

Israel announces plans to annex more Palestinian land

Jean Shaoul
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Ehud Olmert, Israel's acting prime minister, whose Kadima party is expected to win the national election on March 28, recently announced that Israel would unilaterally redraw its borders by 2010, annexing Palestinian land without negotiations with the Palestinians.

Hamas's political leader in exile, Khaled Meshaal, described Olmert's plan as a declaration of war. Following Hamas's election in January, Israeli leaders have made numerous provocative statements, including threats of targeted assassinations, which have been combined with almost continuous military interventions against the Palestinians, including the attack on the Jericho prison.

In his remarks, Olmert effectively repudiated the so-called Road Map, backed by the United States, Russia and the European Union, that was supposed to lead to a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His annexation plan ends any notion of a sovereign Palestinian state that corresponds with any internationally understood meaning of the term. Israel is to seize huge tracts of land, securing them behind the 360-kilometre-long militarised separation wall—effectively turning the West Bank into a series of non-contiguous and impoverished ghettos, hemmed in on all sides.

Once again, there was barely a word of criticism, let alone condemnation, by world leaders or commentators.

The Israeli government has already cut off the Jordan Valley, which constitutes one third of the West Bank, from surrounding Palestinian territory. This will not be handed back to the Palestinians, but will instead form part of Israel's eastern border with Jordan. "There are strategic considerations for this that we cannot relinquish," Olmert told the newspaper *Ha'aretz*.

In the west, the nearly completed separation wall will leave an estimated 10 percent of the Palestinian territory, including all of East Jerusalem, on the Israeli side.

The expansion of the Zionist settlement of Ma'ale Adumim westward will encircle Arab East Jerusalem. Illegally annexed by Israel in 1980, East Jerusalem has long been viewed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the future capital of a Palestinian state.

Ma'ale Adumim will soon be enclosed within Jerusalem behind the separation wall, which will cut off occupied East Jerusalem from other Palestinian areas and leave the northern and southern areas of the West Bank connected only through a narrow strip of territory controlled by the Israelis.

Israel has already begun the construction of a police station between Ma'ale Adumim and Jerusalem as the first step towards implementing a plan to build 3,500 homes to link the settlement to Jerusalem, which is 9 kilometres away.

Cut off from their families in the West Bank by the separation wall, life for the Palestinians in East Jerusalem is already becoming so intolerable that they are being forced to leave the city.

Olmert's plan will leave the Occupied Territories divided into three isolated and truncated areas. The 50 to 60 percent of the West Bank that remains will effectively be bifurcated by Ma'ale Adumim, and cut off from Gaza by Israel. Gaza is already a besieged ghetto whose land, air, and sea borders are controlled by Israel.

Olmert told the *Jerusalem Post* that by 2010 he intends to "get to Israel's permanent borders, whereby we will completely separate from the majority of the Palestinian population and preserve a large and stable Jewish majority in Israel."

The projected borders contravene international legal requirements and numerous United Nations resolutions requiring Israel to fully withdraw from Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, territories seized during the 1967 war. Israeli strategy is to seize as much Palestinian territory as possible while at the same time minimising the

number of Palestinians in the Zionist state.

“The principle that will guide me...is convergence into the large settlement blocks and the thickening of those blocks,” Olmert told *Ha’aretz*. The prime minister refused to specify his plans for all of the different settlements, but he left no doubt that by “convergence” and “thickening” he meant expansion of the major settlement blocks, particularly those lying behind the West Bank separation wall.

According to the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem, this means about 40 percent of the West Bank would remain in Israeli hands.

Olmert confirmed that settlements behind the wall would be expanded. He was asked if he intended to develop the planned “E1” settlements between occupied East Jerusalem and the Ma’ale Adumim settlement.

“Of course,” he replied. “After all, it is unthinkable that we will talk about Ma’ale Adumim as part of the State of Israel and leave it like an island or an isolated enclave. It is completely clear that the contiguity between Jerusalem and Ma’ale Adumim will be built up. This is clear to both the Palestinians and the Americans.”

Olmert sought to reassure his right-wing critics that Israel would keep Ariel, the largest West Bank settlement outside of the separation wall, and smaller neighbouring settlements, including Gush Etzion. The annexation of Ariel would effectively cut off a direct route between Nablus and Ramallah in the West Bank. This underscores the expansionist intent behind his earlier remark that the separation wall may later be moved eastwards.

John Dugard, United Nations special rapporteur on human rights, in his report delivered to the UN Human Rights Commission on March 8, said, “The character of East Jerusalem is undergoing a major change as a result of the construction of the wall through Palestinian neighbourhoods.... The clear purpose of the wall in the Jerusalem area is to reduce the number of Palestinians in the city by transferring them to the West Bank.”

As far as Olmert is concerned, Hamas’s election victory provides a pretext for Israel to step up its war against the Palestinians. Even before the Palestinian elections, Olmert said, “If a government should arise in which Hamas is a participant, the world and Israel will ignore it and render it irrelevant.”

Just what is in store can be seen from what has happened to Gaza, which has become a giant holding pen for the Palestinians. On March 21, Israel sealed off the crossing point from Gaza into Israel at Karni. While this latest closure follows a partial reopening after a two-week

closure, Karni has been closed for most of the last two months, ostensibly for security reasons. The closure has brought all shipments of goods to a halt. Israeli officials declined to say when the border would be reopened.

As the only route for the export of Gaza’s agricultural produce to Israel and Europe, Karni is vital for the Palestinian economy. Its repeated closure has brought misery and hardship for ordinary Palestinians and bankrupted farmers and merchants. Israel radio reported on Friday that the price of flour had risen from NIS 70 to NIS 90 per sack.

A UN statement said that most bakeries in Gaza have closed due to grain shortages, and the area is suffering from an “extreme short supply” of dairy products and fruit. It also said the closure had hindered efforts to deliver emergency food supplies.

Hamas has accused Israel of closing the vital crossing point as retribution for its election victory.

Olmert’s announcement underscores the fraud of Ariel Sharon’s “disengagement” from Gaza, which has been hailed by the international press 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.

The withdrawal from a handful of settlements was a smokescreen to mask Israel’s consolidation of the far more significant land grab of the West Bank. The withdrawal of 8,000 settlers from Gaza has given the Israeli military a free hand to bomb targets, assassinate militants and close the borders with Israel.



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