

Israel: Sharon reiterates threat to annex West Bank territory

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Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon used the January 5 congress of his Likud Party to reiterate his threat to permanently annex land on the West Bank and thereby unilaterally determine the shape of a truncated Palestinian entity.

First made on December 18 of last year, his threat to abandon the timetable set out in the so-called “Road Map” for peace has received scarcely a word of criticism from Washington—despite the US being the main sponsor of the proposals. In effect, he has instead been given a green light for his expansionist aims and the escalating brutality that such plans will necessitate.

The Road Map provides for the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders, as a step towards the creation of a definitive state by 2005.

In last December’s policy speech to a security conference in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, however, Sharon laid down an ultimatum to the Palestinian Authority (PA): that if they failed to suppress all opposition to the Israeli occupation by outlawing militant groups and carrying out mass arrests, he would unilaterally separate Israel from the Palestinian territories within a matter of months.

He refused to specify the line of separation, but threatened that the Palestinians would be granted even less territory than they would under a negotiated settlement. The lines of demarcation Sharon intends to impose are hardly a mystery, as they would follow the line of the illegal security fence Israel is erecting. This cuts well into territories beyond the “Green Line,” the pre-1967 Six Day War border between Israel and the West Bank. This would make permanent the “facts on the ground” of 140,000-plus Zionist settlers having seized control of around 15 percent of the West Bank, representing its prime agricultural land. It would also permanently deny access to any part of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to be their capital and which constitutes a vast proportion of the West Bank proper.

He pledged to speed up the construction of the security barrier, warning the PA, “We are not going to wait forever.”

Despite the provocative character of Sharon’s threat, Washington quickly gave its tacit assent. Initially, White House press secretary Scott McClellan made critical remarks warning Sharon, “We would oppose any unilateral steps that block the road toward negotiations under the road map.” But by the next day, McClellan had changed his tune. “We were very pleased with the overall speech,” he said, adding that Sharon had made some important pledges to ease the conditions facing Palestinians and had undertaken to confiscate no more land for settlement expansion and to dismantle unauthorised settler outposts.

The settlement issue is being focused on by Tel Aviv and Washington—as if Sharon had suddenly become the enemy of the very people on whom he has relied for support—in order to divert attention

from the expansionist substance of his announcement. In this, Sharon can rely on the entirely predictable outrage of the settler population, of Likud’s most extremist wing and of its far-right coalition partners to any proposal to remove a single settlement from the supposedly “biblical” home of the Jews.

The Road Map calls for a freeze on settlements, as well as on what is called “natural growth” in order to create a Palestinian state. But Sharon has only stated that some settlements may have to be “redeployed”—“reducing as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population” and so drawing “the most efficient security line possible.”

Sharon has not specified precisely which settlements are supposed to be shut down, but his record suggests that he is envisaging isolated settlements in the east of the West Bank and the handful in the Gaza Strip. There is no talk of reducing the overall number of settlers.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert subsequently warned of the anguish of possibly tens of thousands of settlers being forced to relocate. He spoke of the measure in terms of preserving Israel’s Jewish majority, warning that Arabs would soon outnumber Israel’s 5.5 million Jews in the territory it controls. “Do we want [the Palestinians] to be equal citizens in the state of Israel and ultimately dictate the nature of the state?” Olmert asked.

If Sharon’s proposals were carried through fully, this figure of tens of thousands is possibly true, but only because Sharon’s government has presided over a doubling of the settler population on the West Bank to 220,000. Israel spends about \$500 million on settlements annually—excluding the massive security bill. Of the settlements established, 130 have been authorised and 100 are unauthorised. Of the latter, 60 have been built during Sharon’s term in office.

Most of the settlements Sharon has so far targeted for dismantling are tiny and often uninhabited. Of two announced to be dismantled on January 3, for example, only one was inhabited and consisted of two families living in an old bus and a trailer. This month, Sharon identified 28 outposts for removal housing just 400 settlers. There are 40 or 50 much bigger outposts that should have been dismantled under the Road Map, and many of those that have been dismantled are quickly rebuilt.

To place the plight of these illegal Israeli settlers in its proper perspective, it should be noted that the borders being drawn by Sharon would displace more than 200,000 Palestinians from their homes.

There is ample evidence that Sharon intends to continue his de facto encouragement of settlements. Only this month it was revealed that \$1 million had been allocated to building a road to an illegal West Bank outpost, after a seminary dedicated to the teachings of the former leader of the extremist Kach party, Rabbi Meir Kahane, was built

there.

In a related development, his government was forced to publicly deny plans to expand Jewish settlements by building 900 homes in the Golan Heights—a strategic plateau captured after Israel defeated Syria, Egypt and Jordan in the 1967 War. The Bush administration had called for freezing Israeli settlement expansion there, after Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz publicly announced a plan to double the number of settlers from 17,000 to 34,000 over the next three years at a cost of \$56 million.

Katz is one of Sharon's main rightist opponents within Likud. The proposal was meant as a deliberate snub to Syria, announced as it was just weeks after its leader Bashar al-Assad had called for an unconditional resumption of peace talks with Israel. "The idea is that Assad will see from his own window the Israeli Golan Heights thriving and flowering," said Katz.

At the congress of the party's 3,000-member central committee, a stronghold of Sharon's main rival, Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Katz was one of a dozen or so MPs up in arms at proposals to remove some settlements. Sharon was met with a chorus of boos when he spoke of abandoning settlements and when he spoke of the possibility of a Palestinian state. But he dismissed demands that he put the issue before the party leadership for ratification. He insisted that, as prime minister, he had the final responsibility. And despite the boozing, the threatened vote of no-confidence and withdrawal from the coalition by the settler-based National Religious Party (NRP) and National Union have not materialised.

Transportation Minister Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the National Union, said he had heard nothing that should make his party leave the government, while NRP leader Effi Eitam was advised by leading settler representative Rabbi Shlomo Aviner to remain in the government at all costs.

Sharon cannot afford to be quite as provocative as his rightist allies, who are addressing a largely domestic audience while playing to the most extreme elements within the Zionist milieu in the US and internationally. He must be politic in pursuing his goal of a Greater Israel while not unduly embarrassing his backers in Washington.

The Bush administration is intent on establishing its undisputed hegemony over the entire Middle East. As was demonstrated with Iraq, this drive ultimately rests on a combination of economic pressure and the deployment of US military muscle. The fate of Saddam Hussein's regime, together with the threats made against "axis of evil" states such as Iran and Syria, is meant to intimidate all the Arab regimes and ensure their obeisance before Washington.

But the Arab rulers have pleaded with Washington to give them a fig leaf with which to hide their refusal to oppose US aggression in the region—by forcing Israel to accept some limited form of Palestinian statehood. To this end, the US joined with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations to draw up the Road Map, which promises the creation of a rump entity on some of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in return for the Palestinian Authority bringing the intifada to an end.

Sharon has been forced to accept for now this "two-states" solution—which would leave the Palestinians in a ghetto entity, ringed and intersected by Israeli military outposts, policed by the PA and the Western powers, and entirely subservient to Israel. But he has constantly pushed the US to ditch the Road Map by mounting constant provocations against the Palestinians designed to elicit suicide bombings by militant groups. This enables Sharon to denounce the PA for its failure to honour its commitment to end hostilities against Israel, and is now being used to legitimise his threat to impose his own

even more iniquitous version of a "two-states" solution on the Palestinians.

Sharon could not contemplate irritating President George W. Bush without the knowledge that he has at the very least substantial backing for his actions amongst many of Washington's key players and a calculation that the criticisms he occasionally faces are only for the record. Indeed, one of the more embarrassing aspects of Sharon's latest outpourings for the Bush administration was his promise to coordinate Israel's supposedly unilateral moves. In December, he pledged that any Israeli actions would be "fully coordinated" with Washington in order not to harm "our strategic coordinations with the United States." To the Likud convention, he declared, "If it transpires in a few months that we have no partner...we will have to act alone, with maximum coordination with our allies, first and foremost the US."

Sharon is a pragmatist whose ambitions are restrained by both the mounting economic, political and military difficulties facing his government and his need to maintain US backing. But ultimately he has not abandoned his aim of driving the Palestinians out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip altogether—nor of extending Israeli control over the Golan Heights and substantial parts of what are now Syria and Lebanon. Even as he made his threat to unilaterally separate from the Palestinians, therefore, he reassured his hard-line critics, "This security line will not constitute the permanent border of the State of Israel."

He clearly calculates that his long-held goals may be realisable if he pushes the Palestinians into a corner and forces the US to take sides in an ever-escalating military conflict he has engineered.

Counter threats by Prime Minister Ahmad Qureia indicate the anger Sharon has provoked and the desperate situation facing the PA in seeking to tie the Palestinian masses to the "two-states" solution envisaged under the Road Map. Qureia said of Sharon's plans, "This is an apartheid solution to put the Palestinians in cantons. Who can accept this? We will go for a one-state solution."

Pointing to maps of the fence, he said it was an attempt to "put Palestinians like chickens in cages. The wall is to unilaterally mark the borders, this is the intention behind the wall... It will kill the road map and kill the two-state vision."



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