

London meeting presses Palestinian Authority for further concessions

Rick Kelly
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The “London Meeting on Supporting the Palestinian Authority,” held March 1, was initially conceived by British Prime Minister Tony Blair as a major initiative to propel negotiations on a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). What took place, however, was a meeting whose agenda was drawn up by the Israeli and US governments. None of the issues underlying the conflict in Palestine were discussed. Instead, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was issued yet another list of demands for political, security, and economic reform, designed to demonstrate the PA’s readiness to suppress any resistance to the Israeli occupation.

Senior delegates from the “Quartet” responsible for President Bush’s “Road map for Peace in the Middle East”—the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia—attended the meeting, as did representatives from over 20 countries, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Israel refused to send anyone to the gathering. The Likud-Labour coalition government of Ariel Sharon opposed Blair’s planned conference when he first floated it after Bush’s reelection last November. As far as Israel was concerned, any discussion on its own obligations or on “final status” issues related to the Road Map—the future of East Jerusalem, the borders of any Palestinian state, or the right of return for refugees—was illegitimate. With the Bush administration’s full support, Sharon insisted that the only subject open for discussion was how to best whip the PA into line. The British prime minister quickly altered the character of the assembly to meet these demands. It was not even possible to call the gathering a conference—only a “meeting.”

Abbas and other figures in the PA were highly sceptical about the event, and the Palestinian president only agreed to attend under pressure from Washington and after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced her attendance. According to the *Guardian*, “Palestinian officials said that after US and Israeli pressure forced Mr. Blair to abandon his original plan for a full peace conference to push forward political talks, the leadership feared that [the] meeting would do little more than set out a fresh series of targets for the Palestinians before a return to the Road Map peace process.”

These fears were fully borne out, but Abbas had little choice but to abase himself, given his reliance on the good graces of Washington to remain in power.

The communiqué published at the conclusion of the one-day meeting was drawn up in advance, and in close consultation with the Sharon government. Israeli representative Dov Weisglass twice met with Blair aides in the two weeks leading up to the meeting and forced several changes to the prepared text. In one case, the original draft stated that Palestinian reform should be met by “reciprocal action by Israel in relation to its own commitments.” Sharon objected to this,

and had the statement altered so that the meeting’s participants merely “urged and expected” Israeli action.

That the Israeli government could dictate the terms of an international meeting that it had boycotted speaks volumes as to the real nature of the relationship between London, Tel Aviv, and Washington. Blair’s claim that his support for the Iraq war had ensured him a special influence over US policy in the Middle East has been left exposed. The reality is that Blair has far less say over the Bush administration’s Middle East policy than does Israel’s ruling Likud Party. The invasion of Iraq and the prostration of the Arab states, rather than providing any impetus to a resolution of the conflict in Palestine, have further emboldened both Israel and the US. The Bush administration is now pressing ahead with its efforts to reorganise the entire region in accordance with the interests of US imperialism.

This drive has effectively sidelined the Blair government, together with the UN and EU. What are now billed as diplomatic initiatives are framed as attempts to placate the Sharon government and force the Palestinians to do as they are told. British Foreign Minister Jack Straw said of the London meeting, “We hope to agree on a practical work plan to enable the Palestinians to meet their commitments and to give Israel confidence.”

Much of the meeting dealt with the drafting of reform measures for the PA’s security apparatus to bring it under central control and direct it towards suppressing resistance to Israel’s armed forces and Zionist settlers.

“The most important message is our complete readiness to exert 100 percent effort in the domain of security,” Abbas declared. The security and intelligence services will be centralised into three main branches, under the control of the Palestinian National Security Council. The PA also promised to “restore and revive lines of communication with the Israeli security establishment on security issues and will seek to strengthen them in the process.”

The London meeting finalised the formation of a “steering group” on security that will be under the direct control of the US. The group is to be headed by Lieutenant General William Ward, who was appointed the State Department’s “security coordinator” for the region last month.

The PA’s collaboration with Israel’s security and intelligence agencies is already well advanced. Palestinian police arrested three men following the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on February 25. The arrests came after the Israeli defence minister issued a list of wanted militants to the PA. Abbas condemned the attack and tacitly backed US and Israeli claims that Syria was responsible by referring to an unnamed “third party.” The London meeting was largely

overshadowed by the increasingly bellicose stance of the Bush administration against Damascus. Rice held a joint press conference with her French counterpart to condemn the Syrian government for its alleged sponsoring of terrorism and its failure to withdraw from Lebanon.

The Israeli response to the second intifada has caused the Palestinian economy to collapse. Punitive restrictions on the transportation of goods within the Occupied Territories and from Palestine to Israel have had a devastating effect. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have lost their jobs after being refused entry into Israel. According to the World Bank's official figures, unemployment in the occupied territories is 27 percent, and the poverty rate is 48 percent.

This has eroded the PA's revenue base, and the Authority's budget for 2005 is expected to be \$500 million in deficit. This budget crisis has been exploited to extract extensive economic and political reform, together with the overhaul of the Palestinian security apparatus. The London meeting saw the PA promise to "ensure tight control over the civil service wage in the 2005 budget [and] implement a Unified Pensions Law to enable reduction of public sector wage bills and facilitate a civil service reform."

"[Abbas has] taken a number of measures establishing tighter control over public finance," Nigel Roberts, the World Bank's director for the Occupied Territories, said last December. "But donors are also able to see that all their spending over the last four years has yielded very little, and they want to exercise some leverage over the situation." This was precisely the purpose of the London meeting, as Roberts himself admitted. "The real focus of this conference is what the Palestinians need to do right now in order to set their house in order, to demonstrate that this is a break with the past," he noted.

Abbas agreed to every measure that was demanded of him. A week earlier, he had also backed an overhaul of the Palestinian cabinet. Ministers who were reputed to be Yasser Arafat loyalists were dumped in favour of academics and "technocrats" committed to imposing economic reform. The new ministers, like Abbas himself, have no genuine social base and command little support among the Palestinian people.

Major General Nasser Yusef was named interior minister and will oversee the proposed realignment of Palestinian security forces. Arafat twice blocked attempts to appoint Yusef, who led a crackdown on Hamas in the 1990s. Just as significant is the appointment of Mohammed Dahlan as civil affairs minister. After returning to Gaza in 1994, Dahlan became head of the Preventive Security Service and a force of 20,000 men. He reportedly received help from CIA officials to train his security force and for the next two years worked together with Israeli authorities to suppress Hamas—arresting about 2,000 members in 1995. In April 2002, Israeli Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer testified before a parliamentary committee that he had offered control of the Gaza Strip to Dahlan because he considered him the man to establish order there.

The Israeli foreign minister described the appointment of the new cabinet as "an important step forward, a positive step towards a better future."

Despite their best efforts to comply with Washington's dictates, the Palestinian leadership has received no substantial increase in aid money. According to Associated Press, the US and other nations were expected to announce pledges totalling \$4.5 billion at the London meeting. In the event, just \$1.2 billion was promised—and only a fraction of this represented new money. A donor conference is scheduled before the end of June, but the amount pledged will depend

on the degree to which the PA fulfils US and Israeli demands. Only last December, a World Bank report declared that "[o]n the basis of what is on offer today, economic revival is a distant prospect, and it would be hard to justify a major new donor financing drive.... If significant progress is made against a set of agreed indicators, a major new donor effort would then be justified."

The meeting's final communiqué referred to the goal of creating "a sovereign, independent, viable, democratic and territorially contiguous Palestine." The statement also incorporated Condoleezza Rice's comment that "a state of scattered territories will not work." "Israel must also take no actions that prejudice a final settlement," Rice continued, "and must help ensure that a new Palestinian state is truly viable."

This rhetoric was designed for public consumption. It ignores the reality that Sharon's long-standing strategy has been to alter the "facts on the ground" in Israel's favour through the expansion of settlements on the West Bank and construction of the so-called "security barrier" that cuts deep into Palestinian territory. All of these measures have been undertaken with the support of the Bush administration.

Israel's contempt for the London meeting was expressed by an unnamed government source, who told the *Haaretz* newspaper: "There have been lots of such statements, and the next day they turned into scraps of paper. The Sharon government officially condemned the assembly's official statement on the grounds that it failed to issue sufficiently clear demands that the PA had to "dismantle the terrorist infrastructure."

Abbas has been invited to visit the White House later this month. But he is deluding himself if he believes that his obsequiousness will result in concessions from the Bush administration. All that he can expect is further pressure and fresh demands. But within the nationalist framework of the PA there is no option but to endure the repeated humiliations inflicted by the US and Israel. Abbas's prostration can only be understood as a particularly graphic expression of the dead end of bourgeois nationalism in the Middle East and internationally.



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