

Israel to expand its settlements

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to submit to US President Barack Obama's demand for a complete cessation to settlement expansion and the building of new settlements in the West Bank.

Hilary Clinton, US Secretary of State, reinforced Obama's demand, saying, "Not some settlements, not outposts, not natural growth exceptions".

The Obama administration's public opposition to Israel's settlement expansion is bound up with attempts to fashion a more acceptable face for US imperialism so that its Arab allies can justify their stance in the aftermath of Iraq. Washington's pose as an advocate of a just settlement for the Palestinians has no credibility if it allows without protest the continued expansion of settlements that break up the contiguity of the West Bank and make any putative Palestinian entity unviable.

But since US commitment to Israel remains an "unbreakable bond", as Obama insisted in his June 4 speech at Cairo University, his statements are devoid of any substantive content. Like all previous US administrations, Obama will publicly condemn settlement expansion while privately accepting it.

Netanyahu has made clear that he will brook no restrictions on the growth of existing settlements. He and his right wing cabinet are determined to press ahead with plans to expand the settlements via "natural growth". He said, "We won't establish new settlements, but there is no logic in not providing an answer to natural expansion."

Regarding East Jerusalem, which Israel annexed in 1967, Netanyahu said, "It is not a settlement and we will continue to build there."

Netanyahu formally agreed to build no new settlements, but the construction of a new settlement, Maskiot, near Palestine's border with Jordan, has begun.

Israeli authorities have also confiscated land in Qatayen, in the Jenin District, which residents fear is for a new settlement. One of the landowners told *Al-Ayam*, the Bahraini daily newspaper, "The officers ordered the owners to take all that they need from the land because in 45 days after this period, the [Israeli] army will take it over. I have 60 dunams here that are included in the confiscation order. And all my land is planted

with olive trees. This is one of the largest portions of my income. We have all the documents of ownership, and we informed Qadora Faris, the governor of the district and Palestinian side in the District Coordination Office as such."

Settlers from Karmel, near the Palestinian city of Yatta in the Hebron District, recently finished building a new road to the east and west of the settlement bloc. The road is three kilometres long. Twenty Palestinian dunams were confiscated for the road. This illustrates a crucial point. While the settlements take up less than three percent of the West Bank, due to the extensive network of roads reserved for the settlers' use and security buffer zones of 50-70 metres on each side of the road that restrict Palestinian access to their own lands, Israeli settlements, roads and the buffer zones take up more than 40 percent of the West Bank. In August 2008, the bypass roads covered 794 kilometres.

Netanyahu has agreed to dismantle 22 of the 100 or so settlement outposts in the West Bank in the coming weeks that have not been authorised by the Interior Ministry. In 2002, Israel promised to dismantle all the outposts built after March 2001 as part of the US sponsored Road Map to a negotiated two-state solution, a plan conditional upon full Palestinian compliance with US-Israeli dictates before any asymmetric negotiations would even begin. But Israeli premier Ariel Sharon jettisoned the Road Map and its meagre restraints in favour of unilateral disengagement, with the full approval of all the major powers, a policy it then abandoned after the disastrous war against Lebanon in 2006.

In the last ten days, Israel has removed three outposts in the West Bank, prompting a furious reaction from the ultra-nationalists who have threatened to return to the sites and rebuild the settlements, as has happened in the past. Settlers have clashed with Israeli soldiers and police, with one group blocking the main entry into Jerusalem. Two new outposts have gone up, near Shiloh and Nachliel. Settlers attacked Palestinian farmers in the northern West Bank and clashed with security forces.

For years, settlers have attacked and killed Palestinians, damaged their crops and torn up their olive groves. The Israeli authorities routinely turn a blind eye to even the most egregious crimes. Many acts of violence are not investigated or result in no charges being laid. Yesh Din, the human rights group, found that in 2005, 90 percent of the cases of violence or injury

against Palestinians were closed without charges. In the rare cases where settlers are charged and convicted, they are given extremely light sentences.

This is in marked contrast to the treatment meted out to Palestinians suspected of attacking Israelis: the authorities invoke all means, including curfews for days on end, intensive searches and arrests, maximum sentencing if convicted, detention without trial, torture, house demolitions and expulsion.

While the Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank are subject to military rule, the settlers are subject to Israeli law and therefore have vastly more protection should they be charged than Palestinian defendants. The different legal systems in operation in the occupied territories for the two populations, depending upon nationality, violates the principle of equality before the law and the principle of territoriality according to which people living in the same territory must be subject to the same legal system.

Ultra-right wing settlers have sent death threats to the army's top general in charge of forces in the West Bank, according to the Army Radio. A letter addressed to Israel Defence Forces GCO Central Command, Gadi Shamni, said, "You are tainted with anti-Semitism and hatred of real Jews. The Arabs are your cherished ones, these sons of Satan and whoever supports them is himself a Satan and a son of Satan, and this is you. We will know how to get to you, too." The letter also included threats against the general's family.

For more than four decades Israel has defied international law that prohibits the annexation of and the building on land taken through conquest, building settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Egypt and Syria. The settlements in Egypt and Gaza were dismantled in 1981 and 2005 respectively. Israel redrew the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to incorporate huge swathes of the West Bank, almost to the river Jordan.

By the end of 2008, the 121 settlements in the West Bank were home to 285,800 Israelis, and the 12 in East Jerusalem were home to 193,700, or nearly 500,000 people in all, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. This is likely to be an underestimate since the records are always out of date. In addition to these settlements, designated by the Ministry of the Interior as "communities", there are about 100 unrecognised settlements, referred to as outposts.

The number of settlers doubled between the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords that was supposed to lead to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and 2000—the most concerted expansion since 1967. New building has continued since the Road Map in 2002.

The settler population has grown consistently by between 4-6 percent per year over the last two decades, a much higher rate than the 1.5 percent growth in Israel as a whole. This is not "natural growth". The settlers do not have a higher birth rate than Israelis living in Israel. Statistics show that thousands of new homes remain empty. Many more would have remained

empty were it not for the numerous financial and social incentives to encourage Israelis and new immigrants to move to the settlements. Some 40 percent of the settlements' population growth is derived from such newcomers.

Since East Jerusalem was annexed in 1967, Israel's has sought to increase the number of Israeli Jews and reduce the number of Palestinians living there in order to prevent any challenge to Israeli sovereignty over the city. At the end of 2005, the population of Jerusalem was 723,700, of whom two thirds were Israeli Jews and one third Palestinian. Nearly 60 percent of the population live on land annexed in 1967, of whom nearly half are Jews, such is the extent of settlement building in Jerusalem.

In order to maintain a Jewish majority, since the Palestinians have a higher birth rate than the Israelis, Israel has:

- Isolated East Jerusalem from the rest of the West bank by building the Wall.
- Refused building and development permits to Palestinians and demolished hundreds of homes, forcing them to live outside Jerusalem even though they hold Israeli identity cards and receive services in the city.
- Revoked residency permits of absentee Palestinians or those unable to prove that the centre of their life is Jerusalem.
- Provided lower budgetary resources to the Palestinian communities, starving them of social and physical infrastructure.
- Expanded Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, surrounding the Palestinian communities and limiting their expansion.

All of this is public knowledge. It has been extensively documented by US strategists such as Anthony Cordesman, of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, which has close links with the CIA. It has been financed by \$3 billion worth of US aid to Israel, equal to \$500 for every Israeli, about which Obama has said nothing.



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