destroy the terrorist regime that confronts us," wrote Netanyahu, in reference to the PA.

Arafat immediately came forward to condemn the terror attacks and proclaim his sympathy with the US government and its people, calling the bombings "a crime against all humanity". He was later televised donating blood for the victims.

After several days of intense telephone discussions between US Secretary of State Colin Powell, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Arafat made his public announcement of a unilateral ceasefire "on all fronts, and in every town and village". He even called on Palestinians "to abstain, even in self-defence in response to Israeli attacks." Palestinian sources stated that Arafat also threatened harsh reprisals against militant Islamic groups if they continued to carry out suicide bombings and other attacks inside Israel.

Terje Larsen, UN special envoy to the Middle East, commented, "Arafat understands the 11th of September has changed the parameters."

The Bush administration considered such a declaration by Arafat essential, in order that it could continue its efforts to bring Arab and Islamic regimes behind its war drive, in the face of widespread hostility towards the US amongst the workers and oppressed masses of the Middle East.

In the days following September 11, the US had succeeded not only in securing supportive statements from its traditional Arab allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but had been given tentative and critical backing from such traditionally hostile regimes as Iran, Libya and Syria. Colin Powell told CBS

television's "Face the Nation" programme last Sunday that the two countries had made "forthcoming" and "positive" statements that presented "new opportunities" for the US.

The last thing the White House needed at this delicate time was for the Israeli government to step up its hostilities against the Palestinians, and so arouse the anger of the Arab masses towards their rulers' collaboration with the US.

Ever since taking office, President Bush has lent tacit support to the military drive by the Likud-led government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to bring the West Bank and Gaza Strip back under Israeli control and to eliminate the Palestinian leadership through a policy of assassinations. Sharon regarded the September 11 events as an opportunity to convince the US to openly reject a negotiated solution and to support his efforts to deal a crushing military blow to the Palestinians.

Taking his cue from America's profession of a "war against international terrorism", Sharon compared Arafat with Osama bin Laden, telling the Israeli parliament, "We should remember that the one who gave legitimacy decades ago for airline hijacking was Arafat." Subsequently, Israel has killed over 25 Palestinians, sent tanks into Ramallah, one of the major towns on the West Bank, sent the army into Jericho, dug its troops in all around the perimeter of Jenin, launched missile strikes on Palestinian police and security compounds in Gaza and used tanks to shell a suburb of Bethlehem.

Confident that he had been given carte blanche to attack the Palestinians at will, Israel's Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer boasted last Friday, "It is a fact that we have killed 14 Palestinians in Jenin, Kabatyeh and Tammun, with the world remaining absolutely silent. It's a disaster for Arafat."

Finally, last Saturday, Sharon said that the planned talks between his Foreign Minister, Labour's Shimon Peres, and Arafat would not take place. The following day, Israel announced that it was establishing a 30 kilometre "closed military zone" in the West Bank adjacent to the Green Line—Israel's pre-1967 borders—as part of its plans to seal off the Palestinians. Sharon's cabinet had only recently vetoed the plan, but army Chief of Staff, Lt. General Shaul Mofaz, told Israeli television that he had now received authorisation for the move, "We will implement it within a week," he said.

In the short term, however, Sharon made a major political miscalculation by anticipating US backing for his actions. Instead he found himself the focus for a diplomatic offensive to force

Israel to back off from a head-on confrontation with the Palestinians.

American and European diplomats gave interviews to the media, expressing their displeasure with Sharon in unprecedented terms. A US official complained, "Just make a list of what's happened. Sharon stepped up attacks on Palestinian communities; his people started a PR campaign to paint Yasser Arafat as another Osama bin Laden; they are roping off neighbourhoods in possible preparation for more attacks; and they are actively discouraging our coalition-building diplomacy with Arab states, especially Iran and Syria."

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said, "All of us have been deeply disturbed by the escalating violence in the region in the last week." More bluntly still, a senior British Foreign Office source described Sharon as "the cancer at the centre of the Middle East crisis."

Many normally fiercely pro-Israeli newspapers criticised Sharon for cutting across US foreign policy. The *Los Angeles Times* said that Sharon "needs to give more help to the United States in its global fight against terrorism... The United States needs Arab nations to be part of the coalition battling the apostles of hate... Sharon must not mistake the United States' determination to find and crush terrorist networks as Israel's opportunity to wipe out the Palestinian Authority."

The *Boston Globe* wrote of "top American officials legitimately intrigued by possibilities with Iran and properly disappointed by the behaviour of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon."

Sharon was initially defiant, telling the *Jerusalem Post* he would not sacrifice Israel's national interests for Washington's desire to forge a broad war coalition. "While stability in the Middle East is important to them, and it is very important to Israel, we will not pay the price for that stability. We simply will not pay it," Sharon said. Nevertheless, he could not openly defy the US, on which Israel depends for its survival. Neither could he risk a split with his Labour coalition partners, a serious possibility given the repeated threats by Peres over the weekend to resign. Labour's support has been crucial for Sharon in preventing the possibility of political opposition to Likud's war efforts emerging within Israel.

On September 18, therefore, Sharon ordered the Israeli army to pull its tanks and troops from Jenin, Jericho, Ramallah and Hebron. The Israeli army also said its forces in Gaza and the West Bank had been told to "avoid any attacking activities against the Palestinians".

However, neither the present ceasefire, nor any talks that may follow can offer a genuine respite from the suffering of the Palestinians. In the first instance, there is no guarantee that the current truce will hold; Sharon's government will seize any opportunity to resume hostilities. Israeli government spokesman Raanan Gissin told the press, "The cease-fire hasn't started yet as far as we're concerned... What a statement [by Arafat] on CNN should satisfy us?" Sporadic fighting continued yesterday, with deaths on both sides. After the killing of a Jewish woman near Bethlehem, another government spokesman, Dore Gold, questioned whether talks would take place in light of this "blood attack". Sharon immediately recalled his security cabinet to discuss Israel's response.

More fundamentally, Arafat and the Arab bourgeoisie of which he is a representative have led the workers and peasants of the Middle East into a political dead-end. Since he signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, Arafat has sought to establish some form of truncated Palestinian state by reaching a negotiated settlement with US imperialism and its main regional proxy, Israel. This was supposed to offer the means to realize the democratic aspirations of the Palestinians for self-determination and provide the basis for social development, putting an end to their poverty and oppression.

This perspective has failed, and not only for the Palestinians. Events since September 11 have exposed the fallacy that any of the Arab regimes have any genuine independence from imperialist domination.

As they did at the time of the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, the Arab heads of state have once again subordinated themselves to US diktats and force of arms.

The Bush administration is utilising the terror bombing of New York and Washington as a pretext for brutally reasserting its domination over the Middle East and the region's oil riches. It has begun by demanding that all the Arab states pledge their fealty to the US by signing up to the so-called "war against terrorism". The first test of their loyalty is to stand by while Afghanistan is bombed.

Other demands will follow. It has been reported that the US has already issued a seven-point list of requests to Lebanon and Syria, including that they disarm, or even disband the Hezbollah Muslim militia and extradite Palestinians and Lebanese Shiite Muslims suspected of terrorism. Lebanese officials are said to have cautioned that such a move could tear apart the country's social fabric.

There is every likelihood that the next down payment demanded by Bush is that the Arab states stand by while the US resumes bombing Baghdad. According to a CIA leak, it is investigating information that Mohammed Atta, one of the alleged hijackers on the first plane to crash into the World Trade Centre, had met Iraqi intelligence in Europe earlier this year. Such allegations pave the way for America to resume full-scale war against Iraq.

Regimes as politically disparate as Egypt and Iran have raised their concerns with the US that precipitate action could inflame popular opposition. However, none of them have questioned America's motives, let alone called a movement in opposition to war by the world's people. Like their counterparts in the Zionist state of Israel, the essential role of the Arab bourgeoisie in Middle Eastern affairs is being exposed as the suppression of social and political dissent through police and military means on behalf of the imperialist powers.

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