

Sharon blows up the “Road Map”

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The June 4 Aqaba summit has been followed by two weeks of bloody conflict. Over 60 died in one seven-day period—the highest weekly death rate since the present Intifada began. The carnage has shattered the credibility of the Bush administration’s so-called “Road Map” for a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The American pretence of impartiality has once again been exposed by events, revealing Washington to be the apologist and sponsor of Israel’s efforts to crush resistance to its occupation of the bulk of the territories seized in the 1967 war. Bush’s Road Map has been shown to be a scheme to establish a ghetto policed by a puppet Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Defence Force and, possibly, an international military presence led by the US.

Using as his pretext the military operation mounted by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Brigade against an Israeli army base in Gaza on June 8, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has launched a series of targeted assassinations of Hamas personnel. These assassinations are guaranteed to provoke retaliation and provide a rationale for further acts of Israeli repression.

The attempted assassination of Hamas political leader Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantissi in Gaza city on June 10 provoked a predictable response—the June 11 suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus by Hamas that left 17 dead and scores injured.

The failed assassination attempt against Rantissi led to initial criticism of Israel by the Bush administration because its intent—to blow up the Road Map diplomacy forced on Sharon by Washington—was so transparent. A group of 25 retired generals who had planned to publish a newspaper advertisement in support of Sharon’s commitment to the creation of a Palestinian state at the Aqaba summit cancelled the notice after the failed assassination of Rantissi. One of their number, Brigadier-General Asher Levy, an old colleague of Sharon’s, commented, “The attempted assassination on Rantissi was an act of folly... At this time, when Abu Mazen is trying to do something on his side, which is not easy, I don’t think we should undermine him.”

But Sharon’s intent was precisely to undermine the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). Abbas is Washington’s creature, and the State Department hopes to use him to bring the Intifada to an end and force the Palestinians to accept an apartheid-style Bantustan in the guise of a “viable state.”

For this reason, the targeted killings—Israel’s euphemism for political assassinations—have continued on a daily basis, leading to the deaths of over half a dozen Hamas activists and many more bystanders.

Israeli Defence Minister General Shaul Mofaz has ordered his forces to “use everything they have” against Hamas. At an emergency cabinet meeting, Sharon derided Abbas as a “chick without feathers,” adding contemptuously, “We have to help him fight terror until his feathers grow.”

An Israeli security official said Hamas leaders, including its spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, were now “marked for death” because they were, in Sharon’s words, “ticking bombs.” Government spokesman Avi Pazner said, “[T]here is no immunity for anybody who either orders or executes terrorist activities.” Israeli army radio quoted senior officials as

saying, “[T]he war against Hamas will now be pursued without quarter and no limit exists on hitting its leaders, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.”

Israel has acknowledged that it has activated an existing “contingency plan” for going after the top leaders of Islamic opposition movements, using the pretext of Hamas breaking off talks with Abbas on a ceasefire. But most observers believe that Hamas and other dissidents could have been brought back to negotiations, once they had registered a protest at Abbas’ description of opposition to Israeli occupation as terrorism during the Aqaba summit.

In a perceptive comment, former Israeli MP Uri Avneri, the leader of the Gush Shalom-Peace Block movement, said of the targeting of Rantissi and others, “Clearly, this was the beginning of a campaign to kill the leaders of all the wings of Hamas—military, political, social, educational and religious.

“Such a campaign is, of course, the outcome of long preparations, which take weeks and months. It was evidently planned even before the Aqaba summit conference convened, but postponed by Sharon in order to afford President Bush his moments of photographic glory on the shore of the Red Sea. Immediately after the president and his entourage went home, radiant with success, the machinery of death went into action.

“The killing of the Hamas leaders (together with their wives, children and casual bystanders) is intended to attain the following results: (a) acts of revenge by Hamas, i.e., suicide bombings, (b) the failure of the Palestinian Authority’s efforts to secure the agreement of Hamas to a cease-fire, (c) the destruction of Abu Mazen’s political standing right from the start, (d) the demolition of the road map, (e) compensation for the settlers after the removal of some sham ‘outposts.’

“All five objectives have been achieved.”

Avneri added that the plan was hatched by Sharon, Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz, Chief-of-Staff Moshe Yaalon, Mossad chief Meir Dagan and Security Service head Avi Dichter—all former or serving generals. “In Latin America they would be called a Junta,” Avneri concluded.

Sharon has achieved one objective not cited by Avneri—the backing of the US and Europe for a military campaign to crush his Palestinian political opponents.

Following the Jerusalem suicide bombing, Washington ditched any criticism of Sharon’s actions in favour of urging an international campaign to destroy Hamas. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, “The terrorists are Hamas... They are the enemies to peace, in the president’s judgment.”

Secretary of State Colin Powell has made phone calls to Middle East leaders urging them to “come down hard” on Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and “other terrorist organisations.”

Britain has responded dutifully to Washington’s appeal. The Blair government announced a crackdown on organisations in Britain raising funds for Hamas. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said he would discuss a clampdown with other European Union countries. The Howard government in Australia promised similar measures.

Tel Aviv’s response to Egyptian efforts to get Hamas and other militant groups back into negotiations was blunt and provocative. Israeli Foreign

Minister Silvan Shalom said a proposal for a rolling ceasefire renewable daily was not acceptable: "It is unthinkable that a ceasefire be temporary, and that in a few months the Palestinians resume the violence after taking advantage of the truce to rebuild their forces." Hamas had said it would consider "carefully and seriously" the ceasefire proposals.

Shalom boasted of his backing from Washington and Europe: "The Americans agree with us and know that the political settlement process cannot be a prisoner of the armed extremist groups, which must be dismantled... the Europeans understand that these groups are threatening the world balance, and it is not just a phenomenon that specifically concerns Israel."

Sharon reiterated that Israel would continue to target "ticking bombs" and has since won the support of the Knesset for his stand.

Few, including Bush and Sharon, believe Abu Mazen has the military capacity or the required support to crush popular resistance to Israeli occupation. In recent days thousands of Palestinians have marched through Gaza's streets chanting "bombardment for bombardment and blood for blood."

A force of 51 US monitors are due to arrive in the Occupied Territories next week, but this is only the start. On June 13, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan urged that a United Nations force be sent to act as an "armed buffer" to police the conflict. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin also supports such an initiative.

Officially, Washington has rejected this proposal, which is also opposed by Israel. But such a move is being considered. Republican Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told the BBC that the US might consider participating in an international force and did not rule out tackling militant organisations like Hamas. He later told Fox News, "Clearly, if force is required, ultimately, to root out terrorism, it is possible that there will be an American participation."

The political crisis facing the Palestinians was thrown into sharp relief by the response of the Palestinian Authority to this possibility. Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said of the French proposal for an international force, "We support it fully and we think the deployment of interposition troops has become extremely important in restoring peace in the area."

President Yasser Arafat portrays himself as a man of the people and an alternative to Abu Mazen. But he too places his hopes on "strong pressure" by the US, the European Union and the UN "to stop this aggression against our people."

The terrible events since June 4 must serve to politically educate all those who are seeking a progressive solution to a conflict that has claimed over 3,000 lives since September 28, 2000, when Sharon provoked the present Intifada with his armed visit to the Temple Mount.

The peace movement and broad sections of the working class in Israel support the creation of two states—one Jewish and one Palestinian—as an alternative to the plan to establish a Greater Israel favoured by Sharon and the rightist forces who support him. They have made this their aim ever since the Oslo accords of 1993, and they far outnumber the extremist elements that view any settlement with the Palestinians as a surrender of the biblical homeland of the Jews.

Despite the propaganda of Sharon to the contrary, Arafat shares this same goal of two states with his rival Abu Mazen, and sat with him in negotiating the establishment of the Palestinian Authority with Washington and Tel Aviv—as a precursor to the foundation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem

Yet the past decade has seen every effort at achieving such a settlement end in renewed bloodshed and the consolidation of the power of forces hostile to the interest of the working class on both sides of the conflict.

Likud, religious extremist and fascist settler parties have benefited from the political impotence of the official left in Israel. Islamist movements such as Hamas have filled the political vacuum left by the collapse of secular nationalist movements such as the PLO, as they

capitulated to the demands of the imperialist powers—the US in particular. Workers on both sides have been plunged into a fratricidal slaughter that shows no sign of abating, while Israel descends ever deeper into recession and economic hardship and the Palestinians are reduced to penury.

The Road Map is only the latest presentation of a failed perspective that cannot provide a solution for the democratic and social aspirations of either the Palestinians or Israeli working people.

The preservation of Israel as a Jewish state is incompatible with a just peace in the Middle East, even if a Palestinian entity were established on its borders. The right-wing forces within Israel would never reconcile themselves to such an outcome. They see the territorial expansion of Israel as not only a religious duty, but a matter of survival militarily and economically.

Even if a Palestinian state were established on the whole of the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel accepted a return to its 1967 borders, nothing would be resolved. The Palestinians would still be subjected to the effective domination of their more powerful neighbour. They would still need access to Israel for work and depend on its good graces for every possible essential, including access to water.

Arabs, who make up 20 percent of Israel's population, would still face routine discrimination as a result of the religious basis of the state. There would be rightist demands for their expulsion to their new "homeland."

The Jewish people in Israel would still be surrounded by hostile forces on all sides, and continue to be seen as the puppets of US imperialism and a force for reaction in the Middle East. Israeli society would continue to be dominated by zealots and right-wing extremists intent on smashing up the social gains made since 1948 and imposing the brutal austerity measures demanded by big business.

The Middle East as a whole would continue to be dominated by corrupt and venal regimes that deny every democratic right to their subject peoples, while enriching themselves through their control of oil revenues.

Above all, the peoples of the region would be subject to the predatory designs of Washington and its European rivals, who seek to establish their own control of Middle Eastern oil reserves, by force of arms if necessary.

An entirely new perspective is required if peace is to be secured, one based not on the separation of Arab and Israeli, Muslim and Jew, but their political unification. Jewish workers and intellectuals who desire peace with their Arab neighbours must understand that this is incompatible with support for the Zionist state. They must champion instead the unity of Jews and Arabs on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.

For the Palestinians, it is essential to understand that genuine liberation cannot be achieved through a nationalist strategy that does not challenge the social and economic system of capitalism and the imperialist set-up in the region that are the root causes of their oppression.

The only programme which embodies the interests and aspirations of all the workers and oppressed masses is one that strives for the creation of the United Socialist States of the Middle East—uniting Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle to tear down the artificial borders dividing the peoples and economies of the region and providing for its harmonious development.



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