

Bush's international peace conference: A conspiracy against the Palestinian people

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President Bush's July 16 announcement that he will relaunch the Middle East peace process with an international conference in New York is an attempt to use the puppet regime of Mahmoud Abbas to rubber-stamp an agreement that leaves the Palestinian masses with nothing.

Washington calculates that the Arab regimes will not only endorse a settlement that traps the Palestinian people in militarised and impoverished ghettos in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but will join Egypt and Jordan in finally recognising Israel.

The heaviest price for any agreement will be paid in Gaza, where the Hamas government deposed by Abbas's Fatah in a Western-backed constitutional coup is targeted for destruction.

The proposed conference is a unilateral assertion of US policy, which Washington announced independently of the other members of the Middle East Quartet—the European Union, the United Nations and Russia. It will be chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Bush framed his announcement as an ultimatum, stating that attendance will be limited to those that back the creation of a Palestinian state, reject violence and recognise Israel. Describing the conference as a “moment of choice,” he warned that support for Hamas would be a victory for its “foreign sponsors” in Syria and Iran that “would crush the possibility of a Palestinian state.”

The US president described Hamas' takeover in Gaza as a “violent and lawless” betrayal and threatened Hamas, declaring, “You must stop Gaza from being a safe haven for attacks against Israel. You must accept the legitimate Palestinian government, allow aid to Gaza, disarm militias, and recognise Israel.”

He also insisted that Abbas arrest militants and end corruption before talks could begin, and told Arab nations to end “the fiction that Israel does not exist,” curb anti-Israel rhetoric in their media, and send cabinet-level officials to the Jewish state.

In contrast, Bush declared that Israelis “should be confident that the United States would never abandon its commitment to the security of Israel as a Jewish state and homeland for Jewish people.” He followed this with a perfunctory appeal to Tel Aviv that “unauthorised outposts should be removed and

settlement expansion ended.” There was no call for a rollback of the vast majority of Israeli settlements.

The announcement was followed by phone calls by Bush to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt to seek their backing for the initiative.

Bush offered \$190 million in financial support to Abbas's regime in the West Bank, together with \$80 million specifically to help Abbas reform his security services. This is aimed at enabling Fatah to wage war on Hamas. US officials said the money was being shifted from Gaza, starving its people.

Israel welcomed the talks, but immediately announced that the three core issues of borders, the Palestinian refugees' right of return, and Jerusalem were not on the table.

Abbas has said that he hoped to reach a “comprehensive peace with the Israelis within a year or even less than that,” i.e., before Bush leaves office. “I heard this with my own ears from the president himself and from Secretary of State Rice,” he added.

Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman, rejected Bush's conference, calling it “a new crusade by Bush against the Palestinian people.”

Bush's chosen peace envoy, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was dispatched this week to hold two days of talks with Abbas and the Israeli government of Ehud Olmert. Israeli President Shimon Peres was full of praise for Blair. “I can't think of a better man,” he said, adding, “We have music in the Middle East, we have orchestras in the Middle East, we need a good conductor and I think Tony can become a good conductor.”

Blair's credentials as a peace envoy are based on his readiness to follow Bush's instructions to the letter. James Wolfensohn, the former World Bank president and special envoy who resigned in 2006, recently told *Ha'aretz*, “There was never a desire on the part of the Americans to give up control of the negotiations, and I would doubt that in the eyes of ... the State Department team, I was ever anything but a nuisance.

“The basic problem was that I didn't have the authority. The Quartet had the authority, and within the Quartet it was the Americans who had the authority.”

Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia all welcomed Bush's

proposals, although Saudi Arabia politely declined to attend.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdul Ilah Khatib and his Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, made an unprecedented visit to Israel on July 25, as emissaries of the Arab League. They relayed the text of an Arab land-for-peace initiative to Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and other cabinet ministers and Knesset members, offering, Gheit said, “security, recognition and acceptance in this region which Israel has long aspired to.”

Israel will not accept the Arab League’s call for a full withdrawal from the West Bank, on which it has major settlements, but it also knows that this is a negotiable position in any case as far as the Arab states are concerned. Yuval Steinitz of the opposition Likud party, commented, “I am happy to say that after hearing our criticisms they said [the plan] is not an ultimatum, it’s not ‘take it or leave it.’”

Bush met this week with Jordan’s King Abdallah at the White House to push through his plan.

The US and Israel view the split between the rival Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, the de facto political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the formation of an emergency government by Abbas as an opportunity to pursue their geo-political interests in the region.

To this end, they are offering a few crumbs to their political agents, Abbas and his new prime minister, Salam Fayyad, a former World Bank and International Monetary Fund official, while isolating and laying siege to Hamas-controlled Gaza.

But Bush’s so called “West Bank First” strategy is also aimed at securing the support of the Sunni Arab states—Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia—against Shi’ite Iran, whose rising influence in the region is just as much anathema to them as it is to the White House. Bush has accused Iran of supporting Shi’ite insurgents in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, describing this as an arc of Shia extremism.

This is both a justification for hostile action against Iran and an appeal to an alternative arc of Sunni states, which use sectarianism to divide the working and rural poor and divert social struggles within their own countries.

Syria is continually bracketed alongside Iran, ever since it sided with Iran in 1980 in the Iran-Iraq war. The two countries have growing economic ties, with an annual trade of \$200 million, and Iranian companies have invested more than \$1 billion in Syria in power generation, the auto industry, cement and agriculture.

Damascus desperately wants to improve relations with the US and Israel and is more than ready to deal with Israel, having repeatedly sought peace talks with Jerusalem. It was, however, unwilling to participate in peace talks without a third party presence and a commitment by Israel to return the Golan Heights—illegally held and settled by Israel since the 1967 war. Israeli Premier Olmert rejected this out of hand and called on Syria to break off relations with Iran and anti-Israel parties. Thus, with no indication that any compromise was on offer,

Syria has refused to attend Bush’s proposed conference.

Last week, Syrian president Bashar al Asssad hosted a visit from Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and discussed Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. Ahmadinejad also met with Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who came from Lebanon to meet him.

The preparations for Bush’s proposed conference take place against the background of an escalating offensive by Israel against Gaza and the Hamas stronghold of Nablus on the West Bank, including “targeted assassinations” of its personnel by Israeli jets.

Israel has now totally sealed its borders with the Gaza Strip, with only humanitarian aid allowed through, leading to the loss of at least 68,000 jobs. Thousands of small factories, businesses and farms have closed as imports and exports have ground to a halt, with the result that about 85 percent of Gaza’s private sector employees are now without work.

United Nations officials have warned that the closure is creating a humanitarian catastrophe. “If the present closures continue, we anticipate that Gaza will become a nearly totally aid dependent population that will be robbed of the possibility of self-sufficiency, and also of the dignity of work,” said John Ging, the UN’s director of operations in Gaza.

The West Bank government has also tightened the screws on Hamas and Gaza. It has extended the power of the military courts and given the Interior Ministry the right to close down non-governmental organisations. It has told the 17,000 Gaza police whose salaries it pays not to turn up for work. Abbas has also announced new elections, without the consent of the 120-member parliament which is inquorate: half of its 75 Hamas members are detained without trial in Israeli jails and the rest are refusing to attend.

Hamas’s deputy information minister, Hassan Abu Hasheish, said this week, “There have been 750 cases of assaults on Hamas people in the West Bank in the last month and a half. I don’t think people can tolerate and forgive that. If it continues, things will explode. That’s what Fatah did in Gaza.”



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