

US secretary of state seeks to impose Israeli diktats on Palestinians

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United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was busy “lowering expectations” after her five-day tour of the Middle East. In truth, Israel had its expectations fully realised. And, amongst the Palestinians, only the Abbas regime would have even entertained the possibility of any other outcome.

Last week’s tour was to promote and prepare for President Bush’s planned Middle East summit in Maryland late November. By the end of the week, Rice was denying that the summit had been postponed until December, because no invitations had been sent yet.

Even before negotiations began, *Haaretz* reported sources “in the [Israeli] Prime Minister’s Bureau” stating that Rice had no intention of imposing on Israel “anything that will not be acceptable to it.” She gave virtually every assurance demanded by the coalition government of Ehud Olmert, including the Likud-led opposition’s insistence that there would be no talk of “dividing Jerusalem.”

Rice made clear that Palestinian demands for a document addressing future borders, Israel’s West Bank wall, Palestinian prisoners, refugees and Jerusalem on a set timeline would be denied in favour of the general statement insisted on by Israel. “We’re at the beginning of a process,” she told reporters in Jerusalem. Following talks with Olmert on October 14, she said that it was very unlikely that there will be any “breakthroughs” on Jerusalem.

In contrast, she virtually instructed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to sign up to whatever was on offer and “to make every possible effort to ensure the success” of the Maryland conference. “We frankly have better things to do than invite people to Annapolis for a photo op,” she told reporters.

Abbas was left floundering, having been exposed once more as a Western dupe. He was forced to warn that the Palestinians would not attend the conference without there being a “clear document and deadline to reach a definitive result.”

Such an open rift with Washington is unlikely. What is certain is that, should a peace conference be convened, Abbas and other Arab leaders would attend only in order to attempt to impose a rotten compromise on an increasingly restive Palestinian population. To this end, they are making every effort to dress up the US in the garb of an honest broker. Egyptian Foreign Minister Abul-Gheit said at a joint press conference with Rice, “This American administration is saying that it is serious about achieving the mission, and I cannot doubt what they are telling me. I have to

believe them.”

Abbas’s key advisers were clear about the implications of failure.

Palestinian Information and Foreign Minister Riyad Al-Maliki warned that, “without a document to resolve this conflict, we can’t go to the conference next month.”

Ahmed Qurei, the former prime minister appointed as chief Palestinian negotiator, said that “If the talks fail, we can expect a third and much more severe intifada.”

Saeb Erekat, Abbas’s longtime adviser, said that the fate of the entire Middle East was in the balance. “So this region either goes in the direction of peace, moderation, democracy, stability or it goes in the direction of extremism, violence, counter-violence and deterioration. If we fail, God help us. I think the consequences will be much bigger than Palestinians and Israelis.”

In any event, the failure feared by the PA seems inevitable. Rice made no actual demands on the Israelis, contrary to the media’s efforts to emphasise whatever disagreements there were between the US and Israel. Indeed the only controversy that arose during her visit was provoked by comments made by Barak and his right-wing coalition partner, the Minister of Strategic Affairs, Avigdor Liebermann of Yisrael Beitenu.

On Monday, the prime minister had indicated his support for proposals, made by Lieberman and others within his Kadima party, to relinquish control of so-called “fringe neighbourhoods” in East Jerusalem. “Was it necessary to include Shuafat refugee camp, Arab al-Suwahara and Walajeh as part of Jerusalem? I admit, there are some legitimate questions to be asked about that,” Olmert said.

Olmert’s motivation was to help ensure the Jewish domination of Jerusalem by relinquishing control of neighbourhoods that are home to 170,000 Palestinians. As Lieberman stated bluntly later that week, “There is no reason for us to finance refugee camps like Shoafat, and they should be transferred to Palestinian control.”

Nevertheless, opposition Likud officials almost immediately urged both the religious party Shas and Yisrael Beitenu to quit the government over Olmert’s “declared intention” to divide Jerusalem. Somewhat bizarrely, given Liebermann’s position, both parties duly threatened to do so.

On Wednesday, President Shimon Peres denied that the government has any intention of dividing Jerusalem. This did not stop a petition being signed by more than half of the 120 Knesset members, including at least 15 members of Olmert’s Kadima and several Cabinet ministers. Kadima Minister Shaul Mofaz told

Israel Radio that Jerusalem is not negotiable. Under Israeli law, any territorial concession on Jerusalem must be approved by an absolute majority of parliamentarians.

For his part, Olmert used the issue to his advantage, asking Rice to stop pressuring Israel given the “stiff opposition” he faced within his own government and in the Knesset. He even arranged meetings between Rice and Lieberman and Eli Yeshai of Shas, who warned her that the government would collapse if “core” final-status issues were discussed in the Annapolis conference. Yishai subsequently told *Haaretz* that if the division of Jerusalem is even mentioned at Annapolis, Shas will leave the government coalition.

The dispute involving jurisdiction over a few Palestinian neighbourhoods all but drowned out the actual statements made by Peres on Jerusalem—that the city’s holy sites must remain under Israeli sovereignty and that the capital must remain united, with a strong Jewish majority and security for its inhabitants.

To assert Jewish control over Temple Mount, the site of the Al Aqsa mosque, would of itself make an agreement almost impossible. This is understood by Israel. A decision to renew excavations to prepare the construction of a new bridge between the Western Wall and the Temple Mount was postponed immediately prior to Rice’s visit only after warnings that it could spark riots and exacerbate tensions immediately prior to the Annapolis summit. It was decided that this was too obvious a provocation. (More likely is that Israel might act on its threat to carry out a major military incursion against Hamas in Gaza.)

The efforts to secure permanent Jewish control of Temple Mount and other religious sites are one aspect of Israel’s plan to permanently annexe not only the whole of Jerusalem, but vast swathes of the West Bank.

The PA is formally calling for sovereignty over all the lands occupied in the 1967 Six-Day War, with East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. In a television interview, Abbas said, “We have 6,205 square kilometres in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We want it as it is.”

However, Abbas, Qurei and the leadership of Fatah have made clear that they are amenable to a “land swap” of some 2 percent of the West Bank. They are particularly keen to do a deal with Israel that they hope would undermine their rival Hamas, which presently has total control of Gaza. Even so, not even they could easily sign up to the actual settlement Israel is going about establishing—by creating “facts on the ground”—for fear of also losing political control of the West Bank.

On September 24, Israeli General Gadi Sh’mani signed an order to confiscate 1,100 dunnum (275 acres) of land in the E1 area of the Maale Edumim Jewish settlement. The confiscation affects the Palestinian villages of Abu Dis, Arab a Sawakh’reh, Nebi Musa and Talkhan al Khamar. Also affected is the Palestinian town of Eizarrya, where one local resident said, “Eizarrya will collapse completely, Eizarrya will die. With one wall and another wall, everything is going to be like a prison.”

The justification for this latest action is the building of a road to be used by Palestinians. But this is only in order to legitimise banning Palestinians from travelling on the present road network linking Jerusalem to Maale Adumim, which is to be expanded by 3,500 dwelling units. This would definitively end all territorial

continuity of the Palestinian suburbs of Jerusalem, at a stroke rendering impossible the ostensible plan for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem that is at least nominally endorsed by the US “Road Map.”

The Associated Press reported that Israel is seeking some 6 to 8 percent of the West Bank, according to Palestinian negotiating documents in its possession. This makes clear that Israel intends to maintain control of all its major West Bank settlements, home to 250,000 Israelis. In exchange for the West Bank land, Olmert is considering transferring to the Palestinians a strip of land between the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which are divided by around 40 kilometres of Israeli territory.

However, Olmert also insists that the *exact* amount of territory he is demanding should be decided in future negotiations. Talk of 6 to 8 percent of the West Bank does not include East Jerusalem, where an additional 250,000 Israelis have moved in as settlers. This represents an additional 9.5 percent of Palestinian land, and their proposed capital.

In addition Israel’s so-called Security Wall, which already consolidates the seizure of much West Bank land, was originally intended to permanently separate the Jordan Valley from the rest of the West Bank and make it permanently Israel’s “eastern border.” The plan was temporarily shelved due to international objections to the Security Wall’s route, but Israel still controls most of the strip except for a small part around the town of Jericho and imposes harsh restrictions on Palestinians. Its permanent annexation would bring the West Bank land controlled by Israel to well over 40 percent and leave the Palestinians in a number of divided cantons, deprived of productive land and totally dependent on Israel for power, water and employment.

Israel has also insisted that any “provisional state” will be “fully demilitarised” and that it will continue to control all borders and air space. On her flight from Israel to London to meet with Jordan’s King Abdullah II, who has signed up to attend the Maryland conference, Rice indicated that the US is ready to accede to these demands as well. She told reporters that she sympathised with Israel’s fears of the threat posed by any withdrawal from the territories.

“If, in fact, they’re going to be asked to withdraw from the West Bank at some point, what does that mean for the security of Israel? That’s a fair question. It really is,” she said. “They [Israel] had the withdrawal from Lebanon and it brought instability in Lebanon. They had the withdrawal from the Gaza, and look what happened in Gaza.”



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