

# US drops demand for Israel to freeze settlement building

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The US government has dropped its demand that Israel halt the building of new Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. An editorial in the British-based *Guardian* noted that the Middle East “peace process died a quiet, undramatic death” with this announcement.

Some half-a-million Israeli settlers now live in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which Israel seized in the Six-day War in 1967. The figure has tripled since the Oslo Accord was signed in 1993. Settlements now control some 42 percent of the West Bank, according to the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem. All the settlements on occupied land are in violation of international law.

The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) had insisted the building of settlements be halted before it sits down to face-to-face negotiations with the Israeli government. The Obama administration initially backed this appeal. In a speech at Cairo University in 2009, Obama insisted that building should cease.

“The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements,” he said. “This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.” But in December of this year, the White House abandoned even a nominal attempt to impose a halt to further settlement building. A US government spokesman made the announcement, “We have been pursuing a moratorium as a means to create conditions for a return to meaningful and sustained negotiations. After a considerable effort, we have concluded that this does not create a firm basis to work towards our shared goal of a framework agreement.”

The US had offered a number of incentives to persuade Israel to halt its building programme. It agreed to subsidise the sale of fighter jets worth \$3

billion. It endorsed the Israeli occupation of the Jordan Valley. Arabs are currently being moved out of this area, in preparation for a major settlement-building programme. Washington also agreed to continue to veto any anti-Israel resolutions at the United Nations Security Council. None of these sweeteners could persuade the Israeli government to play ball.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted that there was no change in policy and that all the parties to the peace process must address the “core issues”, including the question of settlements. But Israel’s refusal to accept even a temporary halt to building expresses the entirely fraudulent character of the whole peace process. It is not a question of the peace process having died, but of it being exposed for what it always was.

Washington’s move has underlined just how servile the Palestinian National Authority is to US dictates. President Mahmoud Abbas’s response was a threat to dissolve the PNA if the talks collapse and hand control back to Israel. All he has proved is that, as far as the Fatah leadership is concerned, either it is backed by the US or there is no alternative to direct rule by Tel Aviv. In any event, Washington will view his threat as empty since he is entirely dependent on its good will for his own survival. PNA leaders are now refusing to negotiate, at least in public, but talks will doubtless continue indirectly and in private as they always have done.

The initial promise of a 10-month moratorium was enough to bring the PNA to the negotiating table. Hillary Clinton declared that this was an “unprecedented concession” on Israel’s part. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused point-blank to halt building in East Jerusalem, and many other projects continued. Building never stopped,

and the PNA was well aware of that fact.

The Israeli human rights organisation Peace Now reported that a month after the start of the supposed freeze on building, work had started on 600 Israeli homes in the West Bank. This amounted to a rate of building four times faster than before the freeze began.

The Israeli authorities are pressing ahead with land appropriations, evictions, demolitions and new developments in Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and Har Homa in East Jerusalem. A \$23 million, five-year project to renovate and develop the area surrounding the Western Wall in the Old City in East Jerusalem has been approved.

Mahmud Zahar, one of the founders of Hamas, derided Abbas's attempts to establish peace talks with Israel. Hamas was elected as the government of the Gaza Strip in 2006, but has been denied international recognition. Europe and the US denounce it as a terrorist organisation. In an interview with AFP, Zahar insisted that Hamas could win despite its isolation: "They told me...you cannot stay isolated and you are not going to survive more than two months, now we finished five years and we survived, and we stayed, and we faced two wars. So we can stay, and we can withstand, and we can win."

Despite Zahar's defiant pose, Hamas has no alternative perspective for the Palestinians. Zahar compared the position of the Palestinians to that of Egypt and Algeria, which, he said, both won independence after being occupied for centuries. The comparison is a relevant one. Egypt and Algeria did indeed win independence. Yet both are now firm allies of the United States. Diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks reveal that Washington now considers Algeria to be its most important ally in the fight against Al Qaeda in the Maghreb. Egypt has long been close to the US.

In both cases, the mass of the population is suppressed by an elite group that enriches itself at the expense of the majority. By citing the examples of Egypt and Algeria, Zahar revealed how Hamas envisages the internal and external relations of a Palestinian state. It would be an oppressive semi-colonial regime. The kind of independence that Hamas is seeking would still leave Palestinians subjugated to the world market and to the demands of the US and other major powers. The lesson of the last half-century

and more of world history is that even the most intransigent nationalist programme cannot secure genuine independence for oppressed peoples.

To the extent Hamas enjoys any degree of independent action at present, it is only to the extent that it is backed by Iran. But this only raises more urgently the need for the working class to establish an independent political axis for its struggles. Obama's posturing as an honest broker was an attempt to provide a cover for the Arab regimes for Washington's ongoing plans for aggressive action against Iran, up to and including war. The settlement freeze and a promise of a peace settlement within a year would allow the Arab regimes to avert popular anger over their collaboration with the US.

A year and a half on, the urgency of attacking Iran has become greater than ever for the US. Netanyahu has called Obama's bluff. He has calculated that both Washington and the Arab states are sufficiently eager to attack Iran that they will not hold out for a deal with the PNA. The closer Obama comes to attacking Iran, the more prepared he has become to allow Israel a blank cheque where the occupied territories are concerned because Israel is the most likely instrument through which a military strike will be mounted on Tehran and its nuclear facilities.



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