

Bush gives Israel blank check in assault on Palestinians

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Even in the annals of Middle East “peace” proposals, the speech delivered by George W. Bush on the White House lawn June 24 stands out for its cynicism.

Speaking as Israeli tanks and infantry rampaged through every major city and town on the West Bank, killing innocent civilians and subjecting hundreds of thousands to round-the-clock curfews, the US president lectured the Palestinian people on the need for “democratic” self-reform while demanding the removal of their elected president, Yasser Arafat.

The Bush plan offers nothing to the Palestinians and advances not a single new proposal for settling the protracted and bloody conflict. It does, however, give a green light to the Israeli state to continue its policy of reoccupying the territories nominally placed under the control of the Palestinian Authority and to physically annihilate this entity’s leaders as well as its security forces.

The line advanced by the US administration represents a radical shift in relation to what is known as the Palestinian question. World diplomacy has long seen the core of this problem as how to accommodate the rights of a people turned into refugees, repeatedly driven off their land, from the creation of Israel in 1948 to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 and the subsequent wave of Zionist settlements in the occupied territories.

Bush sought to recast the problem by portraying the Palestinians as a “terrorist” people and its leadership, the Palestine Liberation Organization, long recognized as a legitimate bourgeois nationalist movement, as a criminal organization.

The attempt to outlaw Arafat and other Palestinian officials represents the codification of a policy that Washington has pursued for over a year, sanctioning the Israeli assassination of selected leaders seen as

hostile to Israeli and US interests.

Israeli ruling circles reacted to the speech by saying it could have been written by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon himself and represented a complete victory for his policy. Israel’s ruling party, *Likud*, said the speech would be remembered as “the end of the Arafat era.”

Even among Israel’s staunchest defenders, however, there were concerns that Bush’s plan failed to place a single demand on the Israeli regime. “Mr. Bush seemed to be telling Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that he is free to reoccupy the entire West Bank until a new, democratic Palestine emerges,” the *New York Times* editorialized. “How the Palestinians can be expected to carry out elections or reform themselves while in a total lockdown by the Israeli military remains something of a mystery.”

Nor did any serious observer see any likelihood that the plan would have the slightest effect in halting the wave of suicide bombings in Israel, much less the crushing repression of the Israeli military in the occupied territories.

Neither Bush nor Sharon has any interest in Palestinian “reform” or “democracy.” Their policy is one of naked force aimed at destroying whatever institutions and infrastructure have been created in the occupied territories since the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and the subsequent creation of the Palestinian Authority.

The American president had not a word of criticism for the Sharon government, warning instead that any attempt by the Palestinians to resist occupation would be futile: “Israel will continue to defend herself, and the situation of the Palestinian people will grow more and more miserable.”

His preposterous comments stood reality on its head.

The root of the present conflict, according to Bush, is nothing more than terrorism and the failure of the Palestinian leadership to fight it.

“Today the Palestinian people live in economic stagnation made worse by official corruption,” he declared. Why? According to Bush, poverty and oppression are merely the byproduct of the perfidy of the Palestinian Authority—which has exercised unsteady control over the area for barely seven years—and its failure to embrace a “market economy.” The repeated mass expulsions of Palestinians from their land, the seizure of large swathes of territory for Zionist settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, and the continuous disruption of economic life by decades of military occupation are beside the point.

Bush insisted that peace could come only through “a break with the past,” which he spelled out as a purge of the entire leadership of the Palestinian Authority, including Arafat, and the installation of new leaders “not compromised by terror.”

No such “break,” however, was demanded of Israel, whose prime minister is implicated in multiple war crimes. Indeed, Bush delivered his speech on the eve of court proceedings in Brussels to determine whether Sharon can be tried there for crimes against humanity stemming from his role 20 years ago in organizing the massacre of hundreds of unarmed Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon.

What would a Palestinian state modeled on the Bush plan look like, were it ever allowed to come into being? One can say with certainty that its president would be a puppet of Washington, in all likelihood a longtime “asset” of the Central Intelligence Agency within the Palestinian movement. Its economy would be subordinated to US and Israeli interests and run directly by the International Monetary Fund. Its security forces would be led by the CIA and the Israeli secret police, Mossad, directed at suppressing any elements opposing the US-backed regime.

With Zionist settlements maintained, the territory of this pseudo-state would remain divided into a patchwork of unviable units, keeping intact the Israeli roadblocks, checkpoints and patrols that turn life into a daily ordeal and humiliation for Palestinians.

In short, a “provisional” Palestinian state would resemble nothing so much as the bantustans created by the apartheid regime in South Africa as a means of

maintaining the black population under conditions of abject misery and repression.

According to press accounts, the final form of the US president’s speech emerged from a sharp debate in the Bush administration in which the most right-wing, pro-Israeli elements, led by Vice President Richard Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, prevailed.

As a congressman in the 1980s, Cheney was one of the staunchest US defenders of apartheid in South Africa, voting repeatedly not only for continued US economic ties to the white racist regime, but against a resolution urging the release of Nelson Mandela from over two decades of imprisonment and negotiations between Pretoria and the African National Congress.

To this day, Cheney defends his vote on the grounds that the ANC was “terrorist.” His views have not changed and are representative of a US ruling elite prepared to relegate the bulk of humanity in the oppressed countries to dictatorship and misery.

Bush, who became president through massive fraud, exhorted the Palestinians to “build a practicing democracy based on tolerance and liberty” and pledged US aid in organizing “fair” elections.

What was clear from his Monday speech, however, was that the US would reserve to itself the right to decide who would be a legitimate leader and who would not. This is as true in Palestine as it is in Afghanistan. There is no place in the Pax Americana envisioned by the Bush administration for even formal self-determination. Washington will decide, by military might if necessary.

This conception—shared by the Bush administration and the Sharon regime—that force will solve the intractable historical problems of the Middle East, can lead only to a social catastrophe.



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