

Bush Backs Ariel Sharon's Massive Settlement Expansion

by Dean Andromidas

Israel's Aug. 17 announcement of the approval of 1,000 new Israeli housing units for the occupied West Bank merely exposes once more the sham of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's so-called disengagement plan. More significantly, Sharon is now acting with the full support of the Cheney-Bush Administration.

The *New York Times* quoted a Bush Administration official who said weak statements made by the Administration following Sharon's announcement, reflect "a covert policy decision toward accepting natural growth" of some settlements, despite repeated past U.S. statements to the contrary. U.S. and Israeli officials admit that this policy was worked out with Sharon during the recent visit of Elliott Abrams, the top neo-con in charge of the Middle East on the National Security Council. The move makes a mockery of the Administration's own declared policy, the so-called Road Map for a Middle East peace, which calls for ending all expansion of settlements and removal of all outposts.

It is becoming more and more obvious that Sharon's "disengagement plan," and the Bush Administration's continued support, is just Sharon's latest scheme under which he can continue the relentless expansion of the settlement enterprise, crush the Palestinian resistance, and provide time for preparation for a new regional war. But the continuation of Sharon's policies, along with the Bush Administration's unqualified support, is raising fears among Jewish and Israeli leaders that Israel is becoming an immoral and racist state.

Just the Tip of the Iceberg

For the past several weeks a group of homeless Israelis has been living in tents just across the street from Sharon's

Jerusalem office. They are protesting Sharon's brutal economic austerity policies, which have left them, and many thousands of others, homeless. This pitiful sight did not stop Sharon from announcing the construction of another 1,000 housing units, built at the expense of the Israeli taxpayer. The only reason why the Israeli economy has not totally collapsed from the burden of this unbridled expansion, and ongoing war against the Palestinians, is the \$10 billion in loan guarantees that the Bush Administration has given Israel, at the expense of the American taxpayer.

When Israel started the settlement enterprise following the capture of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 1967 six-day war, the first settlements were called "security settlements," whose alleged purpose was to be the "eyes" of Israel's advance defense line. In the 1990s, as international pressure against the settlements grew, including from the United States, a new term, "natural growth," was created to describe the expansion of current settlements. Far from being "natural," the settlement population doubled during the 1990s. Sharon now describes the building of Israeli homes in Palestinian areas as "consensus" settlements, "newspeak" for settlements that are within the "political consensus" in Israel. Sharon openly states that the expansion of these "consensus" settlements is part of his disengagement plan!

This new term has only been in vogue for a few weeks, and has already been used to justify thousands of housing tenders which have been approved by the government. The numbers are impressive. On Aug. 2, the government announced the approval of 600 housing units for the largest settlement on the West Bank, Ma'aleh Adumin. The announcement was still in the headlines when Elliott Abrams

was in Israel on Aug. 4. Sharon, as is his wont, lied, "No such plan exists." Abrams acted as if he believed Sharon. Nonetheless on the same day, the Israeli Defense Ministry, which is responsible for approving new housing in the Occupied Territories, revealed that the 600 new units were personally approved by Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz last June.

That announcement was part of a plan to expand these "consensus" settlements. Construction will continue even beyond the current line of illegal settlement construction, which means more Palestinian land will be seized. Since most of these new settlements will be isolated by Sharon's illegal Berlin-style Wall on the West Bank, the land has already been seized.

Then on Aug. 17, tenders for another 1,000 units were announced. On the same day, the Israeli mass circulation daily *Yediot Aharonot* reported that tenders for yet another 600 units would soon be released. Thus in a matter of weeks, Sharon has expanded the settlements by no fewer than 2,200 housing units, enough for expanding the settlement population by up to 10-20,000 people.

But all of this is the only tip of the settlement iceberg. The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reported Aug. 24 that in the settlement of Upper Modi'in, every year 1,200 new housing units go on sale. No fewer than 6,000 new housing units are under construction. The plan is to expand this settlement of 27,000 inhabitants to 150,000!

The same is planned for the settlement of Betar, where construction has been going on irrespective of government announcements. The plan is to expand the population from 27,000 to over 100,000! In the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumin, the plan is to increase the population to 45,000. Thus the increase in these three settlements alone will increase the total population of the settlements by 50%!

This is in addition to almost 100 "illegal outposts" established under Sharon's guidance since he came to power four years ago. Although under the Bush Administration's own Road Map policy, these outposts were supposed to be removed, not one outpost has been dismantled. Quite the contrary, a growing number of these outposts have become new settlements with infrastructure being built, including roads, electricity, and water. All of this has been approved by the Israeli military, financed by various ministries, and approved by Sharon personally.

Peace Now condemned these latest announcements of new housing settlements, saying, "The boss has gone mad. Sharon has decided to scoff at his government's promise to freeze construction in the settlements. Rather than disengagement he is carrying out massive occupation in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]."

Meanwhile, despite the so-called disengagement plan calling for the evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip, settlers there are building new and expensive hot houses on their farms. Settlement counselor Eran Sternberg explained,

"No one can plan his future on the basis of vague declarations by Sharon. What if nothing happens in the end? . . . We generally believe there will be no evacuation, and if we stop building it will make our stand weaker."

Settlements Creating an Apartheid State

Bush's decision to allow Sharon to make a mockery of his own policy does not surprise Israeli political observers. Akiva Eldar, in a commentary in *Ha'aretz* on Aug. 24, wrote that Bush's full support for Sharon is obviously linked to the U.S. Presidential elections. "Last week," Eldar wrote, ". . . Israeli diplomats in Washington reported on the growing panic in the Bush camp. A former senior White House official said that only a dramatic move or a wild gamble, such as replacing Vice President Dick Cheney with a candidate not tarred by the Iraq war, could save Bush. The Republican convention is the last possible date for such a move."

Jewish leaders inside and outside of Israel are alarmed that Bush's support is allowing Sharon to turn Israel into a racist Apartheid state. Henry Siegman, former President of the American Jewish Congress, in a commentary appearing in the Aug. 20 *International Herald Tribune*, denounced Sharon's so-called disengagement plan as a fraud, warning, "Sharon and Israel's right wing represent a radical departure from the dominant sensibility of the founders of the Zionist movement, such as Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Chaim Weizmann, and others. These founders were animated by progressive Western democratic concepts and could not have conceived of a Jewish state that would rule over a permanently disenfranchised people."

"It is one of the ironies of history that the Jewish people, who were disproportionately involved in struggles for universal human rights and civil liberties all over the world—and believed the Jewish national return to Palestine to be consistent with those values—should now be supporting policies of a rightist Israeli government that are in danger of changing the Jewish state into a racist enterprise. For if Sharon—with the support of Israelis, World Jewry and the United States—leverages his promised withdrawal from Gaza into an Israeli presence in the West Bank that is impossible to dislodge, a racist enterprise is surely what his policies will produce."

Siegman concludes, "for its political leaders, and for many Israelis, real estate has become more important than justice, or peace, or the founding principles of Zionism."

While Sharon is building lavish apartments and villas for the settlers, the majority of Israelis are seeing their living standards slashed as a result of Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's brutal economic policies. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been cut from education, social services, welfare, and pensions, Yet Israel's defense budget and settlement budget have actually increased.

One of the biggest cuts in Netanyahu's latest budget is a

25% cut in government grants to local municipalities within Israel proper. Many of these municipalities are already bankrupt, and tens of thousands of municipal workers have not been paid—many for over a year. Nonetheless, grants to the settlements have increased to the point where they are as much as 12 times higher than in Israel. For instance, the Israeli city of Beit Shamesh had its government grants cut back to 276 shekels (\$60) per person. The West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, with a comparable population and socio-economic situation, received no less than 6,000 shekels (\$5,300) per person! Kiryat Arba, just outside of the Palestinian city of Hebron, is the most extremist settlement in the West Bank. It was home to mass murderer Dr. Baruch Goldstein, and one of the hang-outs of Yigal Amir, the murderer of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The drive to expand the settlements is impoverishing the Israeli population, 25% of which lives under the poverty line, and it was recently reported that 46% of all Israeli families are unable to meet their monthly living expenses. Real unemployment stands at over 12%.

Israeli Knesset member Michael Melchior, expressing his alarm and outrage at Israel's descent into economic ruin and social impoverishment, declared in a commentary in the Aug. 19 *Ha'aretz*: "Israel, which defines itself as 'a Jewish Democratic state,' has become one of the most immoral states in the Western world. In one field Israel could win a gold medal, although not in the Athens Olympics. It is the income gaps between society's top tier and the lower tiers. These gaps compromise human dignity, and cast grave doubt on our right to be called a Jewish democratic society."

Melchior, an Israeli rabbi who is also the chief rabbi of Norway, is the leader of the Meimad party, a pro-peace religious party which is now united with the Labor Party. Melchior went on to write: "This is a society that abandons 366,000 of its children-at-risk and throws them into the street; a society that treats its foreign workers like animals, a society that despises its elderly and sends them to rummage through the garbage. . . . It is a society among the leaders in the world trafficking in women. Such a society is neither Jewish nor democratic."

Rabbi Melchior concludes by denouncing Netanyahu's tax break for the rich: "Instead of reducing taxes, the government would have done better to direct those NIS2.5 billion to health services, the single mothers, and the children at risk. Had it done so, perhaps the old couple who 'thanked' Netanyahu before committing suicide due to their economic distress could have thanked him in person. Had it done so, the government could have boasted that it was heading a Jewish, democratic state."

Whether Sharon decides to become Vice President Dick Cheney's "hand grenade" in a bid to start a new regional war with an Israeli strike against Iran, or simply to allow Sharon to continue his settlement enterprise, the Bush Administration's policy is clearly leading to Israel's destruction.