

Bush's meeting with Sharon confirms US support for West Bank land grab

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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's April 11 visit with President George Bush provided yet another demonstration of US support for the continuing expansion of Zionist settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and for Israel's ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.

A striking feature of the event was the coverage it provoked in the international media. Very little of the news and analysis produced bore any resemblance to the reality of what occurred at the meeting held on Bush's 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford, Texas. A sample of the headlines provides a sense of the general interpretation: "Bush, Sharon Clash Openly" (*Los Angeles Times*); "US Dressing Down for Sharon" (*Guardian*); "Instead of Friendship—Disagreements" (*Haaretz*); "Summit Shows Sharon's Glaring Differences with Bush" (*Middle East Times*).

The near universal focus on divisions and disagreements between Bush and Sharon was deduced from the conflicting public statements the two leaders made regarding the ongoing expansion of Zionist settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with Bush formally declaring that the US disagreed with such plans. "Israel has obligations under the Road Map," Bush stated in the press conference held following the meeting. "The Road Map says no expansion of settlements."

Sharon rejected the Bush administration's censure. "It is the Israeli position that the major Israeli population centres [i.e., the settlements] will remain in Israel's hands under any future final status agreement, with all related consequences," the prime minister declared.

What does this conflict of words actually signify? The question of settlement expansion has become particularly acute in recent weeks, since the Sharon government revealed that it planned to construct more than 3,500 houses for new settlers in order to connect the Maaleh Adumim settlement to East Jerusalem. The entire territory will be cut off from the West Bank by Israel's separation wall. The Sharon government's plan not only violates international law, but ends any chance of realising the Palestinian Authority's long-standing demand that East Jerusalem be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Contrary to the media's presentation, however, there is no substantial division between the US and Israel on the question of the settlements, nor on any other critical issue in the

Palestinian conflict.

Sharon can afford to ignore Bush's caution only because he knows that US protests regarding settlement expansion are issued mainly out of consideration for Washington's diplomatic interests in the Middle East. The Zionist state is completely dependent on the US for its existence—in political, economic, and military terms. The US provides Israel with more than \$2 billion a year in military aid, \$500 million in additional economic support, and has undersigned loan guarantees and IMF provisions that are currently worth \$10 billion. If the Bush administration were genuinely opposed to any aspect of Sharon's programme, it could simply threaten to withhold all or part of this massive subsidy, and the Israeli prime minister would have no choice but to fall in line.

But the Bush administration has steadfastly supported the Sharon government through all its provocations and attacks against the Palestinian people, and continues to do so.

In a development that went largely unreported, the meeting at Bush's ranch actually produced a promise of increased US aid to Israel. While details of the amount of money involved are yet to be released, the US president pledged support for Israel's efforts to promote the economic development of the Negev Desert and the Galilee region.

Sharon knew well before the meeting took place that he was likely to face criticism of his settlement programme, but understood that he could take whatever Bush said with a large pinch of salt. "We can't expect to receive explicit American agreement to build freely in the settlements," Sharon advised his cabinet before leaving for the US, *Haaretz* reported. "The publicity [regarding the Maaleh Adumim expansion] put them in a very difficult spot," he added.

Avi Pazner, Israeli government spokesman, told French television that there was no concern about the US's public position. "Sharon explained that what we are doing is within the agreement we have with the United States," he said. "There is a slight disagreement on the interpretation of this accord, but I must say it pales in comparison with the vast strategic agreement between Bush and Sharon."

To confirm the real thrust of US policy in the Middle East, Bush repeated his position that any final status negotiations with the Palestinians would have to acknowledge the

legitimacy of the illegal Zionist settlements. “As I said last April, new realities on the ground make it unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return on the armistice lines of 1949,” the president explained.

“It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement,” he continued, “will be achieved only on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities. That’s the American view. While the United States will not prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations, those changes on the ground, including existing major Israeli population centres, must be taken into account in any final status negotiations.”

This position completely contradicts the Bush administration’s nominal opposition to further settlement activity. Sharon well understands that the US acknowledgement of “facts on the ground” is a green light for accelerated settlement expansion and Israel’s illegal annexation of massive tracts of Palestinian land—including in East Jerusalem and its surroundings.

Much of Bush’s reception of Sharon was intended to distract from the question of Israel’s settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and instead focus on the scheduled pullout of the 7,500 settlers from Gaza that the Israeli prime minister has used as screen for his expansionist policies. “To me, that’s where the attention of the world ought to be, on Gaza,” Bush declared. “[W]e’re now ready to help the Palestinians seize the moment that [Sharon] has provided in Gaza. So that’s where you’ll see our attention focused.”

The US president showered praise on Sharon for his “unilateral disengagement” plan, describing it as “a bold step and a courageous step.” Bush declared, “Prime Minister Sharon is showing strong, visionary leadership by difficult steps to improve the lives of people across the Middle East. I’m grateful to the prime minister for his friendship. I’m impressed by his leadership.”

The Bush administration has consistently promoted the disengagement plan as a step towards peace, when, in fact, Sharon’s entire strategy is geared towards the consolidation of Israel’s position in the West Bank. The expansion of the settlements in that area complements, rather than contradicts, the plan to withdraw the Gaza settlers. Just as the densely populated and enclosed territory of Gaza is to be completely cut off from Israel, so the separation wall in the West Bank is intended to segregate the major Palestinian population centres from the Zionist state, while annexing as much Palestinian land as possible.

The Bush administration’s tacit support for these measures makes a mockery of its supposed opposition to the expansion of the Maaleh Adumim settlement. The construction of thousands more houses on the outskirts of East Jerusalem represents a further provocation on the part of the Sharon government, but within the framework of the disengagement plan, the step is a perfectly logical one. The US’s official position amounts to an

absurdity that conceals a lie: it is acceptable for Israel to annex the Maaleh Adumim territory, and to construct a 25-foot high concrete wall around the area, but not to populate the land connecting the settlement to East Jerusalem. Washington knows very well that in sanctioning the former, it is giving tacit approval to the latter.

Similarly, Bush and Sharon agreed to disagree on Washington’s so-called Road Map plan for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The US president claimed that Sharon’s plan to remove settlements from Gaza represented a valuable contribution to the development of his Road Map, while Sharon openly declared that as far as Israel was concerned, the Road Map was not even on the agenda.

“Only after the Palestinians fulfill their obligations, primarily a real fight against terrorism and the dismantling of the infrastructure, can we proceed toward negotiations based on the Road Map,” he declared. In other words, only after the Palestinian Authority successfully suppresses every manifestation of resistance to Israel’s occupation will the Sharon government even consider making any concessions.

The Palestinian question was not the only item on the agenda at the Texas meeting. Sharon extended his support for the US’s militarist drive into the Middle East. A White House spokesman noted that the two leaders discussed developments in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Syria.

Iran’s alleged nuclear program was discussed when Sharon later met with senior administration officials, including Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and Paul Wolfowitz. According to Israeli Army Radio, before Sharon left for the US, Israeli defence officials asked him to raise the option of a military attack on Iran. Satellite images purporting to show unauthorised Iranian activity were presented as part of an effort to encourage the US to take an even more belligerent stance against the Iranians, and against the European powers who are attempting to formulate a negotiated agreement.



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