

Congress Overwhelmingly Endorses Ariel Sharon's Annexation Plans

By Stephen Zunes | June 25, 2004

On Wednesday, June 23, 2004, the U.S. House of Representatives, in an overwhelming bipartisan vote, endorsed right-wing Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's efforts to colonize and annex large sections of the Palestinian West Bank, seized by Israel in the June 1967 war.

This was not just another "pro-Israel" (or, more accurately, "pro-Israeli right") resolution, but an effective renunciation of the post-World War II international system based upon the premise of the illegitimacy of the expansion of a country's territory by military force.

House Concurrent Resolution 460, sponsored by right-wing Republican leader Tom DeLay, "strongly endorses" the letter sent by President George W. Bush to the Israeli prime minister in April supporting his so-called "disengagement" plan. This unilateral initiative calls for withdrawing the illegal Israeli settlements from the occupied Gaza Strip, but—far more significantly—would incorporate virtually all of the illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank into Israel, leaving the Palestinians with a series of non-contiguous and economically unviable cantons, each surrounded by Israeli territory, collectively constituting barely 10% of historic Palestine. (Even in the case of the Gaza Strip, Sharon's plan would allow Israel to control the borders, the ports, and the airspace, as well as having the right to conduct military operations inside Palestinian areas at will.)

The vote was 407 in favor of the resolution and only 9 opposed.

The Bush letter so overwhelmingly supported by the House declares that "the United States will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan." Indeed, the resolution appears to be part of an effort to short-circuit last fall's Geneva Initiative, a comprehensive peace plan supported by the Palestinian leadership and leading Israeli moderates. In that proposal, the Palestinians agreed that Israel could annex some blocs of settlements, but

only along Israel's internationally recognized borders and only in exchange for an equivalent amount of territory currently part of Israel that would be granted to the new Palestinian state. According to public opinion polls, the majority of Americans—including a majority of American Jews—support this approach over the Bush-backed Sharon so overwhelmingly endorsed by Congress.

The resolution does not even make mention of the once highly-touted "road map" for Israeli-Palestinian peace that the United States drew up with representatives of Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations. The "road map" demanded that any growth in the settlements be frozen and that the remaining outstanding issues, such as borders and the status of Palestinian refugees be left for negotiations between the two parties.

Congressman Pete Stark of California, one of the nine dissenters, observed how the resolution did not call on both Israelis and Palestinians to work together to find a peaceful solution to this conflict, correctly observing that "all parties in the process must work together," something the resolution notably omitted. Minority leader Nancy Pelosi and Deputy minority leader Steny Hoyer (who was a cosponsor of the DeLay resolution) refused to place a resolution cosponsored by Stark (H.R. 479), which applauds Israelis and Palestinians who are working together to conceive pragmatic, serious plans for achieving peace and encourages both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to capitalize on the opportunity offered by these peace initiatives.

According to Israeli press reports, Sharon brought four separate disengagement plans to Washington



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requiring various degrees of Israeli withdrawal, but President Bush ended up endorsing the one which allowed Israel to annex the largest amount of Palestinian territory. Now, much to the chagrin of progressive and moderate Israelis, Congress has also chosen to throw its weight behind the most right-wing of the four proposals.

Most observers—including leading Israeli military and intelligence officials—recognize that by leaving the Palestinians with little hope of achieving a viable state through negotiations, this will only swell the ranks of extremist Palestinian groups and produce more terrorism. Congress has rejected this analysis, however, insisting that Sharon’s land grab will somehow “enhance the security of Israel and advance the cause of peace in the Middle East.”

The resolution calls for the Palestinian “state” that could eventually emerge to be “based on rule of law and respect for human rights,” but does not call on Israel to respect the rule of law and human rights, which its occupation forces and colonists—according to reputable human rights organization in Israel and elsewhere—are violating on a daily basis.

The resolution also repeatedly cites Palestinian terrorism as the obstacle to peace and security, not the Israeli occupation and repression that has spawned it. Furthermore, the resolution calls for the United States to further strengthen Israel’s military prowess and defends Israel’s right to launch attacks against Palestinian groups that “threaten Israeli citizens,” which presumably includes settlers and their militias which have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Palestinian civilians, including large numbers of children.

In supporting this resolution, Congress has effectively renounced UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which call on Israel—in return for security guarantees from its Arab neighbors—to withdraw from territories seized in the June 1967 war. All previous U.S. administrations of both parties had seen these resolutions as the basis for Arab-Israeli peace.

These Israeli settlements violate the Fourth Geneva Convention, which deem it illegal for any country to

transfer any part of its civilian population onto territories seized by military force. UN Security Council resolutions 446, 452, 465 and 471 explicitly call on Israel to remove its colonists from the occupied territories. The vast majority of these settlements that the Bush-Sharon plan seeks to formally annex into Israel were built after these resolutions were passed.

In an incredible act of chutzpah, however, the resolution claims that Israel should not be expected to withdraw from these settlements “in light of new realities on the ground,” namely the settlements built in violation of these UN Security Council resolutions.

Congress, however, apparently agrees with President Bush that Sharon’s Israel, unlike Saddam’s Iraq, need not abide by UN Security Council resolutions.

In that clause, the resolution refers to the illegal settlements euphemistically as “Israeli population centers.” More significantly, the resolution refers to these settlements as being “in Israel,” effectively already recognizing their annexation.

The resolution also insists that supporting the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Israel—or even in the occupied territories to be annexed by Israel under the Bush-Sharon plan—would not be “just” or “fair.”

The Bush letter endorsed by Congress effectively destroys the once highly-touted “road map” and marks the first time in the history of the peace process that a U.S. president has pre-empted negotiations by announcing support of such a unilateral initiative by one party. Both Israel and the United States continue to refuse to even negotiate with Palestine Authority President Yasir Arafat, Palestinian Prime Minister Amhed Qureia, or any other recognized Palestinian leader, on substantive issues dealing with a peace settlement.

Supporting the resolution were the fundamentalist Christian Coalition, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, and other right-wing groups. Leading the opposition to the resolution were Churches for Middle East Peace, the Tikkun Community, and similar progressive organizations.

That the entire House Democratic leadership and all but a handful of Democrats overall supported the resolution is demonstrative of just how far to the right the Democratic Party has gone. In short, the Democrats, like the Republicans, now support the neo-conservative doctrine that places the right of conquest over the rule of law.

More fundamentally, Congress' effective endorsement of an Israeli annexation of land it conquered in the 1967 war is a direct challenge to the United Nations Charter, which forbids any country from expanding its territory through military conquest. The vote, therefore, constitutes nothing less than an overwhelming bipartisan renunciation of the post-World War II international system, effectively recognizing the right of conquest.

*Stephen Zunes is a professor of Politics and chair of the Peace & Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco and Middle East editor of the Foreign Policy In Focus Project (www.fpif.org) and the author of *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Common Courage Press, 2003).*

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