

Israel: Gaza pullout paves way for further West Bank land grab

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Hardly had the last of the 8,000 or so Israeli settlers left Gaza than Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced that Israel would expand the settlements on the West Bank.

Israel's "unilateral disengagement" from Gaza—the closure and demolition of the 14 settlements and the dismantling of military installations securing them—together with the removal of four small settlements in the West Bank were hailed as an act of courage on Sharon's part by the imperialist powers.

The international press has re-branded a proven war criminal as a "peacemaker" and lauded the pullout as an important first step towards alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, normalising relations between Israel and Palestine, and creating an independent Palestinian state.

These claims have been lent a certain credence by the fierce opposition Sharon's moves aroused amongst the far-right settler and religious parties, and even within Sharon's own Likud party—forces which view the surrender of a single inch to the Palestinians as a betrayal. Sharon has also benefited from the support of the Labour Party, which has also portrayed his initiative as a step towards a "two-states" solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But the withdrawal from Gaza is nothing more than a smokescreen to mask Israel's consolidation of a far more significant land grab of the West Bank, land it has brutally occupied for nearly 40 years in breach of international law and in defiance of countless United Nations resolutions.

What do these latest developments mean for the Palestinians? Despite the reams that have been written by the 6,000 media journalists and their support staff that came to cover the Israel's disengagement from Gaza—nearly as many as the Israeli settlers in Gaza—few have even attempted to address this question. Most coverage has been made up of sympathetic accounts of the plight of the settlers, generally couched in terms either favourable to Sharon or critical of him from the right.

Yet anyone who looked at the context in which the pullout took place would see it as only a stage in a long-standing effort on Sharon's part to establish a Greater Israel by permanently annexing the large majority of the land seized in the 1967 war.

Already there has been a massive expansion in the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where 2.3 million Palestinians live. This is now set to increase. The number of settlers in the West Bank has grown from zero in 1967 to about 246,000 in June 2005—an increase of more than 12,000 (5 percent)

in the last year alone. They now form more than 10 percent of the population, but control a far greater percentage of the land, including that which is most fertile and productive.

The number of settlers in East Jerusalem, which Israel formally annexed into West Jerusalem in 1980 and which it routinely excludes from its statistics, has risen from zero in 1967 to 210,000. Together with the quarter of a million settlers in the West Bank, they now form one fifth of the population that lived in what was Jordan in 1967.

These figures have now been boosted by many of the 8,140 settlers displaced from Gaza, who have moved into settlements in and around Jerusalem and Hebron, as well as Ariel in the north of the West Bank.

In addition to the 323 official settlements—that are really heavily guarded colonies from which Palestinians are excluded—there are at least 150 hilltop communities that have incomplete or nonexistent permits, and are therefore illegal even under Israeli law.

The vast majority of the Israeli population oppose the outposts. They have nevertheless been built with tax payers' money and officially sanctioned and encouraged by the state. According to an official Israel government report published last March, government departments and agencies secretly diverted millions of dollars from their budgets to support these illegal outposts. To cite but a few examples:

- * The housing ministry supplied 400 mobile homes for outposts on private Palestinian land.

- * The defence ministry approved the use of trailers to begin the new outposts.

- * The education ministry paid for nurseries and teachers.

- * The energy ministry connected the outposts to the electricity grid.

- * Roads to the outposts were paid for out of public monies.

The total number of such outposts is uncertain since some public agencies refused to hand over important documents to the investigation.

It was Sharon who, as foreign minister in 1998, publicly called for the settlers to seize the hilltops and establish outposts in order to break up the contiguity of Palestinian areas and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. He said, "Let everyone get a move on and take some hilltops! Whatever we take will be ours and whatever we don't take will not be ours!"

Israel has also seized land that it has designated as military areas

or nature reserves. And it has seized vast tracts of land to build a network of highways—the so-called bypass roads—to connect the settlements, and cleared swathes of valuable agricultural land and villages on either side to prevent ambushes. Not only are the roads controlled by the Israeli armed forces, but they are also closed to the Palestinians who must make do with ill-paved roads that are subject to hundreds of military checkpoints that make personal mobility all but impossible. The journey from Ramallah to Jerusalem that once took 15 minutes now takes hours, if it can be completed at all.

The highways thus serve to cut off adjacent Palestinian areas from one another, creating discontinuities of territory and jurisdiction and dividing up the West Bank into isolated parcels of land that Israel can easily control. They constitute a constant reminder of the ever-expanding Israeli settlements.

Israel has also expanded the borders of Jerusalem to encompass not only the Old City and East Jerusalem, but the surrounding land in the West Bank upon which it has built a number of settlements. This has encircled East Jerusalem and cut it off from its immediate hinterland. Once completed, 160,000 Palestinian inhabitants will be permanently cut off from the rest of the West Bank. It is already almost impossible for West Bank Palestinians to enter Jerusalem—the social, cultural, and intellectual heart of the West Bank—to visit their families or access health care or the other amenities of the city. The clear intention is to drive them from their homes and carry out a final ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem.

The largest of the settlements that will be joined to East Jerusalem—and the farthest point cutting into the West Bank is Ma'ale Adumim. It is here that the Sharon government has announced plans to build another 3,500 homes and new suburbs linking Ma'ale Adumim with Jerusalem. It will occupy 100 square kilometres of land, 35 kilometres deep into the West Bank and with a width of 15-25 kilometres.

Not only is Ma'ale Adumim a dormitory suburb for Jerusalem, its expansion will also all but bisect the West Bank, making it impossible to travel between the northern and southern sectors. Without territorial contiguity between the northern and southern West Bank, not only is the establishment of a viable Palestinian state impossible, but so too is any pretence of self-government.

The West Bank will be nothing more than a series of non-contiguous and impoverished ghettos, separated from Israel and hemmed in behind the infamous and illegal 360 kilometre-long Security Wall. This also serves as a mechanism for increasing Israel's encroachment into the West Bank, cutting off families from each other, their schools, places of work and vital welfare facilities.

This bifurcation of the West Bank is mirrored by the separation of the West Bank and Gaza. Travel between the two parts of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is subject to Israeli control and is all but impossible for even the most senior PA officials.

While Israeli security forces will have completed the dismantling of their military installations in the Gaza Strip by the middle of September, this will not make it a sovereign entity in any practical sense. Without handing over Gaza's border crossings, including the international border crossing with Egypt, Gaza's territorial waters, air space, water supply, and providing a safe passage

between Gaza and the West Bank, in accordance with international law, Israel remains the occupying power.

The future for the Palestinians in Gaza is grim indeed. Cut off from Israel where many of them once worked, and without direct access to the rest of the world independently of Israel, their agricultural and manufactured goods now face tariff barriers as well as delays on entering Israel, making them totally uneconomic.

Far from seeing any alleviation of their appalling economic and social conditions, Gaza will be nothing more than a giant holding pen for 1.2 million impoverished Palestinians totally dependent on world aid for their very survival, as a recent World Bank report has acknowledged.

Should violent opposition to Israel break out again, Sharon will simply send the tanks and helicopter gunships unencumbered by the need to protect the settlers. As the disengagement plan spells out, Israel reserves the right to use military force “both preventative and reactive” against attacks from Gaza.

Gaza was simply the pawn that Sharon was prepared to sacrifice in order to gain the bigger prize—US support for holding onto and expanding the Zionist settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. President George W. Bush has said that a permanent peace agreement would have to reflect “the demographic realities” in the West Bank, meaning the Israel settlements.

Washington is well aware of Sharon's real intentions. Just last week, in an interview with an ultra-orthodox newspaper, Sharon explained, “The Americans have often asked us to sketch out the boundaries of the large settlement blocs in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank], and we have always refrained from doing so in the hope that by the time the discussion on the settlement blocs comes, these blocs will contain a very large number of settlements and residents.”

The US plays along with Sharon's pretence of support for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state as envisioned by Bush's “Road Map” because it is a convenient fiction in its dealings with the Arab regimes in the Middle East. In reality, the neo-cons that dominate the Bush administration are the most fervent supporters of the creation of a Greater Israel and the confining of the Palestinians to a series of isolated ghettos making up less than 20 percent of the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip itself.

An excellent series of maps of the West Bank and Gaza have been produced by the BBC. They make clear how Israeli settlements, the incorporation of East Jerusalem, a massive number of armed check-points and roads render impossible the creation of an economically viable, defensible and territorially contiguous Palestinian state.

Interested readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* can find them at the BBC website.



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