Bush "peace initiative" prepares ground for wider war against Arab masses

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President George W. Bush's so-called "peace initiative" in no way represents a shift in the basic policy of the United States in the Middle East. In his Rose Garden speech Thursday, announcing the dispatch of Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region next week, Bush went out of his way to place the onus for the bloodshed in Israel and the occupied territories on the Palestinians and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

Even as Israeli tanks, gunships and troops widened their assault on Palestinian cities, and Israeli forces continued their siege of Arafat's Ramallah headquarters, Bush declared, "The situation in which he [Arafat] finds himself is largely of his own making." The head of the nation that has armed and financed the Israeli apparatus of violence and repression against the Palestinians for more than four decades went on to accuse Arafat of having "betrayed the hopes of the people he is supposed to lead."

The Bush administration has intervened in the Middle East crisis essentially for three reasons:

First, to buy time for the Israeli regime and provide it with a political cover to intensify its assault on the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people.

Second, to ward off the danger of increased European influence in the region, resulting from the political vacuum created by Bush's previous "hands-off" posture. On the same day as Bush's speech, senior European envoys—Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Piqué and European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana—cut short a visit to Israel after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon refused their request to visit Arafat.

Third, to ease popular pressure on dependent Arab regimes, especially Egypt and Jordan, upon whom the US is counting for at least tacit support in the coming American war on Iraq. The cynicism of Bush's Rose Garden bromides about peace in the Middle East was highlighted by his saber-rattling attack on Iraq and his threats against Iran and Syria.

As Bush's speech made clear, the ultimate policy decisions will be made not in Israel, but in Washington. Bush's injunction to the Israelis to pull back their troops will be obeyed, because, in the end, the Israeli regime is a client state wholly dependent on American imperialism for its survival.

While calling on Sharon to halt the invasion of Palestinian areas and begin a pullback of his military forces, Bush endorsed the week-long Israeli assault, saying America recognized Israel's right to "defend itself from terror." At another point, he referred to the military offensive as "a temporary measure," suggesting that further and perhaps even larger "temporary measures" might be justified in the future.

Bush deliberately omitted any call for an immediate end to Israeli hostilities and stipulated no time-line for a military rollback. He thereby gave Sharon a green light to continue and escalate the Israeli assault until Powell makes his way to the region some time next week.

This is precisely what the Israeli regime did, stepping up its attacks on previously occupied areas on Friday and sending tanks into Tubas, a town of 20,000 on the West Bank. Friday saw an increase in the daily toll of reported Palestinian deaths to more than 20.

Among those killed were the latest targets of Israel's policy of political assassination. Qeis Odwan, head of the military wing of Hamas in the northern West Bank, was killed along with five other Hamas militants when Israeli troops stormed their hideout in Tubas. Nasser Awais, leader of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade militia in the same region, was killed in Nablus.

The Sharon regime carried out these actions for the

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calculated purpose of provoking new suicide bombings by desperate and enraged Palestinian youth. As with every previous initiative to achieve a cease-fire and restart political negotiations, Sharon's response is to further inflame Palestinian passions and provoke reprisals, so as to provide the pretext for a further escalation of Israeli military action.

These developments demonstrate that Bush's intervention is a trap for the Palestinians. This was confirmed in the 90-minute meeting held Friday between US envoy Anthony Zinni and Arafat in the latter's besieged offices. Zinni reportedly issued warnings and ultimatums to Arafat, in a discussion that Palestinian spokesmen described as "difficult." There is good reason to believe that behind the talk of peace and negotiations, the US is laying the basis for cutting off relations with Arafat and sending him either into exile or to his death.

As James Bennet noted in a *New York Times* article on Friday: "If Secretary Powell's mission is greeted by another wave of Palestinian suicide attacks, Mr. Sharon may get the free hand to deal with Mr. Arafat that he has been seeking."

Sharon's internal political maneuvers likewise point to a new and even more violent Israeli invasion and decisive action against Arafat. Sharon is working to bring into his coalition the far-right National Religious Party, which opposes yielding any territory to the Palestinians. Ephraim Sneh, a Labor Party leader and cabinet minister, told the *Times* that such a move would mean Sharon "doesn't want a national unity government but an ultra-right-wing government, and he wants us out." Sharon's Labor coalition partners have opposed the prime minister's plans to expel Arafat.

Bush's intervention is the latest in a long line of US-sponsored "peace" initiatives that follow a definite pattern: With American backing, Israel pounds the Palestinians militarily, intensifies its police repression and assassinates leading figures in the Palestinian resistance. This brute force is used to further isolate Arafat and batter him politically and diplomatically. The Americans and Israelis then present him with new and more onerous ultimatums, forcing him to make commitments to disarm the population and accept additional political concessions—commitments he cannot possibly carry out.

Thus a framework is established in which any outbreak of Palestinian violence is blamed on Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, while Israel is given a free hand.

The Powell mission and any talks he holds with Palestinian representatives will contribute nothing to the struggle of the Palestinian people for their democratic and national rights. The basic line of the Bush administration remains that of support for Israeli expansionism and implacable hostility to the aspirations and rights of the Palestinian masses.

At the most, the US will tolerate a demilitarized Palestinian ghetto-state that is deprived of any ability to defend itself and any genuine independence. This is the meaning of Bush's call, in his speech on Thursday, for a "Palestinian state that is not a haven for terrorism."

Decades of struggle, war and repression have demonstrated that there can be no peace or social progress in the Middle East—for Arab and Jew alike—until the entire framework of the Zionist state is repudiated. This, in turn, requires a revolutionary settlement with the bourgeois state system in the whole of the region—a system imposed historically by Western imperialism and maintained as the basis for the rule of despotic Arab regimes that are organically hostile to the democratic rights and social aspirations of the Arab people.

Genuine peace cannot be achieved through negotiations because the fundamental social and political issues at stake transcend the questions of land and relations between a Palestinian and Israeli state. Peace and social progress can be achieved only through the united action of the Arab and Jewish working masses, fighting for the establishment of a democratic, socialist Middle East.

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