



U.S. ENDORSES NEW TACTIC IN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon arrived in Washington Wednesday to meet with President Bush, who endorsed his controversial plan to pull Israel out of the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

Prior to his trip Sharon announced that between four to six main West Bank settlements -- home to about 92,500 Israelis -- will stay under Israeli control. The small towns, built on land Israel captured from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War, are considered illegal under international law.

Sharon has said the plan would boost security.

"Only support for the disengagement plan will allow us to continue to manage a relentless battle against terror," Sharon said. "Disengagement allows us a free hand to act against terror."

Israel wants explicit approval from the United States that it will not be forced to withdraw its borders to those that existed prior to the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. For many years the United States has tried to negotiate peace with a Palestinian state in pre-war borders.

Another sensitive topic is the resettlement of some Palestinians who say their families were forced from their homes during Israel's founding in 1947-48. Sharon wants Mr. Bush to agree that these Palestinian refugees will not have the so-called "right of return" and will instead settle in the new Palestinian state.

Palestinian objections

Palestinians argue that Sharon's plan to "disengage" from them contradicts the terms of the U.S.-backed "road map" for peace, which says that the borders of a future Palestinian state must be negotiated.

The "road map" was launched in April 2003, but has made little progress. The plan seeks to end the violent conflict in the region and establish a Palestinian state by 2005. It is the fourth attempt by the United States in 25 years to broker a peace deal between the Israelis and Palestinians.

"The maintenance of six settlement blocks in the West Bank is a recipe for closing all the doors in the peace process and its destruction," said Palestinian negotiations minister Saeb Erekat.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei said President Bush's assurance to Israel that it could keep some West Bank land captured in a 1967 war was unacceptable.

"Bush is the first U.S. president to give legitimacy to Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. We reject this, we will not accept it," he told reporters at his West Bank home.

President Bush's reaction

At a joint press conference Wednesday President Bush endorsed Sharon's plan calling the proposed pullout "historic and courageous actions."

"In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949," Mr. Bush said.

When asked directly about the right of Israel to maintain some settlements Mr. Bush said that final decisions must wait for "final status" negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis on the creation of a Palestinian state.

"It is now up to responsible Palestinians, caring Europeans, the United Nations, to step in and create such a state," Mr. Bush said.

The president also seemed to back Israel's demand that Palestinians not be guaranteed a right of return to land that is now Israel.

Mr. Bush's support is expected to help convince doubting members of Sharon's own conservative Likud Party, especially Finance Minister and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will vote on Sharon's plan May 2.

While polls show that a majority of Israelis support Sharon's plan, many leading Likud Party members oppose any withdrawal by Israel from the Gaza Strip.

By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra

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