

Israeli-Palestinian talks part of preparations for US aggression against Iran

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The Middle East Quartet made up of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia said last Friday that talks would take place in Washington on September 2. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas had agreed to attend.

The meeting is the product of massive pressure placed upon the PA regime by the US to go along with a diplomatic charade. The Quartet offered Abbas a suitable cover, with references to a comprehensive settlement ending Israel's occupation and resulting in "the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state" within a year. Abbas needed this in order to justify a resumption of talks that ended after the December 2008 Israeli invasion of Gaza.

But, with far more legitimacy, Netanyahu was able to cite Clinton's call for negotiations "without preconditions"—the key Israeli demand. This gives carte blanche to Israel to carry on its land grabs in East Jerusalem and on the West Bank through its programme of settlement construction.

The Palestinians initially refused to resume any talks until Israel declared a freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In March, however, Israel announced plans for building 1,600 new housing units, formally rejecting US demands for a freeze on settlements in East Jerusalem.

The US secured the resumption of "proximity talks" (not face to face) by initially promising the Palestinians that there would be no work on the proposed Ramat Shlomo project for two years. But all Netanyahu agreed was a 10-month moratorium on settlement construction that has never been honoured and is due to expire at the end of September.

The day after the talks were announced, Netanyahu stated his intention to end the moratorium on settlement construction. In response, Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, warned, "If the Israeli government decides to announce new tenders on September 26, then we won't be able to continue with the talks."

With most informed commentators on the region noting that there has been no change on the ground to justify talks and that they are being held only to placate the US, there was a notable silence amongst the majority of the Middle East regimes.

For the US, the negotiations serve the essential purpose of lending credence to its claim to be an honest broker in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. But maintaining this pretence is equally important to Washington's Arab allies, who need some public justification for collaborating with aggressive US moves against Iran—up to and including a possible military strike.

The past month has seen repeated threats levelled against Tehran by top US officials, including President Obama, who warned that "all options" were open if Iran did not abandon its nuclear programme. A report by the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) stated that "American credibility ... would be seriously diminished if, after repeatedly issuing warnings to the contrary, it permitted Tehran to cross the nuclear threshold," and that the US must be prepared for "extraordinary action" centring on "visible, credible preparations for a military option."

Israel has long been advocating a military strike on Iran, but there are intense manoeuvres to secure the collusion and even active participation of the Arab regimes—focusing, in particular, on offering massive arms deals.

The US has concluded a 10-year \$60 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia to supply 84 of the latest F-15 jets with onboard targeting systems, similar to those used by the US to destroy Iraq's radar and missile systems in 2003. The US will also refurbish many of the Saudis' older F-15s.

The deal includes about 70 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters and up to 60 Longbow Apache attack helicopters, plus flight simulators, spare parts and long-term support for the planes and helicopters. It follows a \$177 million deal earlier this year to supply the Saudi National Guard with 2,742 anti-tank missiles.

This is one of the largest ever arms deals and the first

major new arms procurement deal with Saudi Arabia since 1992. According to the Pentagon, it is part of an effort to “deter Iran and to counter Al Qaeda in Yemen.”

US defence officials have said various agreements are in preparation with other allies in the Gulf. In the last year, the US has agreed a \$220 million deal with Jordan for the delivery of more than 80 advanced rocket launchers, and a \$338 million contract for 1,808 Javelin anti-tank missiles and 162 launchers with night vision systems.

It has signed a \$290 million agreement with the UAE for 1,600 laser-guided “smart” bombs, 800 one-ton bombs, and 400 bunker buster bombs, a deal which Washington justified in terms of building up the Gulf state “against threats from Iran.”

Earlier this year, the Obama administration announced the sale of 24 F-16 jet fighters at a cost of \$3.2 billion to make Egypt—in the Pentagon’s words—a “more valuable partner in the Middle East.” Egypt will receive four batteries of highly advanced Harpoon Block II anti-ship cruise missiles, four fast missile boats “in order to better defend access to the Suez Canal,” and 450 Hellfire anti-tank missiles. The US will also sell the Mubarak regime 156 jet engines for F-16 jets, valued at \$750 million.

Egypt controls the flow of oil and warships through the Suez Canal. According to Global Research, last June, “Egypt reportedly allowed one Israeli and 11 US ships to pass through the Suez Canal in ... an apparent sign to Iran.”

The US has in addition armed the Lebanese government against Hezbollah and the Fatah-led PA in order to undermine Fatah’s rival, Hamas. Both Hezbollah and Hamas are backed by Tehran and could open a second front against Israel in the event of an Israeli or US attack on Iran.

This has been combined with efforts to divide Syria from Iran by offering various incentives, including a final peace settlement with Israel.

The arms sales are a continuation and expansion under Obama of a strategy devised by the Bush administration to boost the Sunni Muslim states against predominantly Shia Iran. In a report to Congress, the Pentagon argued that providing the Arab countries with advanced arms “is part of Washington’s efforts to boost the moderate axis in the Middle East and to deter Iran.”

A senior US source told *Ha’aretz*, “We believe that there are many cases in which the Iranian threat commits us to strengthen the ability of states in the region to defend themselves.”

Israel has formally protested the arms deals, soliciting promises by the Pentagon that they will not “alter the military balance in the region” and references to Congress’s power to block shipments that would undermine Israel’s military superiority.

In reality, the F-15s to be sold to the Saudis will not be equipped with long-range weapons systems and other arms, in deference to Israel’s insistence on maintaining its military supremacy in the region. The US is offering Tel Aviv 20 F-35s, its most sophisticated plane, known as the Joint Strike Fighter, with stealth technology that will allow Israel to evade radar detection and anti-aircraft fire and give it an important advantage if Russia has supplied Iran with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, as Tehran claimed last week.

Washington is also strengthening Israel’s defences by funding the joint development by Boeing and Israel Aerospace Industries of the Arrow-3 anti-missile interceptor at a cost of \$100 million, and providing an additional \$205 million for Israel’s Iron Dome anti-rocket system. This is aimed at providing Israel with a protective shield against rockets in the event of a retaliatory attack by Iran or others.

Israel’s covert relations with Saudi Arabia belie its official protests. On June 12, the *Times* (of London) quoted a US defence official stating that Riyadh had agreed to allow Israeli bombers to fly over its territory in order to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities, and even “carried out tests to make certain its own jets are not scrambled and missile defence systems not activated.”

“This has all been done with the agreement of the [US] State Department,” the official said.

These are the political realities underlying the announcement of “peace talks” between Israel and the PA. They are little more than a cover for ever more advanced preparations for war.

The *Moscow Times* of August 17 expressed the concerns of one of the US’s main rivals over these developments, warning, “The political situation in the region and especially Israel’s foreign policy supported by the US may lead to new local armed conflicts, and today there are all the chances that they may grow into a regional war in which many countries will be involved.”



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