

Sharon vows to accelerate settlement expansion in the West Bank

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In the immediate aftermath of Israel's evacuation of 21 Zionist settlements in Gaza and 4 in the West Bank, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has promised to step up construction in other West Bank settlements. The provocative remarks, made to the *Jerusalem Post* on August 22, confirm the reality that Sharon's "unilateral disengagement" scheme has nothing to do with alleviating the oppression of the Palestinian people, and is instead aimed at consolidating a massive Israeli land grab in the Occupied Territories.

"There will be building in the settlement blocs," Sharon bluntly told the *Post*. "Each government since 1967—right, left, and national unity—has seen strategic importance in specific areas. I will build." The prime minister repeated that there would be no further dismantling of settlements. "This is something you will be able to see in a short time, that there will be no second disengagement," he declared.

Sharon defended the strategic value of the settlements for the Zionist state. "Because of the settlements we can pray at the Cave of the Patriarchs" in Hebron, he said. If it were not for the settlers he asked, "would it have been possible to renew the settlement in Gush Etzion; incorporate Rachel's Tomb inside Jerusalem's fence; or have Maaleh Adumim and its satellites, Beit El, Shilo, the Ariel Bloc, or the security zone overlooking the coastal plain? We had a dream. Parts of it were realised, others were not."

Some of the nearly 9,000 settlers removed from Gaza have simply shifted to the West Bank. According to *Haaretz*, at least 212 settler families have moved to the illegally occupied Palestinian land. Sharon made clear that he does not oppose such movement: "We don't move anyone, people can go wherever they want," he declared.

Despite the pullout from Gaza, there will still be more Zionist settlers at the end of 2005 than there were at the start of the year, according to the Peace Now organisation. Annually, some 10,000 Israelis join the approximately 200,000 settlers already living in East Jerusalem and 250,000 in the West Bank.

The Sharon government is continuing its active support for

such expansion. On August 24, *Haaretz* revealed that the Israeli armed forces has begun issuing land expropriation orders to Palestinians living near Maaleh Adumim, which lies east of Jerusalem and is one of the largest settlement in the West Bank. The land seizures are to facilitate the construction of Israel's separation wall.

The barrier will extend 25 kilometres—about half the West Bank's width—beyond the pre-1967 "Green Line" border into the West Bank, and will cut off Maaleh Adumim from Palestinian territory and connect the area to Jerusalem. The planned route will have the additional effect of severing any direct connection between northern Palestinian towns and cities (Ramallah, Nablus) and those in the south (Bethlehem, Hebron).

According to Hind Khouri, the Palestinian Authority's minister for Jerusalem, expropriation orders have been issued for 158 hectares of Palestinian land, and the wall's planned route will leave Palestinian grazing grounds, olive groves and 250 wells on the Israeli side of the barrier.

The Sharon government is simultaneously stepping up its efforts to fully integrate Maaleh Adumim into Jerusalem. Last week it was announced that Sharon was fast-tracking the construction of a police headquarters in the area. This is in preparation for the planned building of 3,500 more homes in the area between the settlement and the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem. (See: "Israel to build thousands more settler homes in West Bank".)

The Bush administration's response to Sharon's comments in the *Jerusalem Post* was typically muted. When questioned, David Welch, the assistant secretary for the Near East, refused to call on the Israeli government to cease the settlement expansions. "I'm confident that the prime minister understands with clarity President Bush's views," he asserted.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with acting Israeli finance minister Ehud Olmert in Washington last Wednesday. "It is absolutely clear that, in the next three to four months, it is difficult to expect any dramatic developments in the peace process," Olmert declared after

the meeting, without being challenged by Rice. He emphasised that the secretary of state had not discussed any timetable for a return to the “road map” plan, and had not insisted on any date for the implementation of any of its provisions, one of which is the freezing of all settlement activity.

The Bush administration’s refusal to condemn Sharon’s plans for the West Bank is in line with the US’s long-standing record of providing diplomatic, military, and financial backing for the Zionist state. While lip service is occasionally paid to the need for a return to the “peace process,” at every critical juncture the Bush administration has lined up behind its proxy in the Middle East.

Bush’s position that any final settlement between the Palestinians and Israel must acknowledge the changed “realities on the ground” has given Sharon a free hand in the West Bank. As the *Jerusalem Post* noted in its interview with Sharon: “Senior Israeli officials have consistently maintained that although the road map called for a settlement freeze, it had a tacit agreement with the US—which the US has never admitted—that construction could continue in the built-up areas inside the large settlement blocks.”

The brutal reality of Sharon’s program was again demonstrated last Thursday, when undercover Israeli forces shot dead five Palestinians in the West Bank town of Tulkarm. Two of the men were allegedly militants, one from Islamic Jihad and one from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. According to Palestinian witnesses, the three other people killed were unarmed teenagers. The Israeli army has insisted that the five were shot after they resisted arrest on charges relating to suicide bombings, but witnesses reported that the Israeli forces first opened fire as they were sitting around an outdoor table.

The attack may mark the end of the uncertain six-month “period of calm” that has held between Palestinian militant groups and Israeli forces. The location of the killings was particularly provocative. Tulkarm is one of two Palestinian towns that were nominally handed over to the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in February, after Israeli forces withdrew to the outskirts of the area. An Israeli army spokesman said the town had become “the centre of the Islamic Jihad terror organisation” and claimed that the “Palestinian Authority turns a blind eye to their activities”.

Such allegations could easily be used by Israel to justify a renewed military offensive against Tulkarm and other Palestinian centres under PA control, or a fresh assassination campaign against Palestinian militants. National elections are expected to be held in Israel early next year, and will be preceded by an internal Likud ballot for the ruling party’s leadership. Sharon has a long track record of staging

provocations and sparking violence with the Palestinians for his own political gain.

The prime minister’s interview with the *Jerusalem Post* clearly represented an attempt to regain the support of Likud’s right wing. A poll of the party’s membership conducted by *Haaretz* last week showed that Sharon was less popular than both former finance minister Binyamin Netanyahu (30.5 percent versus 47 percent), and far-right leadership aspirant Uzi Landau (37 percent versus 45 percent).

Netanyahu has stepped up his public attacks against the prime minister. “Sharon is not fit to lead Likud or the country,” he declared. “Sharon made a precedent of giving a prize to terror for nothing in return. He is dividing the nation, and turning its people into refugees.”

The prime minister hopes to win back majority support from within his own party in coming months. Opinion polls of the Israeli electorate have highlighted the reality that Netanyahu is widely despised. His resignation from the cabinet on the eve of the Gaza pull-out was widely condemned as opportunistic by the Israeli media; and large sections of the Israeli working and middle-class have been badly affected by the welfare cuts and other right-wing economic reforms introduced by Netanyahu when he served as finance minister under Sharon.

It is now widely expected that if Sharon does not secure his leadership within Likud, he will quit the party that he helped found. “It’s not going to happen, but in the unlikely event that Bibi [Netanyahu] beats Sharon, Sharon can run in a different party,” an unnamed Sharon associate told the *Jerusalem Post* on August 25. “If Sharon loses in the primary [Likud ballot], he will not let Bibi become prime minister.”

Speculation has continued about the possibility of a political “big bang,” with Sharon leaving Likud to form a new party, together with the secular Shinui party and sections of the Labour Party, possibly including Labour leader Shimon Peres. A faction within Labour, led by cabinet minister Haim Ramon, has been urging the prime minister to make such a move. These appeals only underscore the bankruptcy of Labour Zionism, and demonstrate the complete absence of any principled opposition to Sharon’s program from within the Israeli political establishment.



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