

PLO leader bows to Bush

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A “serious effort to push the peace process forward.” With these words describing US President Bush’s June 24 speech on the Middle East crisis, Yasser Arafat gave full expression to his own political bankruptcy and that of the movement he has led for more than 35 years.

Israeli government officials described the same speech as the “official political death” of the Palestinian leader, while others saw the words from the Rose Garden as an American green light for either Arafat’s assassination or his deportation.

The first of many demands that Bush placed upon the Palestinians as a precondition for the US blessing a considerably less-than-independent state is the deposing of Arafat and all other leaders deemed by Washington or Tel Aviv to be “compromised by terror.”

Why is Arafat incapable of saying no? Why could he not state the obvious: the unelected president of the United States has no right whatsoever to declare who shall and who shall not represent the Palestinian people. Bush’s plan, moreover, demonstrates that Washington is an unconditional ally of Sharon and therefore incapable of playing any role as a mediator in the Middle East.

Arafat was among those who organized the Palestine Liberation Organization as a movement of national liberation, advocating armed resistance to occupation and independence from the Arab bourgeois states that had proven impotent in the face of the Israeli military in the 1967 war.

The survivor of countless assassination attempts, plots and sieges by Israel and his erstwhile Arab allies alike, Arafat has seen many of his closest comrades, such as fellow Al Fatah founder Abu Jihad, murdered by Israeli agents. Thousands of the self-sacrificing Palestinians have given their lives fighting under the banner of the PLO, while many more have spent years in Israeli jails.

This history lends a strong element of pathos to the present position of the PLO leader. Surrounded by Israeli tanks in his shattered Ramallah headquarters, he is attempting to put a “positive spin” on an American plan that calls for his own elimination and the reduction of the Palestinian people to the status of US vassals. Like the regimes in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia that the Bush administration consulted before the speech, Arafat has chosen simply to ignore Washington’s arrogant presumption that it will decide who is fit to lead the Palestinians.

While the present groveling before George W. Bush seems a far cry from the PLO’s defiant anti-imperialist rhetoric during its heyday of the 1970s, there is an inexorable logic to the political evolution not only of this movement, but many others that promised national liberation through armed struggle.

The African National Congress in South Africa, the FMLN in El Salvador, the MPLA in Angola, and many others have carried out similar capitulations, turning themselves into bourgeois parties and leading governments committed to the defense of capitalism.

The Palestinian liberation struggle captured the imagination of generations of workers and youth throughout the Arab world, but the PLO was unwilling and unable to mobilize these masses behind its cause. It failed to make a genuine appeal to the strivings of the masses of oppressed in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere, precisely because it remained dependent on the reactionary regimes of these countries.

Its perspective remained within the narrow confines of bourgeois nationalism, the conception that the creation of an independent Palestinian state would resolve the immense problems confronting the millions chafing under Israeli occupation and scattered throughout the Palestinian Diaspora.

While the guerrilla fighters of the PLO waged an often-heroic struggle—from the battle of Karameh in

1968 through to the siege of Beirut in 1982—the movement’s leadership sought to achieve its aims by maneuvering between imperialism and the Soviet bureaucracy on the one hand, and the various Arab regimes on the other.

Two developments in the late 1980s exposed clearly the class nature of the Palestinian nationalist movement. The first was the decision of the Stalinist bureaucracy to dismantle the Soviet Union and align itself with US foreign policy, depriving the PLO of room to maneuver.

At the same time, the development of the *Intifada*, or popular uprising, in the West Bank and Gaza posed an even greater threat to the PLO than to Israel itself. The entry of masses of disaffected Palestinian youth into an unequal struggle against the Israel Defense Forces threatened to create an ungovernable situation that would stymie the aspirations of the Palestinian social elite to create their own state and economy in these territories.

These were the pressures that brought Arafat and the PLO to Washington in 1988 and into the series of negotiations that resulted in the Oslo accords five years later and the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This regime has proven a bitter disappointment to the Palestinian masses, who have seen only further deterioration in their impoverished social conditions and an immense expansion of Zionist settlements and Israeli repression.

At the same time, social polarization within the territories has widened, with a thin layer connected to the PA officialdom enriching themselves through corruption as masses of people confront intense poverty and an unemployment rate estimated at more than 50 percent.

The PA leadership fears the social dynamite that exists within the crowded refugee camps of Gaza and the West Bank. Its goal is to create a stable state that will defend private property. It looks, therefore, to the US for a solution.

Chief PA negotiator Saeb Erekat and others within the Palestinian leadership have appealed for Washington to send US troops to the West Bank and Gaza, comparing it to the NATO occupation of Bosnia and Kosovo. This turns the demand for Palestinian self-determination into an appeal for Washington to establish a colonial-style protectorate.

What they and Arafat are incapable of doing is making an appeal over the heads of Bush and his Arab allies to the working people of both the Arab world and the US itself. Mesmerized by the apparent power of US imperialism, they cannot see the immense contradictions that will undermine Washington’s efforts and create the conditions for social upheavals.

The PA leadership has already announced plans for elections next year and is carrying out other measures aimed at convincing the Bush administration that it is on the path of reform. So far, Washington, like the Sharon government in Israel, has dismissed these efforts as “cosmetic.” The Palestinian leadership may go further and push Arafat aside as well to curry favor in the White House.

In 1988, when Arafat opened formal talks with the Reagan administration on a Middle East settlement, he agreed to deliver a State Department-drafted declaration renouncing “all forms of terrorism.” Pressed by reporters to go further, and pledge his support for the state of Israel, he asked bitterly, “Do you want me to do a striptease?” Now the question could well be, “Do you want me to commit hara-kiri?”



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