

Washington talks provide cover for Israeli repression

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No sooner had Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon finished his Washington talks with President George W. Bush on July 29, than his regime stepped up its oppression of the Palestinian people.

Just two days later, the Israeli parliament passed a blatantly racially discriminatory law preventing Palestinians who marry Israeli citizens from obtaining Israeli citizenship and thus living in Israel. The law applies only to Palestinians and will mean couples having to live separately or the Israeli citizen moving into a Palestinian area.

Israel's security forces have also gone on the offensive. Its armed forces fired rubber bullets at hundreds of protesters demonstrating in Qalqilya against the 600 km "security" wall that Israel is building to seal off the West Bank. At the high security Shikma jail, housing some 650 mostly Palestinian prisoners in Ashkelon, just north of the Gaza Strip, police used tear gas to suppress a riot by inmates over intrusive cell searches. Twenty-two prisoners were injured.

In the last days, Sharon has also issued a tender to build 22 new homes in Neve Dekalim, a Jewish settlement in Gaza, in defiance of agreements to freeze settler activity.

Such events are not aberrations but were implicit in Sharon's discussions with Bush. Whilst political commentators had claimed the Washington talks would see the US exert heavy pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinian Authority so as to secure the so-called "Road Map to Peace", which envisages the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2005, the reality is that the accord holds nothing progressive for the Palestinian people.

Drawn up by the Quartet—US, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations—and presented as a means for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the road map is but the latest charade by which the Middle East is to be reorganised in the interests of US imperialism and Israel's ruling elite.

Conceived as a sop to gain the support of various Arab regimes in return for their support for the war against Iraq, the road map set out conditions even more stringent for the Palestinians than those contained in the failed Oslo Accord.

The agreement was predicated on the marginalisation and isolation of PLO chairman Yassir Arafat, now virtually imprisoned in his Ramallah headquarters, and the installation of

businessman Mahmoud Abbas, regarded by Washington as a more pliant tool for its interests, as prime minister.

Under his leadership, the Palestinian Authority is charged with ending all resistance to Israel's ongoing and illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Only after this had been achieved, and verified by Washington, is Israel required to withdraw its forces from those areas occupied since September 2000.

The future of any Palestinian state was also made dependent upon the Quartet reaching a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East, including between Israel, Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, the final settlement in 2005 is to encompass such contentious issues as borders, sovereignty over East Jerusalem settlements, and the right of return for nearly four million Palestinian refugees to the land from which they were driven in 1948 and 1967.

Were all the conditions met, however, the outcome would be a weak, truncated Palestinian state, more akin to an apartheid-style bantustan. Even this is unacceptable to Sharon. No sooner had the road map been published than the Israeli government tabled more than 100 objections.

At his last meeting with Bush in June 4, following the US president's talks with leaders of the pro-American Arab regimes in Egypt, Sharon had come under pressure to make some concessions to get the road map up and running. Nevertheless, he offered nothing more than the dismantling of a few illegal settler outposts. Since then, opposition has escalated with numerous armed clashes between the Palestinians and Israeli armed forces and Israeli assassination attempts on the lives of Palestinian militants.

Sharon's objective has been to provoke retaliatory action that would enable Israel to blame the Palestinian Authority and Mahmoud Abbas, the new Palestinian prime minister selected by Washington as part of its efforts to sideline and isolate Palestinian chairman Yassir Arafat, for their failure to stamp out resistance.

It knows perfectly well that such a goal is unattainable. Nonetheless, the PA's failure would provide Israel with the pretext to annex further areas of the West Bank, expelling the population of these areas into a narrow Palestinian strip of territory that would then be cordoned off like the Gaza Strip so

that it resembles a high security prison rather than any sovereign state.

In talks on Friday July 25, Abbas had complained to Bush at Israel's action, singling out its ongoing construction of the West Bank wall, which cuts through Palestinian territory, destroying homes and farms, and encircles land occupied by illegal settlements. For his part, Bush had praised Abbas as a leader of "vision and courage" and pronounced the wall to be "a problem".

In the later meeting with Sharon, much was made of the fact that Israel was implementing some of the measures agreed in June, including the release of 342 Palestinian prisoners and authorising the removal of three roadblocks and a few "unauthorised outposts". (On August 5, Israel announced it was calling a halt to military withdrawal from Palestinian cities, and said there would be no further prisoner releases in addition to those already agreed, citing the wounding of a Jewish settler near Bethlehem two days earlier).

However, Bush made clear that he supported Sharon's insistence that any concessions to the PA were dependent upon it fulfilling the agreement to act ruthlessly against all opposition to Israel.

"The commitment to fight terror... will make it a lot easier to deal with difficult issues, including the settlement issue," Bush said. "Prime Minister Abbas made a public declaration that we would work together to dismantle terrorist organisations, and that is exactly what is going to happen".

Bush overruled Abbas and his chief security officer, Muhammad Dahlan, who argued that a confrontation with Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Brigade would jeopardise the fragile three-month truce declared by the three groups on June 29, and demanded more. With Sharon looking on, Bush insisted that the PA mount "sustained, targeted and effective operations to confront those engaged in terror and to dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure".

Whilst describing the West Bank wall as a "sensitive issue", Bush insisted that the best way of addressing Israel's security was for the PA to crack down on the terrorist groups that threatened Israel, making the wall an irrelevance in the long term.

A White House official quoted Bush as saying "The process needs to start immediately and it would be good for it to end as quickly as possible. Everyone one wants to help Abu Mazen [as Abbas is also known] but the main help is what he can give himself".

Sharon in turn praised Bush's fight against terrorism and suggested that Israel, like the US, would never compromise with "terror and evil". As far as Israel was concerned, it was now up to Abbas to fulfil his promise to take action against Hamas and other opposition groups.

The Palestinian leadership was "doing nothing to eliminate or dismantle" terrorist organisations, Sharon went on, going so far as to equate the Palestinian Authority with Hitler's Germany.

"The most outstanding mistake took place in the 30s in Europe when Nazi Germany routinely violated all the agreements signed with it", Sharon stated, cynically ignoring that it is Israel which has violated international agreements by maintaining its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Sharon was well satisfied with his talks with Bush. His inscription in the White House's official visitor's book said it all: "True friendship among allies can overcome every obstacle."

Bush's refusal to censure Israel illustrates that under the guise of peace, the interests of the US and Israeli ruling elite are to be forcibly promoted against the Palestinian people and, increasingly, the Israeli working class.

The ever-worsening economic and social conditions within Israel have played an important role in Sharon's calculations. The world recession, the intifada that has led to a fall of more than 50 percent in tourism, Israel's lifeblood, and the war against Iraq has led to a catastrophic decline in Israel's economy. The recently introduced Economic Austerity Plan that seeks to place the full burden of the crisis onto the working class and the most vulnerable layers of the population has exacerbated social tensions to breaking point.

Sharon's security rhetoric provides a means by which the ruling elite hopes to divert these tensions away from its real source—the economic policies required by international capital—into a war against the Palestinians and thereby justify the establishment of a garrison state, that will suppress both Palestinian and Israeli workers alike.

For the US, Sharon's praise for the attack on Iraq as just the first step in the "war against terror" underlines the fact that in the foreign policy machinations of the Bush administration, the road map is part and parcel of the White House's project to establish its grip over the Middle East under a Pax Americana. To this end, the only Palestinian entity that will satisfy US imperialism is one that exists as a virtual prison camp for its inhabitants, policed by such politicians as can be found or bought, on its behalf.



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