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War Drive

Palestine terrorised

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AS we went to press the Israeli army was continuing its siege of Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus, Jenin and many other Palestinian towns.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sharon.jpg>]

The news from these towns is terrible. Dozens of people have been killed, hundreds wounded and over 1,000 taken prisoner. The whereabouts of many is unknown. Corpses lie rotting in the street, food and water is running out and ambulances are routinely prevented from attending the wounded.

Israel's new blitzkrieg against the Palestinians follows the remorseless logic of reactionary occupying armies - an attempt to definitively smash the armed resistance, and to cow and terrorise a whole people by random killings of civilians, mass arrests and torture, house to house searches, the wanton destruction of property, the imposition of curfews and the humiliation of the Palestinian leadership.

George Bush's claim that the Palestinians have brought this upon themselves is absurd. This is the typical hypocrisy of imperialism - blaming the victims for the violence of the oppressor. What the Palestinians have done - the Palestinian masses and not Yasser Arafat - is to stand up and refuse to live on their knees, to stand up and to indeed say 'enough is enough', to say that they refuse to live as a permanently occupied and humiliated people. That is the meaning of the second Intifada.

Bush and Sharon claim the Israeli invasion has been caused by the Palestinian suicide bombings. Anyone taken in by that confuses cause and effect; the suicide bombings have been an attempt - a desperate attempt - to retaliate against the wave of assassinations of Palestinian militants, and the daily brutalisation of the Palestinian people from tanks, helicopter gunships and F-16 fighter bombers. If there had been not a single suicide bombing, the Palestinian people would still be brutalised.

What is unfolding in Palestine is the gradual implementation of the programme of the most reactionary wing of Zionism, the reconquest of the whole of 'Judea and Samaria'. Ariel Sharon has torn up the 1992 Oslo peace agreement, which itself was an act of pathetic submission by Arafat, an agreement to live in a caricature of a Bantustan under total Israeli supervision and control, which lacked the most elementary features of a real Palestinian state.

Suicide bombings which target civilians are not the method of mass mobilisation which socialists advocate. They damage the international image of the Palestinian struggle, and they make it more difficult for the growing opposition inside Israel itself. But they have to be seen for what they are - a desperate measure by desperate people. To put an equals sign between the suicide bombings and the actions of the Zionist army is to fail to make an elementary distinction, that between the systematic daily violence of the oppressor and the desperate violence of the oppressed.

Until the start of the suicide bombings the most elementary fact of the Intifada, rarely mentioned in the Western media, was that this was a resistance struggle against occupation, carried out entirely within the so-called 'Palestinian territories', allegedly under the administration of the Palestinian Authority. Ever since the election of Sharon, the butcher of the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in 1982, it has been on the cards that the Palestinian Authority would be destroyed and the 'Palestinian' areas reoccupied. Even before his election, right from the signing of the 1992 Oslo agreement, the relentless programme of settlement building on the West Bank and Gaza - and the destruction of Palestinian homes and the seizure of Palestinian land to make way for it - continued.

The green light for the destruction of the Palestinian Authority and wholesale reconquest of the West Bank and Gaza was given by the start of the US 'war on terrorism'. Confusion on this issue was created immediately after September 11, when Bush and Blair hypocritically talked up the need for a Palestinian state. In the days before the attack on Afghanistan, the US stayed Sharon's hand, preventing an all-out attack until the alliance against the Taliban had been created. Once the destruction of the Taliban had been carried out, such posturing was dispensed with. The US has coordinated with the Israeli government every step of the way, and Sharon has been given the US go-ahead to destroy every armed and political organisation of the Palestinian people, something symbolised by the assassination of the general secretary of the PLFP and the murder of numerous top leaders of Fatah and Hamas.

Targeting Arafat is of course designed to symbolically humiliate the Palestinians. But Arafat's leadership has in fact been disastrous. He led them into the Oslo agreement trap and commanded a hopelessly corrupt and authoritarian Palestinian Authority, which did little for the Palestinian masses.

The Intifada was not of Arafat's choosing, it was imposed on him by the Palestinian masses. Moreover, the performance of the PLO leadership handed mass support to the Islamic Hamas movement on a plate. Hamas, with its extensive welfare and food programme, was seen by hundreds of thousands of Palestinians as the only force actually doing something for the people - and the only force resisting. Fatah was dragged into the resistance by the sheer necessity of self-defence, and by the need not to be totally outflanked by Hamas.

Little by little it has dawned on increasing numbers of Israelis that whatever blows are delivered to the Palestinians, the present Sharon policy means only permanent violence and conflict, that Israel cannot be secure if it is permanently at war. The emergence of the 'refuseniks', the hundreds of reservists who have refused to go to the occupied territories, and the attempt by peace activists to take food to the beleaguered population of Ramallah, are encouraging signs.

Equally, the international peace demonstration, fired on by Israeli troops, was an encouraging initiative, dealing a propaganda blow against the Israelis.

But the Palestinians need much more in terms of international solidarity. For the moment they are terribly isolated. The reactionary bourgeois nationalist and semi-feudal Arab leaders will not lift a finger to deliver real aid to the Palestinians, even turning down the very modest Iraqi proposal for a one-month oil embargo. The European Union has done precious little except express its 'concern'.

Only a mass movement of solidarity around the world can bring direct aid to the Palestinians. Here there are encouraging signs already, with huge sections of the global justice and peace movements being won to the cause of Palestine, something visibly shown by the November 30 London anti-war demonstration, which was also a massive display of support for the Palestinians. Without such a movement, there is a real danger that eventually the full programme of the Zionist right and of the settlers will be implemented - meaning the total expulsion of the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza.