

## Ex-Diplomats Protest Bush's Anti-Palestinian Policies

By Jim Lobe | May 13, 2004

WASHINGTON, D.C.—President George W. Bush's policies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not only damaging the United States' credibility worldwide, but are putting U.S. diplomats, civilian contractors and the military at heightened risk.

That's the message that at least 60 former U.S. diplomats and other government officials who have served overseas will deliver to the President later this month.

The open critique of Bush's policies still gathering signatures was inspired by a similar protest signed by 52 former British ambassadors and senior government officials sent to Prime Minister Tony Blair two weeks ago. That letter warned that Blair's strong support for Bush's policies in both Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were "doomed to failure."

The U.S. diplomats' letter, due to be sent on May 28, focuses far more on the Israel-Palestinian issue, noting in particular Bush's Apr. 14 endorsement of Sharon's plan to unilaterally withdraw Israeli settlers from the Gaza strip while consolidating five large settlement blocs on the West Bank.

"Your unqualified support of Sharon's extra-judicial assassinations, Israel's Berlin Wall-like barrier, its harsh military measures in occupied territories, and now your endorsement of Sharon's unilateral plan are costing our country its credibility, prestige and friends," the letter says. "Nor is this endorsement even in the best interests of the State of Israel."

So far, the response to the letter has been "amazing," organizers say. To date it has been signed by at least 16 former ambassadors, most of whom, like Edward Peck, James Akins, Talcott Seelye and Chas Freeman, Jr., represented the United States in various Arab capitals. Several dozen former deputy chiefs of mission, consul generals and chiefs and deputy chiefs of Central Intelligence Agency stations have also

signed on, including Ray Close, a well-known CIA officer who served part of his career in Jeddah.

Former U.S. Information Agency officers and U.S. Agency for International Development employees were also well represented among the signers, who were organized by former ambassador to Qatar, Andrew Killgore, and a former USIA chief inspector, Richard Curtiss.

But despite the prominence of some of the signers, the letter's impact may be somewhat muted, particularly compared to the controversy provoked by the letter to Blair.

While Blair's Middle East policies have come under strong attack both within his Labor Party and by the two major opposition parties, Bush's alignment with Sharon has not provoked much criticism from other major political figures, including his Democratic challenger in the upcoming November elections, Senator John Kerry.

Shortly after Bush's April 14 embrace of the Sharon plan, Kerry declared not only that he supports it as well, but that he also backed Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi. That killing provoked widespread outrage by U.S. allies in Europe and the Arab world—the same countries that Kerry says the Bush administration has ignored to its detriment.

Kerry's declarations have been interpreted as an attempt to keep U.S. Jews, long a reliable source of support for Democrats, from deserting the party in what most analysts believe will be an extremely close presidential race.



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Thus, Kerry has backed away from his earlier proposal to appoint former President Jimmy Carter or former Secretary of State James Baker to oversee renewed peace negotiations, because of “the Jewish community’s perception that they are overly sympathetic to Arab positions,” as the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* recently put it.

The Bush campaign for the November vote is making a major bid for Jewish support, based almost exclusively on his strong backing for Sharon, despite the fact that most U.S. Jews do not favor the positions of the Israeli leader’s Likud Party against substantial territorial compromise with the Palestinians.

Despite Kerry’s unwillingness to take on Bush’s unprecedented support for Sharon, however, public concern over Washington’s general position in the Middle East appears to be on the rise. Concerns seem greatest over the recent setbacks in Iraq and the growing sense that U.S. actions, most recently the abuse and humiliation by U.S. troops of Iraqi prisoners, is intensifying anti-U.S. hatred and anger in the region.

The former diplomats and other regional specialists say the Bush Administration does not appear to appreciate how the U.S. occupation in Iraq and its support for Israel’s actions in the occupied territories are seen increasingly in both Europe and the Arab world as part of the same picture. By tying Washington to Sharon, Bush is making it far more difficult to gain or keep much-needed allies in its global “war on terror” and in Iraq, they say.

That Likud members rejected Sharon’s withdrawal proposal despite Bush’s support further undercuts U.S. credibility, according to Shibley Telhami, a Middle East expert at the Brookings Institution who has long warned that U.S. support for Israel is the main “prism” through which Arabs gauge U.S. intentions.

“Now, if it looks like this Gaza withdrawal isn’t going to take place,” he told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It will be very difficult for the administration to deal with [moderate Arab governments].”

The immediate issue for the administration, Telhami said, is how to handle the King of Jordan, who cancelled a previous visit to protest Bush’s

endorsement of the Sharon plan, when he makes good on plans to visit Bush in Washington.

The diplomats made a similar point in their letter, urging Bush to return Washington to the position of a “truly honest broker” between Israel and the Palestinians. “A return to the time-honored American tradition of fairness will reverse the present tide of ill will in Europe and the Middle East—even in Iraq,” they wrote, adding that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is “at the core of the problems in the Middle East.”

The letter echoed the views of U.S. allies, as well as Palestinians themselves, by noting that Bush’s backing for the Sharon plan flouts a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions dating back to 1948, and undermines the Road Map for peace drawn up by the so-called “Quartet”—the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia. Quartet representatives met Tuesday at the United Nations.

Moreover, the administration acted after a series of negotiating sessions between Israeli and U.S. diplomats but “left out Palestinians,” the letter continues. “In fact, you and Prime Minister Sharon consistently have excluded Palestinians from peace negotiations... You have placed U.S. diplomats, civilians and military doing their jobs overseas in an untenable and even dangerous position.”

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