

US, Israel push Palestinian prime minister to launch crackdown

Chris Marsden
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“He is our man, and Washington has got to support him as visibly as possible.” So said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, an influential right-wing US think-tank that included media mogul Rupert Murdoch on its board of directors.

He was speaking of Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas, who has earned Washington’s support by his efforts to impose the diktats of the Bush administration’s “Road Map” on a largely hostile and skeptical Palestinian people.

On July 1, he spoke at a specially convened press conference alongside Ariel Sharon at the Israeli prime minister’s Jerusalem office to announce the beginning of efforts to implement the Road Map’s provisions. He was accompanied by seven of his cabinet ministers who sat alongside their Israeli opposite numbers. The most important presence was that of his security chief, Mohammed Dahlan, who sat between Israeli defence minister Shaul Mofaz and vice prime minister and former mayor of Jerusalem Ehud Olmert of Likud, laughing and joking with each other. Together, Abbas and Dahlan are charged with bringing the Intifada against Israeli occupation to an end on behalf of their political masters in Washington.

The conference was made possible by the three-month ceasefire agreed on June 29 by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Yasser Arafat’s Fateh. The agreement followed a round of intensive arm-twisting by Mahmoud Abbas, Arab states and top White House representatives such as Bush’s national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

In return for these efforts, Sharon had authorised a limited withdrawal from parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Bethlehem, in line with the demands of the Road Map. He made his by now obligatory profession of a desire for peace, coupled with a threat that there “will be no compromise with terror.”

The Israeli pullback from Gaza and Bethlehem barely

provided a fig leaf for Abbas to hide behind. Even as it was taking place on July 2, residents complained that the changeover did not stop Israeli roadblocks from keeping them out of the rest of the West Bank and away from their jobs in Israel. And the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) could swiftly reimpose its occupation anyway.

Um Mohamed told *IslamOnline*, “It is a trick, a lie, as the pullout is just a sham.... They are still not far away from us and may at any time push into our areas and close roads.”

Local anger was made worse by the scale of destruction left behind by the IDF. At Beit Hanoun, armoured bulldozers had destroyed dozens of homes and factories, torn up roads and uprooted trees. They also ripped up 1,000 acres of citrus trees on which the local economy depends and which will take a decade to replace.

The renewal of Israel’s stranglehold was not long in coming as the IDF reblocked the main north-south road in the Gaza Strip—the “Tancher” highway—following a rocket attack on the Zionist settlement at Kfar Darom. The army said this violated the ceasefire despite being carried out by a member of the Al Aqsa martyrs’ brigade, which refused to endorse the pact. The man was killed by the IDF.

But this was far from the only painful reminder of Israel’s real intentions. The *Guardian*’s Chris McGreal reports in its July 3 edition how the Israeli government has confiscated hundreds of acres of Palestinian land on the West Bank this week to build still more Zionist settlements.

The land was seized around villages north of Jerusalem on the very day the IDF moved out of Bethlehem. Palestinian minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said that the withdrawal was merely a cover for land seizures. “It’s robbery. What they are doing is trying to practice ethnic cleansing on the outskirts of Jerusalem.”

A local resident told the *Guardian*, “All this started 20

years ago ... they have taken 4,000 acres of land over the years. We are being squeezed out. There were 20,000 people living here in 1967. Now there are 1,300.”

The aim of the seizures is to expand Israeli-controlled areas around Jerusalem deep into the West Bank and incorporate them into the city and a Greater Israel.

Far worse for Abbas is what Tel Aviv and Washington expect of him, which is a clampdown on militant groups that must inevitably place him on a collision course with the Palestinian masses.

The head of Israel’s domestic security service Shin Bet, Avi Dichter, warned before the July 1 press conference, “We will not move on to transfer responsibility for the West Bank before it becomes totally clear that in Gaza the process of disarming terror groups has begun.”

Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz also told the cabinet on July 2 that Israel wants to see Palestinians start disarming militant groups in Gaza and Bethlehem before pulling out of additional areas.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom has denounced the June 29 ceasefire as a trick that would leave a “ticking bomb” in place by maintaining the “infrastructure of terror.” He won the support of Rice, who demanded that the Palestinian Authority (PA) use the ceasefire to disarm militant groups. IDF chief of staff Moshe Yaalon issued a challenge to Hamas in an interview published in *Yediot Aharonot* in which he proclaimed Israel’s victory over the Intifada and ridiculed Hamas for asking for a ceasefire “before the gong had sounded. There is a chance the power of Hamas is declining.”

Mahmoud Abbas is extremely reluctant to mount a frontal challenge to his Palestinian rivals, as he has little or no popular support. Abbas was forced to respond to the Kfar Darom attack, however, which he condemned as “sabotage.” Palestinian police arrested seven militants on July 3, four of them Fateh members, which provoked angry demonstrations including gunfire outside his and Dahlan’s homes in Gaza.

Gunmen fired volleys into the air and set off homemade grenades in Gaza City.

On July 7, the PA arrested and then released to her family an 18-year-old woman planning a suicide bombing in Israel—the first such arrest by Palestinian forces since the IDF withdrawal.

Abbas has continued talks with Hamas, Fateh and Islamic Jihad, but this will not satisfy Washington or Israel who want nothing less than a full-scale offensive.

Washington is prepared to bankroll Abbas if he moves against his opponents, mooted an extra \$300 million for

rebuilding his security forces and other monies to fund social services presently offered by Hamas, which has used them to establish a popular base of support. Washington has thus far agreed to a \$30 million aid package to help rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the IDF in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A symbolic example of how such money will be used is the launching of a beautification project in Gaza where municipal workers have begun whitewashing over anti-Israeli graffiti associated with the Intifada.

The position of the pro-US leadership of the PA could hardly be worse. As few as one out of four of its 17,000 police officers even has a weapon, and all 45 police posts along Gaza’s border with Israel have been destroyed by the IDF. One top officer commented, “And now they are asking us to disarm Hamas and destroy them? The Israelis want to push us to a civil war.”

The charge is accurate. Dahlan’s companion on July 1, Ehud Olmert, told WNBC television in New York on May 13 that Abbas “has got to prove that he’s against terror, and the only proof that is reasonable for us is that ... he will end it, that he will fight it, that he will defeat these Hamas and Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad groups, that his security forces will be ready to get in direct confrontation with these groups and stop them so that we will not have to stop them... Hamas is ready to continue terror, and, therefore, the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Abu Abbas will have to fight them ... without any hesitations whatsoever if they want to succeed.”

He later admitted, “The problem, by the way, is that if we talk too positively about Abbas immediately, some of his people from his side call him a traitor and a collaborator with Israel.”



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