

Israel: Bush endorses Olmert's West Bank land grab

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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert met US President George Bush in the White House on May 24. Olmert also spoke with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Stephen Handley during his four-day tour of Washington. The Bush administration again confirmed its support for Israel's land grab in the West Bank and backed the ongoing Israeli siege of the Occupied Territories.

After speaking with Bush for more than five hours, Olmert told Israeli journalists that he was "very, very satisfied" with the discussion. Israeli official Dov Weissglas stated that the meetings had "met all our expectations."

Washington gave the Israelis every reason to be satisfied. Bush declared that Israel's plan to remove some isolated settlements in the West Bank while permanently annexing the larger settlements and east Jerusalem was a "bold idea" that "could lead to a two-state solution if a pathway to progress on the road map is not open in the period ahead."

Speaking of Olmert, the US president added, "I'm encouraged by his constructive efforts to find ways to move the peace process forward."

Olmert's settlement strategy in the West Bank, like former prime minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement from Gaza, is in fact aimed at precluding any negotiations with the Palestinian leadership that could involve Israeli concessions. The agenda of the Israeli government remains one of illegally expanding its borders and oppressing the Palestinian people.

Its plan for the West Bank (known as "convergence" or "realignment") involves the relocation of an as yet unspecified number of Zionist settlers from some of the more isolated and costly settlements to other illegal settlement blocs located in Palestinian territory behind

the separation wall. Israel will hold onto between 40 to 50 percent of the West Bank, while the rest of the territory will be split into two non-contiguous cantons. Unhindered by the more insecure settlements, the Israeli military will have free reign to conduct offensive operations in the Palestinian areas.

Bush made it clear that his administration has essentially abandoned its own so-called "Road Map" towards the creation of a Palestinian state through negotiations. The US now backs Olmert's strategy, despite the fact that it flouts international law and countless United Nations resolutions. Having effectively torn up long established precepts of international law with the invasion of Iraq, Washington no longer even bothers to acknowledge such concerns with regard to Israel and the Occupied Territories.

During the May 24 press conference, Bush was asked if he agreed with Israel's planned annexation of the major settlement blocs in the West Bank. He replied by referring journalists to the letter he sent to Sharon in April 2004, in which he wrote that "in light of new realities on the ground ... it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949."

Tel Aviv understood Bush's position to be a green light for further settlement expansion, creating "new realities on the ground" favourable to the Zionist state. Olmert is overseeing the ongoing development of the West Bank settlements. The day before he departed for Washington, the Israeli press reported that Olmert had approved land expansion orders for three settlements, Betar Illit, Givat Ze'ev, and Oranit. Last week approval was also granted for the construction of a new settlement at the site of an army outpost in the Jordan Valley. The centre will house 30 families evacuated from Gaza last year.

The US president was asked whether anything worried him about Olmert's plan. "No," Bush replied. "The only thing that worries me about the plan is that Hamas has said they want to destroy Israel."

The president endorsed Israel's refusal to meet with Hamas officials, saying, "No country can be expected to make peace with those who deny its right to exist and who use terror to attack its population."

Bush encouraged Olmert to hold discussions with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The Israeli prime minister has stated that prior to the implementation of any unilateral moves in the West Bank he will spend between six and nine months looking for a "partner for peace."

Such a process will be purely for public consumption. Olmert, like Sharon before him, has made it clear that he is uninterested in holding any genuine negotiations with Abbas. "He has no power," Olmert said of the Palestinian president on May 21. "He is helpless. He can't even minimally stop terror among the Palestinians. How can he represent the government in such a critical, complicated, and sensitive negotiations?"

The Bush administration denounced Hamas's victory in January's legislative elections as illegitimate and, together with Israel, has worked to undermine the new Palestinian Authority (PA) through a financial embargo that has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Territories. PA employees, including health, education and other workers, have not been paid their wages for more than two months. There have been numerous reports of increasing malnutrition in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as deaths caused by drug shortages in Palestinian hospitals.

In an interview with the *New York Times* published May 19, Olmert denied that there was any humanitarian crisis and denounced such reports as "for the time being, total propaganda."

The Israeli military has meanwhile continued its highly provocative campaign, assassinating Palestinian militants and firing thousands of artillery shells into Gaza. On May 19, four Palestinians were killed when Israeli missiles hit a vehicle being driven by Muhammad Dadouh, an Islamic Jihad commander, in Gaza. A 25-year-old woman, Hanan Aman, was also killed in the attack, along with her five-year-old son and the child's grandmother. Aman's three-year-old

daughter was among those seriously injured.

Defence Minister Amir Peretz expressed regret for the civilian deaths, but stressed that he would continue to authorise assassination operations in Gaza and the West Bank. Peretz is the leader of the Labour Party, the main coalition partner of Olmert's Kadima.

The question of a possible military attack on Iran was another focus for discussion between the Israeli prime minister and Bush administration officials. In an interview with CNN broadcast on May 21, Olmert claimed that Iran was only months away from developing the capacity to construct a nuclear weapon. "The technological threshold is very close," he said. "It can be measured in months, not years."

The Israeli government has long encouraged Washington to pursue "regime change" in Tehran. Details of the latest US-Israeli discussion were not released. Bush merely said that he and Olmert "shared our concerns about the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons ambitions."

The Israeli prime minister declared that he was also "very satisfied" with the talks on Iran. "We extensively discussed the Iranian issue," he said. "There is an understanding between the president and myself on how to deal with this matter."



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