

Opposition to US Middle East “Road Map” escalates

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11 June 2003

Clashes on the West Bank and Gaza Strip have delivered a sharp rebuttal to the US-backed “Road Map” for peace in the Middle East and the efforts of President George W. Bush to impose it on the Palestinians.

On Monday, June 9, two Islamic militants were killed while trying to infiltrate a Zionist settlement at Netzarim in Gaza, according to the Israeli Defence Forces. On Sunday, June 8, five Israelis and five Palestinians died in clashes in the West Bank and Gaza.

The clashes follow a collective decision on June 7 by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Al Aqsa Brigade, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine to reject the endorsement of the road map by Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). They also protested his description of armed resistance to Israeli occupation as “terrorism” and his pledge to implement a clampdown. Hamas formally ended a cease-fire implemented earlier.

Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Al-Aqsa Brigade jointly mounted Sunday’s attack on the Erez army checkpoint between the Gaza Strip and Israel, killing four Israeli soldiers and wounding four others before they were shot dead.

Israel responded on June 10 with a rocket attack on the car of a senior Hamas official, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi, in Gaza City. Rantissi was not in the vehicle at the time and suffered only leg injuries. But a 43-year-old woman and an eight-year-old girl nearby were killed and another 25 injured.

The attack is purpose built to provoke retaliatory action, thus allowing the Israeli government to blame the Palestinian Authority for any failure to implement the provisions of the Road Map. Hamas was said to have been considering a resumption of peace talks, but speaking from his hospital bed Rantissi vowed, “We will maintain our jihad and resistance until we kick out every single criminal Zionist from our land.”

Abbas made his statements during the June 4 summit in the Jordanian resort of Aqaba where he met with Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Bush had just taken part in a summit meeting of pro-American Arab regimes at Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, where he lined them up behind his efforts to impose the road map.

Abbas promised the US president to curb the 32-month *intifada* in order to secure the promised Palestinian state by 2005, held out by Bush. In his remarks Abbas stressed, “Let me be very clear: There will be no military solution for this conflict, so we repeat our renunciation and the renunciation of terrorism against the Israelis wherever they might be.... We will exert all of our efforts using all our resources to end the militarisation of the *intifada* and we will succeed.... Our goal is clear and we will implement it firmly and without compromise: a complete end to violence and terrorism. And we will be full partners in the international war against terrorism. And we will call upon our partners in this war to prevent financial and military assistance to those who oppose this position.”

Verbally, Abbas had given Bush all he could have asked for. But the

problem for the US is that he is consequently seen as little more than a stooge of Washington. The rejection of Abbas’s comments by his political opponents is a popular step. According to some polls, only 2 percent of Palestinians support their prime minister, who was imposed by a political clique acting at the behest of the White House in order to displace President Yasser Arafat who has been declared beyond the pale by both the US and Israel.

His public standing is not helped when US Secretary of State Colin Powell promises to give him practical help in dealing with militant groups.

What is being offered the Palestinians under the road map is seen by most as abject surrender in return for a few vague promises.

At the summit, Sharon gave very little in return despite being under considerable pressure from Washington to help the road map fly. He is being asked to accept some compromise with the Palestinians in order to help secure US hegemony over the entire Middle East, but the road map is still highly favourable to Israel. It falls well short of what was promised eventually under the Oslo Accords in terms of territory—the “contiguous” Palestinian state referred to will probably occupy less than half of the West Bank. (Under Oslo the Palestinian Authority was given control of 70 percent of Gaza and 42 percent of the West Bank, but Israeli military incursions have already significantly diminished this already meagre offering). And there is no discussion of the fate of Jerusalem and of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

But Sharon still concentrated on making clear that nothing would be done without Abbas having first subdued all resistance to Israel and stressing that any removal of Zionist settlements (in line with “the importance of territorial contiguity in the West Bank”) would be minimal.

He proclaimed that “my paramount responsibility is the security of the people of Israel and of the state of Israel” and there could be no peace “without the abandonment and elimination of terrorism, violence and incitement.”

Sharon only promised to remove “unauthorized outposts”, said nothing about the right of return for 4 million Palestinian refugees or the future of east Jerusalem, seized in 1967 and wanted by the Palestinians as their capital.

His spokesmen have stressed that Sharon has been promising “territorial contiguity” to the Palestinians for years, by which he means the construction of tunnels and bridges that would leave the majority of Zionist settlements intact and establish a Palestinian “state” surrounded by Israeli armed fortifications and functioning as little more than a glorified prison camp.

The insistence on dismantling only “unauthorized outposts” encompasses at most around 20 minor settlements out of more than 100 outposts in the West Bank and a further 60 in the rest of the Occupied Territories. More than 200,000 Israelis have moved into the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967.

And when one uses the term minor, it is important to understand what

this means. Arafat rubbished Sharon's summit pledge by asking rhetorically, "What's the significance of removing a caravan from one location and then saying 'I have removed a settlement'?"

The prescience of his remarks was underlined by the Israeli army's first action to dismantle a "settlement" at Neve Erez and Amona, near the Palestinian city of Ramallah, which materially consisted not of a caravan but a water tower. Nabil Abu Rdainah, a senior aide to Arafat, called the action a "theatrical and insignificant step", while Zionist settlers promised to erect a new settlement and more for every one dismantled.

Dismantling Sharon's self-defined "illegal outposts" of a few tents and caravans would in any case leave far more substantial settlements that would divide the West Bank into three Palestinian enclaves—hence the need for tunnels and bridges.

As Yoel Marcus, an advocate of a two-state settlement with the Palestinians remarked in *Haaretz*, "Taking down a few outposts and settlements won't be a problem for Sharon. Since coming to power, 62 new ones have been rubber-stamped by him, contrary to the basic policies outlined by his administration. Releasing a few hundred prisoners won't be a problem either, with 5,000 of them now sitting in our jails."

Sharon remains a determined advocate of the creation of a Greater Israel. He calculates that any concessions he may have to make will be minimal, given that they are being asked for by the most pro-Israeli US administration in recent history. And in any case there will be ample opportunity to blow the entire project up given the demands that are being placed on Abbas and his clique.

The Israeli army has sealed off the West Bank and Sharon's spokesman Avi Pazner has warned that if Abbas "does not fight the terrorists, we will". For its part, Washington has also issued a blunt warning to Palestinian leaders that failure to end attacks on Israelis is threatening the creation of a Palestinian state envisaged in the road map.

Nevertheless, as far as the fascistic layers of Zionist settlers, sections of Likud and Sharon's far-right coalition partners are concerned, the prime minister has become little more than a traitor.

On June 5 between 20,000 and 40,000 rightist demonstrators—mainly settlers and orthodox Jews—gathered in Jerusalem's Zion Square to denounce Sharon for his "surrender to terrorism". Zion Square was the venue for a protest rally against the Labour government of Yitzhak Rabin, who was gunned down later in 1995 by religious fanatic Yigal Amir for having endorsed the 1993 Oslo Accords setting up the Palestinian Authority. Once again signs were carried calling another prime minister "traitor".

Though small in number, these extreme elements exert disproportionate influence within Israeli society and over the Sharon government in particular.

One cabinet minister, Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the National Union bloc, said on national television that uprooting settlements touched nerves so sensitive in Israel that the step could spark civil war. He was supported by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed of the Nablus-area Har Bracha settlement, who said, "It's obvious that when you hurt people, tough problems can be created." When asked to caution against taking violent acts, Melamed refused.

Speaking at the Zion Square rally, Tourism Minister Benny Elon (National Union) said there was no need for a road map, "because there is a Palestinian state and its capital is Amman. There will not rise any other Palestinian state besides Jordan." And National Religious Party leader Effi Eitam asked of the hopes aroused by the Aqaba summit, "Hope for whom? For terror? This is the hope of the evil. Our hope is to continue living in this land—which is all ours, which all belongs to us."

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein has said he will call a special meeting of the IDF, the security service Shin Bet, the police and senior State Prosecutor's officials to discuss the rising protests and threats against Sharon personally. A Shin Bet official told the Israeli press, "The

assassination of the prime minister is our greatest nightmare. Unfortunately, I cannot rule this out from happening again."

The right wing has one major political advantage. Whether supportive of Sharon's latest pretence as peacemaker, as with the opposition Labour Party and Meretz, or critical of him, the answer of the official Israeli left and peace movement is to support some version of a two-states solution as is now being publicly advocated by Washington. And their criticism/opposition to Sharon is confined to an appeal for him to genuinely implement the US road map.

As one such advocate, Avi Shlaim, an author and professor of International Relations at Oxford University, argued recently in the British-based *Guardian*: "In 1937, the Peel Commission proposed the partition of Palestine. In 1947 the UN voted for the partition of mandatory Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. The logic behind partition remains the only viable solution now."

This solution is no solution at all. Even if one were to adopt the most charitable estimate possible, the type of Palestinian state being envisaged is completely unviable. It would exist under Israeli sufferance, dependent on its larger neighbour economically and subordinate to it militarily.

But a Jewish state, even one encompassing the territories established by 1967 war, is also unviable and no less a prison house for its citizens—albeit one for now more comfortably furnished.

One of the main reasons Sharon has been forced to go through the motions of diplomacy is because Israel is totally reliant on economic subventions from the US. Its economy is in a state of collapse, unable to compete in the high-tech sectors that it placed so much hope on in the 1990s, suffering from the virtual collapse of its tourism industry and faced with a massive and escalating military budget in order to suppress the Palestinians and maintain its position as a regional strongman on behalf of Washington.

Whether based on the vision of a Greater Israel or a two states solution, for the ordinary citizens of Israel the future is one of austerity budgets, wage cuts and slashing social spending.

Moreover, Israel's character as "Jewish state" established under the ideology of Zionism in all its variants, automatically discriminates against the 20 percent of its existing population who are Arab and Muslim, as well as placing broad layers of secular and moderate Jews under the political dictates of a thin layer of religious and political extremists.

The alternative to the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not an apartheid-style separation enforced by the military might of US imperialism. What is required is a political break with Zionism and a unified struggle by Jewish and Arab workers for the creation of an entirely new form of rule to that of the Zionist elite and the autocratic Arab regimes alike—the United Socialist States of the Middle East. This would allow for the utilisation of the region's vast resources for the benefit of all its inhabitants, rather than for the US corporations now seeking to grab its oil reserves.



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