

Bush backs Sharon's refusal to hold talks with Palestinian Authority

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The Republican administration in the United States has made its most open declaration of support for Israeli prime minister and Likud leader Ariel Sharon's efforts to destroy the Palestinian Authority and depose its President, Yasser Arafat.

Following talks with Sharon, President George W. Bush held a joint press conference in Washington, in which he endorsed Israel's insistence that it presently has no "negotiating partner" and that further peace talks depend on reform of the PA in line with Israeli and US demands.

In his usual garbled style, Bush "reiterated my strong view that we need to work toward two states living side by side in peace" before handing over to Sharon.

The Israeli leader insisted, "in order to achieve peace in the Middle East... we must have a partner for negotiations. At the present time, we don't see yet a partner."

Bush replied by supporting Israel's ongoing military incursion into the West Bank, and the siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah that has left them in ruins, declaring, "Israel has a right to defend herself." He then endorsed Sharon's insistence of reform of the PA, blaming Arafat for the failure to secure peace in the region. Although he did not officially cancel the regional peace summit proposed earlier by Secretary of State Colin Powell, he insisted, "the conditions aren't even there yet. That's because no one has confidence in the emerging Palestinian government. And so first things first, and that is, what institutions are necessary to give the Palestinian people hope and to give the Israelis confidence that the emerging government will be someone with whom they can deal?"

Bush's statement came as Israeli tanks surrounded Arafat's HQ for the second time in less than a week and an operation began to arrest at least 27 Palestinians, including some police officers.

Media speculation was rife that Sharon's intention was to gauge the possible US reaction to the expulsion of Arafat. In an op-ed piece written for the June 9 *New York Times*, Sharon proclaimed Israel's seizure of the Occupied Territories during the 1967 War as "legal—resulting from a

clear-cut war of self-defense" and claimed that Israel had never been required to "withdraw from all the territories that its forces had entered" by the United Nations, because they were "disputed territories where Israel had legitimate rights to defensible borders".

He went on to state, "Israel will not return to the vulnerable 1967 armistice lines, redive Jerusalem or concede its right to defensible borders under Resolution 242. Movement from a long-term interim agreement to a permanent settlement can only be guided by changes in the reality of Israeli-Palestinian relations on the ground and not by a rigid timetable."

This is Sharon's most open statement to date that ever since he came to power, he has set out to create "facts on the ground" that over-ride previous agreements on the borders of a Palestinian state provisionally set out during the 1993 Oslo Accord.

His government has no intention of stopping there. Sharon's long-term aim is to either force the Palestinians to live in a number of non-contiguous enclaves policed by the Israeli military or if possible to drive them out altogether and incorporate the bulk of the territories into a Greater Israel. The right wing of Sharon's cabinet openly calls for Israeli forces to fully reoccupy the West Bank.

To carry out his aims, Sharon needs the full support of the US. To date he has been hampered by the Bush administration's efforts to secure the support of the Arab regimes for a renewed military offensive against Iraq and so take effective control of the Middle East's oil supplies.

Sharon's piece in the *New York Times* again argues that Israel's war against the Palestinians should be recognised as an integral part of US plans to dominate the region, rather than as an obstacle to their realisation. He insists that the Arab regimes can be forced to swallow almost anything Israel plans for the Palestinians short of outright destruction, providing only that Bush lays down the law. He concludes, "A little over a decade ago, the American victory in the Persian Gulf war established the necessary conditions for convening the Madrid peace conference. It was proved then

that security is the prerequisite of peace. Similarly, a victory in the war on terrorism today will provide a new diplomatic basis for a stable Middle East peace.”

The previous day, Sharon’s Labour Party predecessor, Ehud Barak, made his own contribution to Israel’s political offensive in the pages of the *Washington Post*.

He too warned against the potential of the Israel-Palestinian conflict “for derailing efforts to remove Saddam Hussein”, but warned against acceptance of proposals for a peace agreement from Saudi Arabia.

He described this as a search for a “quick fix” that is “seriously—probably fatally—flawed.”

Barak declared, “the idea that the Palestinian Authority could conduct an effective anti-terror campaign” to be “an illusion so long as Arafat is in power. Arafat is the embodiment of all that stands in contrast to these objectives and values.”

The Arab regimes, he added, have no effective leverage over Arafat and, finally, the plan “rewards terror” and Arafat’s efforts to “dictate to Israel and the world”.

Echoing Sharon, Barak insisted that the Saudi plan was unacceptable because, “It calls for the 1967 borders rather than secure and recognized ones.” Such a plan would “be rejected by Israel as a non-starter and a threat to the country’s future and security.”

He concluded his diatribe by again drawing attention to Bush’s plans for war against Iraq: “What, then, should America do? It should, first of all, focus on Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein. Once he is gone there will be a different Arab world and, in time, a different Palestinian leadership. Right now the only other regional player with whom Arafat acts in harmony is Hussein.”

Powell has been arguing for months that ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is vital in order to turn the political heat off America’s Arab allies, who face mounting anti-US sentiment amongst their subject peoples, and so better pave the way for an attack on Baghdad. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who is backed by the powerful Zionist lobby and the Christian right in the Republican Party, has led support for Sharon’s line. For the moment at least, this most vocal pro-Israeli faction of the Bush administration appears to be in the ascendant.

On June 8, prior to his meeting with Sharon, Bush met with Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak at Camp David. Mubarak called on him to set a definite timetable for securing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Bush refused to do so, even though Mubarak made clear his own support for the installation of a puppet regime and advanced a proposed timetable stretching over two years. Successful reforms, he argued, would allow new leaders to emerge and pave the way for an independent Palestinian state “at peace with its

neighbour.”

Mubarak’s plan is a further capitulation to US and Israeli demands, even when compared with that proposed by Saudi Arabia, which proposes that Israel return to its 1967 borders. His proposals call for the creation of a Palestinian state early next year, but outstanding issues such as final borders and the return of Palestinian refugees are to be settled at an unspecified later date.

Bush replied, “We’re not ready to lay down a specific calendar, except for the fact we need to get started quickly, soon, so that we can seize the moment.”

Mubarak said the Palestinian leader should be supported for the time being, but could assume a ceremonial role in a year’s time. But when he made a pathetic plea on Arafat’s behalf (“Look, we should give this man a chance” to reform the PA), Bush replied bluntly, “Chairman Arafat, as far as I’m concerned, is not the issue... I also happen to believe that there is plenty of talent amongst the Palestinians, and that if we develop the institutions necessary for the development of a state, that talent will emerge.”

The previous week, on June 5, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer informed the press, “in the president’s eyes Yasser Arafat has never played a role of someone who can be trusted and who is effective... What the president is interested in is results, from whatever corner they may come from. If that’s Chairman Arafat, that’s fine with the president. If it’s others, that’s fine with the president.”

The Israeli Defence Force’s June 6 incursion into Ramallah did more damage to Arafat’s compound than was done during its recent 34-day siege. No building remains intact, after they were blown up with explosive charges. The half dozen buildings were home to Arafat’s national security force, the largest of his police forces. Just two days earlier, Arafat had promised CIA director George Tenet that he would integrate the 13 separate police agencies under his control in line with US and Israeli demands. For Israel to then destroy the headquarters of what would be the obvious nucleus of such a combined force itself gives the lie to any claim that reforms will satisfy Israel, as opposed to Arafat’s removal.



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