

Palestinian president fawns on Bush

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Journalists love a cliché, as is evidenced by how many wrote of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's meeting with President Bush under the title, "Mr Abbas goes to Washington".

In truth only the meeting's arena permits reference to Frank Capra's masterpiece. In every other respect the comparison is fallacious. In "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington", James Stewart plays Jefferson Smith, a naïve idealist who succeeds in both exposing and triumphing over the corruption endemic to Capitol Hill and echoed in the US media. Abbas, on the other hand, is no innocent, but a venal representative of the Arab bourgeoisie. And his role in Washington was to conceal political duplicity, rather than expose it.

Even before meeting with Bush, Abbas chose to write an op-ed piece for the mouthpiece of the Republican right, the *Wall Street Journal*. Entitled, "Message to Ariel Sharon: Set My People Free," the May 26 article provides a fairly accurate summation of the efforts of Israel's Likud-Labour coalition government to "effectively preclude a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Abbas writes, "Israel's ongoing settlement construction in the West Bank, its insidious Wall which, since not built on the 1967 border, is suffocating Palestinian cities and towns, and its illegal attempts to cut off East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank will, if allowed to continue, render a two-state solution to our conflict an impossibility. If the two-state solution dies, our democracy cannot be far behind, for democracy and freedom are intertwined: It is impossible to have one without the other."

"For the next few months, world attention will focus on Israel's planned unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians have no illusions about this action: It is not a gesture of peace; rather it diverts attention away from Israel's settlement expansion of the West Bank. While much is being made of Israel's withdrawal of 7,300 settlers from Gaza, homes for another 30,000 Jewish settlers are being built in the West Bank. Moreover, even after Israel withdraws its settlers from Gaza it wants to continue to control Gaza's borders, airspace and seacoast. No one will be able to enter or leave without Israel's approval, and the Israeli army has made clear its intention to operate at will within Gaza. The 1.3 million Palestinians in Gaza who have lived under an oppressive occupation will hardly be made free by Israel's evacuation.

Palestinians fear that the Gaza Strip will become a large prison."

But Abbas reveals only a partial truth. For he presents these measures as an attack on the "vision" shared by himself and Bush, a man who supposedly supports the Palestinian "quest for freedom" as part of his ongoing efforts "to see democracy and freedom spread throughout the Middle East".

To proclaim Bush's commitment to democracy and freedom would be impermissible under any circumstances, but Abbas prefaces his assertion by stating, "Although I have great faith in the Palestinian people and in our democracy, I also am aware that democracy without freedom is ultimately meaningless: An 'occupied democracy' is an oxymoron."

This is certainly true for Palestine, but equally so for Iraq where the United States is the occupying power and is ruthlessly suppressing all resistance to this injustice.

Abbas fawns on Bush, as if he is unaware that Sharon has enjoyed the full backing of Washington for his ongoing offensive against the Palestinians—measures that have been discussed between Bush and the Israeli Prime Minister at every turn. The Bush administration has repeatedly insisted that the planned Israeli pull-out of settlers from Gaza is all that can be expected at present, unless Abbas succeeds in ending all opposition to the Israeli occupation and imprisons militant nationalist and Islamic forces. Washington even declares that criticism of settlement construction on the West Bank is counter-productive because it might hinder Sharon's efforts to implement the Gaza pullout.

Abbas boasts of already having done what is required of him. He presents this as having fulfilled the demands of the Palestinian electorate, but his list of achievements, "transparency and accountability", a "cease-fire with Israel", "dialogue" (he boasts "I have brought about in four months what Israel was unable to achieve in four years of military incursions and assassinations"), has been drawn up at the behest of the White House.

Furthermore, even after correctly characterising the aims of Sharon's government, and noting how "Israel's daily military incursions and destruction of our infrastructure and institutions have rendered us an impoverished nation," Abbas promises his continued cooperation with Tel Aviv and to take over the policing of Gaza.

Following his audience with Bush, Abbas continued in a

similar vein. In a press statement issued before he departed for Canada, he commended Bush's efforts to reach peace in the Middle East and to support the Palestinian economy. He was happy with Bush's strong commitment to support Palestinian efforts to build their own state and to implement the Roadmap peace plan. "We consider the statements of President Bush as obligations. He is a man who honors his obligations and we have not asked for more," he wrote.

A look at what was actually said by Bush exposes the falsity of such claims. Bush was careful in phrasing any demand he made on Israel and prefaced these with a veiled warning to Abbas that "only the defeat of violence will lead to sovereignty... All who engage in terror are the enemies of a Palestinian state, and must be held to account. We will stand with you, Mr. President, as you combat corruption, reform the Palestinian security services and your justice system, and revive your economy."

Bush never called for a return to the 1967 borders. Instead he stated that, in any final status peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, "changes to the 1949 armistice lines must be mutually agreed to."

Nor did he call for a halt to the construction of the separation wall across the West Bank. After noting there should be an end to settlement expansion, he said only that Israel's barrier in the West Bank "must be a security, rather than political barrier, and its route should take into account, consistent with security needs, its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities." What this means is anyone's guess. Only as security improves should Israeli armed forces withdraw to their positions as of September 28, 2000, rather than 1967, Bush added.

When questioned by reporters on his attitude to the ongoing settlement activity on the West Bank, Bush inadvertently made clear that his pretence of opposition was worthless. "We continue to remind our friends, the Israelis, about their obligations under the road map, just like we remind President Abbas about the obligations under the road map that the Palestinians have accepted. So nothing has changed," he said.

Since nothing has changed, Sharon will no doubt take this as a green light to carry on as before.

Bush's financial commitment to the Palestinian economy, hailed by Abbas, amounted to a meagre \$50 million to be used in projects in Gaza. To put this in perspective, Washington provides Israel with approximately \$3 billion in direct military and economic aid every year—around a third of the entire foreign aid budget—and a further \$2-3 billion in indirect forms of aid.

Only on security was the US more forthcoming. Bush stated that he was sending General Kip Ward to support Abbas's efforts "to reform the Palestinian security services and to coordinate the efforts of the international community to make that crucial task a success." Thus Abbas has granted the US overall control of Palestinian Authority security forces and its

international relations, including negotiations with Israel.

Bush told reporters that the end goal was "a Palestinian state based upon rule of law, and you cannot have a democracy based upon rule of law if you have armed bands of people who will use their weapons to try to achieve a political outcome."

The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* concluded on May 29 that the onus was still being placed on Abbas to meet the Palestinian Authority's security commitments before there was any question of Israel dismantling illegal outposts in the West Bank:

"In the wake of Israeli unease after the Bush-Abu Mazen meeting on Thursday, US officials made it clear over the weekend that the promises made by the US president to the PA chairman did not deviate from Washington's well-known stance with regard to the Middle East. National Security Council spokesman Frederick Jones said that Bush's statements to Abu Mazen reiterated the president's declarations in his June 24, 2004 speech and in his letter of guarantees to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon."

An accompanying article by Danny Rubinstein noted the response to Bush's remarks of Palestinian spokesmen other than Abbas as being less than fulsome:

"As far as Gaza is concerned, Bush's statements were superfluous, Palestinian spokespeople said over the weekend. After all, Israel intends to withdraw from Gaza completely. As for the West Bank, Israel has for years been establishing faits accomplis that affect the final status. They have already won partial American recognition of the settlement blocs..."

"The statements about Jerusalem are worthless," said one Palestinian commentator, noting that Bush was attempting, not even seriously, to close the stable doors after the horses have fled. He meant that after building Jewish neighbourhoods in and around East Jerusalem, with more than 250,000 residents today, Israel has already fixed faits accomplis in the city borders, by completing the walls and separation fences."

Bush's statements were indeed "superfluous" and "worthless", but this was enough to satisfy Mr Abbas who functions as Washington's puppet.



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