

Bush backs Sharon's West Bank land grab

By Bill Van Auken
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With his endorsement of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "disengagement" plan Wednesday, President George W. Bush broke with nearly four decades of official US diplomacy, dropping even the pretense that Washington is committed to a negotiated settlement of the Middle East conflict. He has aligned the US government publicly and unequivocally with Israeli aggression and the dispossession of the Palestinian people.

The US president, who launched his invasion against Iraq a little over a year ago under the pretense of upholding the inviolability of United Nations resolutions, made clear his contempt for every UN decision relating to the rights of the Palestinians. The US-Israeli pact sanctioning the Israeli annexation of Palestinian land flies in the face of longstanding UN resolutions condemning the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and demanding its termination.

The unilateral deal announced by Bush and Sharon calls for the dismantling of a relative handful of fortified Israeli enclaves in the Gaza Strip and evacuating some 7,500 settlers in return for the US supporting Israel's "right" to permanently annex a vast portion of the West Bank territory that it seized in its 1967 war with neighboring Arab states. Zionist settlements in this territory house some 240,000.

Sharon also received Bush's explicit endorsement of Israel's ongoing construction of its "security fence," a vast wall that bisects the West Bank and will displace hundreds of thousands more Palestinians.

Israeli officials familiar with the talks said that Sharon came to Washington with several proposals regarding the territory his government proposed to annex in the West Bank. Bush chose the one most onerous for the Palestinians. It commits Israel to withdrawing from only four insignificant settlements in the northwest of the occupied territory, which house barely 500 settlers.

Bush likewise joined with Sharon in supporting the unilateral abrogation of the right of Palestinian refugees forced to flee by Zionist terror in 1948-49 to return to their homes in what is today Israel.

Sharon was quoted in the Israeli press as responding to Palestinian outrage over the deal by saying, "I said that we were going to deal them a lethal blow, and they were dealt a lethal blow."

This US-Israeli diktat marks a resurgence of the kind of unbridled imperialism and colonialism that prevailed in the region in the aftermath of World War I. It recalls the drafting of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which drew lines in the sand demarcating colonial spheres of influence, with the voiceless Arab masses forced to submit at the point of a gun.

Not only were Palestinian representatives excluded from the talks leading to this illegal land grab, the announcement of the US-Israeli deal was made in a manner that suggested the Palestinian people and their historic grievances do not even exist.

Bush called the Israeli measures "historic and courageous," adding, "If all parties choose to embrace this moment, they can open the door to progress." But neither Washington nor Sharon recognizes any other parties. Never mind the door to progress, the Palestinian Authority's president Yassir Arafat cannot even open the door to his besieged compound in Ramallah without risking assassination by an Israeli sniper.

"In light of new realities on the ground," Bush declared, it is "unrealistic" for Palestinians to expect the Israelis to abandon their illegal settlements and give back the land they seized in 1967. In the same breath, he insisted that the Palestinians' sole path to an independent state was the suppression of any resistance to the Israeli conquerors. "If they want a state which provides a hopeful future to their people, they must fight terror. They must be resolute in the fighting of terror."

The facts "on the ground" to which Bush refers are, in fact, the product of systematic terror by the Israeli state, which drove Palestinians off their land and replaced them with Zionist settlements. The Palestinians' demand for the right of return is likewise a response to the Zionist terror unleashed with the creation of Israel, in which three quarters of a million people were driven from their homes and villages and dispersed to refugee camps throughout the region.

Bush and Sharon posed for the cameras at the White House as allies in the "war on terror" and champions of peace and democracy. But the world knows they are partners in aggression. Both are conducting rapacious occupations that have engendered mass resistance, and both have been shaken by the fierceness of that resistance.

Bush came into office with two interrelated foreign policy objectives: first, to invade Iraq and, second, to provide full US support for Israeli attacks on the Palestinians. These aims were part of a broader agenda of establishing undisputed US hegemony over the Middle East and its oil reserves.

As former treasury secretary Paul O'Neill recounted in Ron Suskind's book *The Price of Loyalty*, the US president signaled a turn toward unconditional backing for the Israeli regime at the first meeting of his National Security Council (NSC) in January 2001.

According to O'Neill's account, Bush announced to the NSC: "We're going to correct the imbalances of the previous administration on the Mideast conflict. We're going to tilt it back toward Israel." He added that the US would pull back from any

attempt to broker a settlement.

Warned by Secretary of State Colin Powell that such a move could produce “dire” consequences, encouraging Sharon to use unbridled military might against the Palestinians, Bush responded: “Maybe that’s the best way to get things back in balance.... Sometimes a show of strength by one side can really clarify things.”

The implementation of this policy entailed support for the Sharon regime’s campaign of political assassinations against Palestinian militants and leaders, and its policy of massive retaliation and collective punishment in response to the terrorist attacks that these assassinations helped generate.

Since the outbreak of the so-called al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000—sparked by then-Likud leader Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to Temple Mount—approximately 2,700 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces, the great majority of them civilians and nearly 600 of them children. During the same period, around 840 Israelis—including soldiers, settlers and civilians, 100 of them children—have been killed in a series of suicide bombings and other attacks.

While the Bush administration used the “war on terror” as the pretext for invading and occupying Iraq, Sharon has invoked the same rationale as a cover for Israeli expansionism and a merciless campaign aimed at stamping out Palestinian nationalism and reducing the Palestinians to a powerless and humiliated people.

For the masses throughout the Arab world, the two occupations and the resistance against them are increasingly seen as interrelated parts of a single process. Indeed, the connections between the two are becoming increasingly evident.

For many years, Israel has used US arms to carry out its repressive actions against the Palestinians. Now, the US military is using Israeli expertise and advisers in devising tactics and rules of engagement for carrying out the brutal campaign to suppress the nationalist uprising against the US occupation of Iraq.

At the same time, Bush and Sharon were brought together in the White House Wednesday by their respective political crises. Confronted with growing opposition to his policy in Iraq and damning revelations about the failure of the White House to take any action to prevent the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Bush welcomed the announcement of his support for Sharon’s annexation scheme as an opportunity to distract public attention and deceive the American people into thinking he is promoting peace in the Middle East.

Sharon, facing possible indictment on corruption charges and the likely breakup of his right-wing coalition, hopes that the unconditional support of the government that provides the money, aid and arms that keep Israel afloat will rescue him from defeat.

The deal in Washington marks the collapse of a so-called “peace process” that had already proved to be a fiction in the decade following the 1993 handshake between Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the White House Rose Garden.

It marks one more humiliation for Arafat, who at that time accepted the US-brokered agreement with Israel on the theory that it represented a trade of “land for peace.” In reality, the pact envisioned the same terms that Israel and Washington are today imposing unilaterally—the maintenance of at least some of the

West Bank settlements and the renunciation of the right of return—but as part of a negotiated final status agreement that would involve the creation of a Palestinian state.

Every Israeli government since then has proved itself determined to sabotage any advance toward a Palestinian state or any genuinely democratic settlement of the Palestinian question. Instead, the consistent Israeli negotiating stance has been to demand that Arafat repress any resistance to Israeli occupation, thereby discrediting him among the broad masses of the Palestinian people.

Nor has any US government—Democratic or Republican—exerted any real pressure on Israel. After the Bush-Sharon announcement on Wednesday, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, issued a statement endorsing the unilateral declaration as a “positive step.” He told the *Washington Post*: “What’s important obviously is the security of the state of Israel, and that’s what the prime minister and the president, I think, are trying to address.”

In a separate interview with the *New York Sun*, Kerry declared: “I’ve always felt that the right of return is contrary to the viability of a Jewish state, and that’s what Israel is.”

For the Democratic challenger, as for the Republican incumbent, the Palestinian people do not exist.

No doubt, domestic politics enter into the calculations of both Bush and Kerry. Both are currying favor with the Zionist lobby in the hopes of gaining cash and votes. Bush is also appealing to his “Christian-Zionist” base, which sees Israeli dominance as the path to Armageddon.

More fundamentally, Washington’s support for Israeli expansionism is bound up with the same drive for hegemony that underlies its colonialist venture in Iraq. It has propped up Israel with an estimated \$6 billion in annual aid and loans for maintaining a garrison state through which it projects its power in the Middle East.

The policies pursued by Washington and Israel are destabilizing the entire region and creating the conditions for revolutionary upheavals. Not only Arafat, but all of the corrupt Arab regimes stand exposed by the US-Israeli deal. The visit by Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak just before Wednesday’s announcement and the scheduled arrival of Jordanian King Abdallah II on April 21 provide a measure of the servility of the Arab ruling classes toward US imperialism.

This colonialist pact will provide no escape for the Israeli people from the vicious cycle of repression and violence. Rather, it will further inflame the Palestinian masses.

Only a program that unites Jews and Arabs on a democratic, secular and genuinely anti-imperialist—that is, socialist—basis can provide a way out of the bloody impasse.

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