

Israel: Sharon's rejection of US "road map" has powerful support in Washington

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Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon arrives for talks in Washington next week, during which he will discuss with President George W. Bush his objections to the "road map"—the plan drawn up by the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations that is meant to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and set up a Palestinian state by 2005.

In the past week, Sharon's public utterances and, more significantly still, the actions of the Israeli state and its armed forces have made abundantly clear that Sharon has no intention of seeking a negotiated settlement—even one as onerous to the Palestinians as that outlined in the road map. (See: "Israel: US 'road map' offers nothing to the Palestinians but continued repression," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/may2003/road-m08.shtml>).

Over the past week Secretary of State Colin Powell has been touring the Middle East seeking to convince the Arab regimes that the US is placing significant pressure on Israel to reach a settlement with the Palestinians and that its dominant influence over Middle Eastern affairs in the aftermath of the war against Iraq can be a force for good.

Powell's performance convinced no one after his meeting with Sharon produced only the release of some 180 out of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners, the removal of some travel restrictions, and the transfer of funds to the Palestinians as a supposed goodwill gesture.

Even as Powell spoke in the Egyptian capital of Cairo on May 12, claiming there would be no rewriting of the road map, Israel was imposing one of the tightest closures of the Gaza Strip in years.

That same day, some of the content of a more extensive interview given by Sharon to the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* were published.

In it the prime minister raised a series of objections to the road map that together add up to a de facto rejection of the proposal.

He insisted that existing Jewish settlements would not only not be dismantled, but they would instead continue to expand. Jews would continue to live in Shilo and Beit El under Israeli sovereignty. He asked rhetorically, "Do you see a possibility of Jews living under Arab sovereignty, I'm asking you, do you see that possibility?"

He continued: "Our finest youth live there. They are already the third generation, contributing to the state and serving in elite army units. They return home and get married, so then they can't build a house and have children?"

He added that all Israeli governments had gone ahead with settlements, even during periods of peace diplomacy, even when this was opposed by the US. The settlements of Ariel and Emmanuel in Samaria, he said, would be incorporated within the security fence that is being constructed.

The road map demands that Israel dismantle many of its smaller West Bank settlements and freeze construction in the 150 more

sizeable ones. But Sharon, correcting his earlier placatory statements, has confirmed that Israel has no intention of withdrawing from most of the territory it occupied in 1967 and there is therefore no chance of setting up a Palestinian entity that is territorially contiguous.

He has stayed true to his long-held position to offer the Palestinians a series of disconnected enclaves making up around half of the West Bank, policed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and excluding the prime sites, which will be occupied by Zionist settlers. His statement on Ariel and Emmanuel would mean that significant parts of the West Bank would be west of the security fence and be directly incorporated into Israel.

Sharon also stated there could be no question of a right of return for Palestinian refugees displaced from their land following the establishment of Israel in 1948. His version of a Palestinian ghetto was to be the only home for refugees: "There cannot be a situation where there are two states for one people. Let's make the issue clear."

Two days later, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz told the Israeli Cabinet that the road map in its current form was "bad for Israel," was not in the country's security interests and would not be possible to implement in its current form. He added that the election as prime minister of Washington's chosen replacement for Yasser Arafat—Mahmoud Abbas, known as Abu Mazen—had not produced any significant change in the Palestinian Authority's attitude toward terror. Israel would therefore continue its policy of targeted killings (assassinations) and other "anti-terror" actions.

Public Security Minister Tzachi Hanegbi threw his own provocation into the pot by proclaiming that Jews would soon be allowed to pray at the disputed Haram al-Sharif, or Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, with or without the agreement of the Waqf, the Islamic authority which administers it. The compound, which is the site of the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, has been closed by the Waqf to non-Muslims since October 2000 in response to Sharon's visit there, as the then-leader of the opposition, accompanied by hundreds of soldiers—the provocation that sparked the present *Intifada*.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that reopening the compound would court disaster. He said, "The violence which started with Sharon's visit is still raging today. Such a decision would only make things worse."

This is clearly the Likud-led coalition's intention.

Even as Mofaz and Hanegbi were making their statements, other provocations of a bloody character were underway. In Gaza and the West Bank the IDF shot dead five Palestinians. Israeli undercover soldiers drove up to a Palestinian guard post in Gaza in a civilian car, sparking an exchange of fire in which two security officers and an Islamic Jihad militant were killed. In the West Bank city of Nablus, a

member of Al Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades was killed when Israeli troops fired on a crowd of demonstrators, and Israeli troops killed a 14-year-old when they fired at a crowd of Palestinian youth in the West Bank town of Jenin.

Earlier that day, raids were mounted on the Khan Younis refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, during which an Israeli missile wounded some 20 Palestinians.

The next day, 50 tanks and helicopters seized the northern town of Beit Hanoun in an operation that left three Palestinians dead, including a 12-year-old boy, and more than 30 wounded. According to doctors, the boy was left to bleed to death because IDF troops prevented paramedics from reaching him. In a separate incident, soldiers shot and killed a Palestinian near Rafah on the Egyptian border.

Palestinian Parliament Speaker Ahmed Qureia responded to the latest military offensive by warning, "There can be no talk about the road map or peace process while this aggression and ugly attacks against the Palestinian people continue."

On Sharon's earlier statements, Erekat, the Palestinian negotiator, said that talk of peace was meaningless without action on settlements: "It's either settlements or peace. Both cannot go together. It's the main issue for us in the road map, and Sharon's statement just reflects that he does not accept the road map."

How does one account for the readiness of Sharon to apparently defy Washington so openly, given Israel's reliance on the US economically and militarily?

It is difficult to say to what degree Powell is genuinely seeking to force Sharon to make territorial and other concessions to the Palestinians, or whether his statements are of a purely diplomatic character designed to ease domestic pressure on America's Arab allies for their tacit support of the invasion of Iraq. Publicly, at least, Powell has insisted, appearing on Israeli television, that Bush would speak to Sharon "in very open, straightforward, honest, candid terms about settlement activity." But no one can forget how Powell was held out in European capitals as a voice of moderation in the run-up to the Iraq war, only to come out as a leading warmonger, insisting on America's right to act unilaterally without a United Nations mandate.

Whether or not Powell's efforts are sincere, they carry little political weight given that the more hawkish sections of the Bush administration—centred around Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—have no intention of allowing anything other than the type of bloody rout of the Palestinians envisioned by Sharon.

Others in this clique include Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, the recently removed chairman of the Defense Policy Board (DPB), Elliot Abrams, the director for Mideast affairs on the National Security Council, and Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy.

In an address to Likud members last week, Sharon confidently dismissed Powell's claim that Bush would put him under pressure when he visits Washington. "We are not travelling to a place where there are pressures," he said. "We are going to a place with which we have a special kind of relationship."

The head of the Palestinian negotiating team, Yasser Abd Rabbo, concurred with this assessment, stating that Sharon "believes he can bypass Colin Powell, using certain groups in the administration and certain groups in the Congress to ensure that the road map comes to nothing."

Prior to Powell's arrival in Tel Aviv, Sharon had secret talks with

two senior US National Security Council officials, Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and Elliott Abrams. The *Asia Times* reported that Abrams had assured Sharon that Bush would not threaten to withhold aid or take other strong sanctions to press Israel into endorsing the road map.

Powell has already been subjected to public attack by the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, who sits on the Defence Policy Board, and House Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

At the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Gingrich declared that the State Department was "back at work pursuing policies that will clearly throw away all the fruits of hard-won victory" in Iraq. He said that he was not attacking Powell specifically, but rather the department as a whole and its Near East bureau in particular.

He charged that the administration was split between two "world views"—the State Department's belief in "process, politeness and accommodation," and a focus on "facts, values and outcomes" maintained by the Pentagon and the president. He described what he called the State Department's "invention" of the "Quartet" for Palestinian-Israeli peace talks as a "clear disaster for American diplomacy" because it was "unimaginable that the United States would voluntarily accept a system in which the UN, the European Union and Russia could routinely outvote President Bush's positions by three to one."

For his part, DeLay told a Christian Right group that negotiations with the Palestinians would "amount to a covenant with death."

Whatever diplomatic niceties are trotted out by Powell or Bush, the logic of events favours the view of the Republican hardliners. The road map, despite its pretensions to offering an equitable solution to the Palestinians, can only be understood in the context of the entire policy pursued by the US in the Middle East—which is to establish its grip over the region's oil wealth through *force majeure*. Any Palestinian entity established by Washington would be little more than a prison camp for its inhabitants, whose administration would function as policeman of political and social discontent on behalf of the US and its Israeli ally.

The proposals formally endorsed by Bush differ from those of the Pentagon hawks only with regard to the size of the prison being offered. The hawks favour a starker ultimatum because they are pushing for continued military aggression in the Middle East—possibly beginning with war against Syria—which is incompatible with Powell's current pretense of being an honest broker between Tel Aviv and the Palestinian Authority.



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