

Bush's vision of a Palestinian state: Subservient to Israel and policed by the major powers

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The international press has, for the most part, uncritically repeated the line that the first leg of President George W. Bush's Middle East trip, with stops in Israel and the Palestinian territories, is aimed at helping to move the so-called "peace process" along and establish a Palestinian state by 2009.

Bush himself said in an Israeli television interview that, although he was not predicting a full peace accord before he left office, "There will be an agreement on what a state would look like, in my judgement." He continued: "I am not going to force the issue because of my own timetable, but I do believe that Prime Minister [Ehud] Olmert and President [Mahmoud] Abbas do want to get this done."

The Palestinian state of which Bush speaks, should such a thing ever come into being, is one that could be imposed on the Palestinians only through a military and political offensive involving the United States, Israel, the European powers and the Arab bourgeois regimes, particularly Egypt. The role of Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) is to act as their local agent in transforming the occupied territories into a Western protectorate.

The Annapolis conference in November was supposed to be the start of the peace process with PA President Abbas, the leader of Fatah.

But Olmert's first condition for any negotiations is that Abbas rein in armed groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which fire rockets and mortars into Israel from Gaza. He has repeatedly warned that he will not implement any treaty until the Palestinians have done so, a clear message that Abbas must wage all-out civil war against opposition to Israel. If Abbas can't or won't do it, then Israel will.

Olmert has sought Bush's agreement that Israel will have a free hand to carry out operations against any opposition to its policies in the West Bank and Gaza throughout the period of the negotiations. Any kind of reconciliation between the PA and Hamas, much less a Palestinian government with Hamas members—a National Unity government—is out of the question.

Abbas has done his best to oblige. According to a recent report by Israel's security force, Shin Bet, Palestinian security forces have arrested more than 250 Hamas operatives in the West Bank since November 29, mostly in Nablus and Hebron, and confiscated weapons. Some of the detainees belong to non-military organisations within Hamas, including its charities. The PA security services have also arrested some Fatah militants.

Hamas has accused the PA of the political persecution of its organisation, institutions and members. A spokesman described the crackdown as a harsh blow to the efforts of the Arab regimes to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between Hamas and Fatah. He accused the PA of launching a campaign of political arrests, which includes the jailing of teachers and academics, to please Bush.

Since Annapolis, Israel has intensified its own security operations, often alongside Palestinian security forces, against oppositionists, rounding up Hamas supporters in Nablus in the West Bank. In so doing, it has served to further discredit the PA among the Palestinians for having collaborated so openly with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

Palestinian detainees have been subject to military trials in which, according to a recent report by an Israeli human rights group, Yesh Din, 99.7 percent of those accused have been convicted, 95 percent in plea bargains. Hearings are conducted in Hebrew with inadequate translation into Arabic, and in some cases last just minutes. Almost half of the 9,000 prisoners currently held in Israeli jails were sentenced in such military courts. Yesh Din also claims that the military has not investigated all the allegations of mistreatment of Palestinian detainees.

Israel has launched almost daily military incursions into the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, from which it supposedly withdrew in August 2005.

Saeb Erekat, a Palestinian negotiator, accused Israel of stepping up attacks on Palestinians ahead of Bush's visit. Olmert confirmed that security forces had indeed been ordered "to intensify the Israeli response" to the rocket attacks against southern Israeli towns from the Gaza Strip. The IDF killed two Palestinians on Thursday, and five, including two civilians, on Sunday. On Wednesday, the first day of Bush's visit, they killed three.

Bush stated that he would confront Abbas about the rocket attacks on Israel. He said, "As to the rockets, my first question to President Abbas is going to be: 'What are you going to do about them?' He knows that it is not in his interest to have his people launching rockets from part of his territory into Israel. You can't expect the Israelis, and I certainly don't, to accept a state on their border which would be launching pad for terrorist attacks."

Israel has sealed its border with Gaza and cut off the flow of almost all supplies, including medications, in a bid to turn Gazans against Hamas. Hundreds of seriously ill people face death due to the lack of medical treatment and Israel's refusal to let them travel to Egypt or Israel to receive proper care.

The Israeli government has also drastically reduced its supply of fuel and energy, increasing the already desperate humanitarian crisis. On Sunday, Kanan Obeid, chairman of Gaza's Hamas-run energy authority, said that Gaza now has only 35 percent of the power that its 1.5 million citizens need. With most areas already suffering power cuts for two hours a day, Gazans are now faced with being without electricity for up to eight hours a day.

Israel's Supreme Court overruled objections from human rights campaigners who said that the fuel reductions were "in blatant violation of international law." The court claimed that no humanitarian issues were at

stake.

Israel has demanded that any future Palestinian state be a demilitarised zone, with arms limitations on its internal security forces. Such a state's main function would be to make the area safe for Israel. The precise arrangements are to be worked out with US special security envoy General James Jones, as agreed in Washington before the Annapolis summit.

Israel also demands no restrictions on Israel's flights over Palestinian air space and the right to monitor border crossings.

It wants an international force to be deployed in the West Bank and along the Philadelphia Route in Rafah, near Gaza's southern border with Egypt, and a permanent IDF "trip wire" deterrence force for an extended period in the Jordan Valley. This would be used in the West Bank, with Palestinian agreement, whenever Israel deemed that there was a possibility of an invasion from Jordan.

With regard to an international force in Palestine, the European powers, and France in particular, appear to be more than willing to get involved in order to secure their own positions in the region, following on from their participation in the international South Lebanon force. European Union Middle East envoy Marc Otte has indicated that the EU is currently "in a listening mode" on the matter, adding, "We must make sure that all the parties are interested."

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said in his opening remarks at the Paris donors' conference that France "proposes the deployment, when the time and conditions are right, of an international force to assist the Palestinian security services." Abbas welcomed his statement, explaining that the PA had previously accepted the principle of such a force.

Israeli Foreign Secretary Tzipi Livni said at a NATO meeting in Brussels last month that NATO would have to play a part in ensuring security if Israel was to hand back any land to Palestinian control. She said, "We are now in a process that is expected to strengthen the capabilities of the Palestinian Authority—so they would fight terror instead of Israel. However, one cannot exclude the possibility that we will need to discuss what can be the role of NATO in supporting the need for change, a real change, on the ground."

Hamas has no alternative to such imperialist machinations and has indicated a readiness to rely on the European powers, hoping they will act as a counterweight to the US and Israel. It has previously rejected any international force as "blatant interference" in Palestinian affairs. But in a long letter to Sarkozy, Ismail Haniyeh, the elected Hamas prime minister who was dismissed by Abbas last June, urged France to come to the Palestinians' aid, saying that the Gaza government was "prepared to cooperate with all international efforts to establish security and stability in the region."

Haniyeh praised Sarkozy, writing, "We followed your speech at the recent Paris conference in which we found many positive and encouraging initiatives aimed at ending the occupation and restoring the legal rights of the Palestinian people and ending their suffering."

Israel has also demanded that Egypt be more directly involved in controlling the Palestinians. It wants Cairo to police its border with Gaza and prevent weapons from reaching Hamas and other militant oppositionists via a system of tunnels.

Livni has accused Egypt of not doing enough to crack down on arms smuggling. Last month, the US Congress made US\$100 million of aid to Egypt conditional on Cairo meeting its conditions, including securing Egypt's borders with Gaza to prevent arms smuggling, more human rights training for Egyptian police officers, and legal guarantees of judicial independence.

Egypt's response has been to fall in line with Washington's demands. It has beefed up its efforts to detect and destroy tunnels used for smuggling weapons. Cairo has agreed to authorise the US Army Corps of Engineers to examine the tunnels and to spend US\$23 million of US military aid on

technical equipment to detect tunnels. It has also agreed to allow US Army Corps personnel to train its forces.

Egypt has complained that controlling the border with Gaza is almost impossible under the 1978 Camp David agreement, which restricts Egyptian deployment along the border to a maximum of 750 border police. Cairo has therefore asked for the treaty to be amended to allow up to 3,000 personnel assisted by helicopters to police the area.

Although the Arab bourgeoisie pay lip service to the Palestinian cause, in part at least because it plays well with their own public, their relations with and dependency on the US are far more important to them. This determines their attitude towards the Palestinians and Israel's demands.

All the while, Israel is consolidating its land grab. It is determined to reduce the territory to be handed over to any future Palestinian entity to ever-smaller non-contiguous cantons in the West Bank, all of which would be separated from and without control over their access to the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government has announced the construction of 300 more homes in Har Homa, a settlement on occupied land between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This will complete the encirclement of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to be their capital, making travel for those Palestinians living in East Jerusalem outside the city limits all but impossible.

As a sop to Abbas and in the run-up to Bush's visit, Olmert agreed to dismantle a few of the more than 100 unauthorised settlement outposts in the West Bank. While all the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which house more than 460,000 Israelis, are illegal under international law, the outposts are supposedly unauthorised even by the Israeli government.

The outposts were the brainchild of Ariel Sharon, who in the late 1990s called on ultranationalist or religious settlers to "capture the hills" in order to establish territorial contiguity between isolated settlements, thereby preventing the surrender of the land to the Palestinians. They typically consist of several dozen trailers on West Bank hilltops. At least 75 of these outposts have been built partly on private Palestinian land, and some 3,000 people currently live there, although not all outposts are occupied.

Under Bush's Road Map, Israel was supposed to have stopped all settlement activity and removed the 50 or so outposts established after March 2001. After dismantling a few, of which about half were unpopulated, the Sharon government did nothing.

When Israeli Labour leader Amir Peretz became defence minister in 2006, he negotiated the voluntary removal of a few settlements in return for the legalisation of others. Even after the IDF issued "delimiting orders" against 13 outposts, only 3 were evacuated. Despite High Court orders, the rest have not been abandoned. In some cases, evacuated outposts are to be replaced by military bases.

The Israeli government has sought to ban the publication of a report compiled in 2006 by Baruch Spiegel, at that time an advisor to the defence minister, which details all the settlements and outposts. The *Ha'aretz* newspaper reported in October 2006 that widespread construction had been carried out in dozens of the settlements, often without permits.

According to a report on the outposts by a lawyer, Talia Sasson, which was commissioned by the Sharon government, many of the so-called unauthorised outposts were facilitated by "certain government agencies, public agencies and regional councils of Judea and Samaria [the Israeli name for the West Bank]."

Peace Now, which has tried to get the court to lift the ban on the Spiegel report, claims that the Israeli government argued in court just before Bush's visit to Israel that it should not be released "for fear of harming state security and foreign relations."

The recent donors' conference in Paris raised US\$7.4 billion in pledges from the US, the European powers and the Arab regimes. Most of this is to pay for the PA's security forces, rather than to develop the Palestinian

economy, which has been devastated by Israel's closure of the borders, the blockade, curfews and roadblocks. However, such pledges have not been honoured in the past, not least because without Israel easing its 500 roadblocks and opening the borders, the Palestinians are unable to get their agricultural produce to market.

It is highly unlikely that Israel will lift the restrictions any time soon. Even if it did, such aid would not stop the economy from shrinking, as even the World Bank has admitted. So bad is the situation now that three quarters of the population are dependent for survival upon handouts from international relief agencies and remittances from family members working abroad.

Just this week, British Gas announced that it will end its Palestinian gas programme—the most important development project in Palestine. It had been negotiating for more than 18 months to develop a gas field in the Mediterranean controlled by the PA.

The proposal was a flagship project for development in the area and for cooperation between the PA and Israel. But negotiations broke down because Israel said it was concerned that revenues from the project would flow to Hamas. This pretext has again deprived the Palestinian bourgeoisie of any basis for establishing even a modicum of independence from Jerusalem.



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