

Israel to expand West Bank settlements with US support

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1 September 2004

Last week, Israel announced plans to expand the settlements in the West Bank and sent troops into Gaza, demolishing Palestinian homes and tearing up a vital arterial road. Its actions have exposed Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to pullout from Gaza—hailed by Washington as a step towards a peaceful resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict—for the fraud that it is.

Under Sharon's so-called "unilateral disengagement" plan, Israel would withdraw its 8,153 settlers in Gaza while continuing to control Gaza's borders, coastline and airspace, and reserving the right to send troops into Gaza in retaliation for any attacks launched from there. The focus on Gaza was aimed at drawing attention away from Israel's efforts to consolidate its grip on the West Bank and so eliminating any possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

The government has made two separate announcements of its plans to expand its illegal settlements in the West Bank. It released a tender to build 1,000 new homes and a few days later a further 533 were announced: more than 300 in Har Gilo and Haradar, near Jerusalem, and 200 new homes in Adam and Emanuel.

The expansion of the Israeli settlements forms part of a series of measures aimed at increasing their geographic size and population, and making any future Palestinian state impossible. In effect Sharon has continued his policy of "creating facts on the ground" and consolidating Israel's seizure of the bulk of the West Bank.

The announcements were timed to coincide with the start of the prime minister's Likud party conference in an attempt to forestall criticism from the ultra-nationalists, who have opposed his plan to surrender a single settlement in Gaza, and to reaffirm his position as the godfather of the settlements. In practice, Sharon is just as committed as his opponents to the Greater Israel project, only differing from them in seeking US backing as the most realistic way of achieving this objective.

Sharon's wider political objective has been to create the conditions for support both at home and abroad for his land grab in the West Bank by appearing to make concessions in

Gaza at the cost of withdrawing just 8,100 settlers and pulling out the army. This follows his deliberate wrecking in September 2000 of the 1993 Oslo Agreement, because the establishment of even a truncated Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza that would entail the surrender of any of the settlements, illegal under international law, was too much for Sharon. For the same reason, he then torpedoed the "road map" brokered by the Quartet—made up of the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations. The road map was spawned by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq as a sop to his coalition partners, in particular British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

In its place, Sharon proposed and won on April 14 US endorsement of his plan for a "unilateral withdrawal" from Gaza in return for an even more truncated Palestinian state than that envisaged under Oslo. Israel would continue to exercise military, economic and political control over the Palestinian entity. Above all, the US agreed that the Palestinian refugees, who had been driven out or had fled their homes during the 1948 and 1967 wars, would have no right of return to their former homes in Israel. Any return would be to the new state of Palestine and even that would be the subject to negotiation.

The building of homes by an occupying power on land seized during a war—the West Bank and Gaza were seized during the 1967 war with Jordan and Egypt—is illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention and has been condemned by countless UN resolutions. But the Likud party's rejection on May 2 of Sharon's disengagement plan, because it entailed the surrender of a few settlements in Gaza and some settler outposts in the West Bank, has helped Sharon portray himself as a moderate alternative—whose proposals are at least better than anything the ultra nationalist and religious parties are proposing.

Moreover, while two of Sharon's coalition cabinet have quit in protest and another has been sacked for opposing the Gaza pullout, Sharon's shaky minority government has been able to hang on to power with the support of the opposition Labour party.

Sharon's shamelessness knows no bounds. The announcements followed within weeks of his government flatly denying a Peace Now report detailing the expansion of Zionist settlements in both the West Bank and Gaza. This was in blatant defiance of the "road map", whereby Israel agreed to freeze "all settlement activity (including natural growth of settlements)" and dismantle settlement outposts erected after March 2001.

Last April, when Bush endorsed Sharon's plan to "withdraw" from Gaza, he said that "new realities on the ground" made it "unrealistic" for Israel to give up all but the smallest settlements in the West Bank. Now Bush has gone even further. The White House's refusal to criticise these latest plans means that even the limited restraint imposed by the "road map" has been lifted and Israel has been given US backing to hold on to the West Bank settlements, expand them and incorporate them permanently into Israel. The prospect of even a limited Palestinian entity has been jettisoned.

The *New York Times* quoted a US official as saying that there was a "covert" shift towards accepting "natural growth" within settlements. The Bush administration would now give "tacit support" to new building within the boundaries of existing settlements.

The *Jerusalem Post* was jubilant. It said, "For years any expansion of Israeli settlements was met by knee jerk American opposition. Now it seems that the automaticity of this policy is being reconsidered. It's about time. We welcome the signs that the US may put away its settlement microscope, and support the growth of the settlement blocs, which take up less than a tenth of the West Bank and do not bloc the creation of a Palestinian state. Far from, harming the 'peace process', this overdue shift would help compel the Palestinians to make one possible."

There has been universal acknowledgement that Sharon has Washington's support, which means that the US has unilaterally junked the "road map" without so much as telling its partners. Just as significantly, not one of the Quartet has uttered a single word in protest, falling dutifully into line once again.

As the *Independent* stated, "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note, as Washington this week quietly buried the road map to peace.... The US acceptance of additional settlement building is so absolute a slap in the face of its road map partners, so exclusively attuned to [Bush's] domestic political needs that its partners have responded with open mouthed silence. No one denies the implications. But no one ... is prepared to come out and say anything as the peace plan is buried beneath a gravestone marked 'a forgotten victim of the US presidentials'."

While the White House may have calculated that support

for the settlement expansion would help to shore up Sharon's shaky coalition, a more important motivation was the belief that it would help secure the support of the Zionist and conservative supporters of Israel in the November presidential elections.

Yoel Esteron, in Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper, explained, "When Ariel Sharon's bureau chief Dov Weissglas convinced Bush advisors Condoleezza Rice and Elliot Abrams to give the [Israeli] prime minister a bit of rope, he granted them something in return: Mr Sharon's cold shoulder to the Democratic candidate.... This is a simple barter deal—take the building settlements, give a slap to John Kerry."

This horse-trading has left the Palestinians out in the cold. The bewildered Palestinian leadership had no answers to this latest attack. They were reduced to making pathetic noises of protest. Referring to the US's support for the expansion of the Zionist settlements, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei said that such a move would destroy hopes for peace. "I can't believe that America is now saying that settlement expansion is all right. This will destroy the peace process," he told reporters.

At the same time as announcing that new homes would be built in the occupied West Bank, Sharon sent in its tanks and bulldozers into Gaza, destroying 13 homes and making 100 people homeless. Bulldozers tore up the coast road to Egypt, dividing the Gaza Strip into three and cutting off one neighbourhood from another.

The action confirms that, even in the event of a withdrawal of troops, Gaza remains a ghetto that, with or without Israeli forces stationed inside, is no more independent than the so-called homelands that Apartheid South Africa set up for black Africans. Israel will continue to dominate the Gaza Strip and can seize it when it chooses whenever it deems that the Palestinian ruling elite has not done enough to suppress the population.



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