

Israel: Top adviser reveals Sharon set out to sabotage peace talks

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9 October 2004

Ariel Sharon's chief adviser, Dov Weisglass, has admitted publicly that the Israeli prime minister formulated his plan for "unilateral withdrawal" in order to block peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and thus keep the majority of Jewish settlers in the West Bank--and that he did so with the full backing of the Bush administration.

Dov Weisglass should know. He is one of the architects of Sharon's plan and heads Israel's negotiations with the White House. He told Ha'aretz Friday Magazine in an interview that has been published in part, "The significance of the plan is the freezing of the peace process.

"It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians."

Weisglass explains that the disengagement plan developed by Sharon was a response to what Israel viewed as growing opposition internationally--and, even more importantly, domestically--to Sharon's bloody offensive against the Palestinians, and a desire for some form of negotiated settlement.

When asked why the disengagement plan had been developed, he replied, "Because in the fall of 2003 we understood that everything was stuck. And although by the way the Americans read the situation, the blame fell on the Palestinians, not on us, Arik [Sharon] grasped that this state of affairs could not last, that they wouldn't leave us alone, wouldn't get off our case. Time was not on our side. There was international erosion, internal erosion. Domestically, in the meantime, everything was collapsing. The economy was stagnant, and the Geneva Initiative had gained broad support.

"And then we were hit with the letters of officers and letters of pilots and letters of commandos [refusing to serve in the territories]. These were not weird kids with green ponytails and a ring in their nose with a strong odour of grass. These were people like Spector's group [Yiftah Spector, a renowned Air Force pilot who signed the pilots' letter]. Really our finest young people."

Sharon responded by declaring that, as Israel had already proclaimed that PA leader Yasser Arafat was no longer

considered to be a "partner for peace," supposedly because of his failure to stop terrorist attacks on Israel (a position fully endorsed by Washington), he would now proceed with a plan for "unilateral separation."

In practice this amounted to a crude land-grab of the bulk of the West Bank. This was barely masked by a military withdrawal and the removal of around 7,500 Zionist settlers from the Gaza Strip, as well as just four settlements on the West Bank. Gaza will remain under Israeli military encirclement, while the best West Bank land, and the whole of East Jerusalem, will be permanently annexed to Israel behind a heavily fortified border wall.

Weisglass makes clear that the sacrifice of some settlements was conceived of as a way of ending the pretence of seeking a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians under the US-sponsored "Road Map" in a "legitimate manner."

"That is exactly what happened. You know, the term 'peace process' is a bundle of concepts and commitments. The peace process is the establishment of a Palestinian state with all the security risks that entails. The peace process is the evacuation of settlements, it's the return of refugees, it's the partition of Jerusalem. And all that has now been frozen."

He admitted that, far from this move flying in the face of an American initiative for peace, it was carried out with Washington's backing. The US supported Sharon's plans knowing that there would never be any significant removal of Zionist settlements, and therefore no prospect of a Palestinian state other than as a series of ghettos with no viable infrastructure and surrounded on all sides by the Israeli military. Joking cynically, Weisglass continued, "[W]hat I effectively agreed to with the Americans was that part of the settlements would not be dealt with at all, and the rest will not be dealt with until the Palestinians turn into Finns. That is the significance of what we did."

Sharon, he added, could also argue "honestly" that the disengagement plan was "a serious move because of which, out of 240,000 settlers, 190,000 will not be moved from their

place."

Touting the advantages that have since accrued to Israel, Weisglass proclaimed, "When you freeze [the peace] process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the [Palestinian] refugees, the borders and Jerusalem.

"Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda.

"And all this with authority and permission. All with a [US] presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress."

In August President George W. Bush endorsed Sharon's break with even the minimal restriction on Israeli expansionism embodied in the "Road Map," when he repudiated what was previously official US policy and agreed that West Bank settlements would eventually become part of Israel.

Weisglass' candid statements were not so politically damaging for Sharon. He has spent weeks proclaiming his hardline stance to his right-wing critics in the orthodox and settler parties and within Likud itself, and threatening to eliminate Arafat and begin hostilities against Syria and Iran. But they were embarrassing for his sponsors in Washington and for Israel's Labour Party, which has declared itself in support of the planned "unilateral withdrawal" and hailed it as a genuine move towards peace.

Both feigned surprise at what was in fact well known to them.

On the evening of October 6, Washington made a request for Sharon to "clarify" Israel's position. State Department Spokesman Adam Ereli said that that the administration had told Sharon that Weisglass' comments do not match Israel's official government position as presented to the US!

But Ereli then reiterated an Israeli government reassurance that it remains committed to the "Road Map" and to Bush's supposed vision of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Publicly Sharon voiced his continued support for the "Road Map" in a statement from his office, which went on to denounce the Palestinians for endangering a peaceful settlement.

In a classic example of double-speak the statement declared, "PM Sharon supports the road map, which is the only plan that will enable progress towards a lasting political settlement. The blame for the current stalemate lies with the Palestinians, who are refusing to honour their commitments and who are continuing to cling to the path of terrorism, violence and incitement.

"In the absence of a Palestinian partner, the government initiated the disengagement plan in order to bolster Israel's

diplomatic position, improve its ability to protect its citizens, and ease the suffering of the civilian population, until such time as a Palestinian partner who will fulfill all road map commitments with whom it will be possible to negotiate and make progress towards peace."

Weisglass also insisted that there had been no intention to freeze the "political process as such," but only "not to hold a political process with the PNA [Palestinian National Authority] in its present state."

This was more than enough for Washington. A senior State Department official duly proclaimed that the Bush administration was very satisfied with the clarifications of Weisglass' comments made by Sharon's office. And Secretary of State Colin Powell also gave his blessing, telling reporters in Grenada that the US does not doubt Sharon's commitment to the road map.

For his part, Labour Party chairman Shimon Peres simply said that Sharon had never told him that the disengagement plan was meant to freeze the peace process. There was no indication of his repudiating Labour's promise to support the disengagement plan being passed by the Knesset (parliament) in November, however. Only that Peres too would seek "clarifications" from Sharon.

For their part, Arafat and the PA leadership again showed that they are incapable of reversing the disastrous capitulation to US imperialism they made in return for securing their own right to police parts of the West Bank and Gaza--and so enrich themselves at terrible expense for the Palestinian masses.

Speaking as if he believed the professions of the Bush administration that they had been deceived as to Sharon's real intentions, Arafat's chief negotiator Saeb Erekat called on Washington to distance itself from Weisglass' comments. "It's clear that Mr. Weisglass expressed the true intentions of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon," he said. "We hope that President Bush will answer the question now as how to make the Gaza disengagement plan part of the road map and not an alternative to it."



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