

Further Israeli provocations on Jerusalem Day

Jean Shaoul, Chris Marsden
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Yesterday's Jerusalem Day was an extraordinary political provocation, even by the normal standards of the event.

The celebration, marking 44 years since the "reunification" of Jerusalem, or more properly its seizure during the 1967 War, saw a heavily-policed march of thousands—composed predominantly of ultra-orthodox religious layers and right-wing settlers—through the Jewish enclave of Sheikh Jarrah, located in the Arab east of the city. The Palestinian Authority wants East Jerusalem to be the capital of any Palestinian state. Sheikh Jarrah has been the location of repeated clashes. Over 3,000 officers, including border police and undercover units, were on patrol across Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a special session of the Knesset, declaring that the reunification of Jerusalem after the Six-Day War gave the city the "momentum to develop". Referring to the ongoing illegal settlement construction, he proclaimed, "We are building and we will build still more... A real city is being built here."

The previous evening Netanyahu pledged that Jerusalem would never be divided.

He was backed in the Knesset by Kadima opposition leader Tzipi Livni, who proclaimed that the unity of all Jewish people was essential at a time when some are "questioning Jerusalem as the capital of Israel".

"There is no 'their' Jerusalem and 'our' Jerusalem," she declared.

Last week, Netanyahu, in a speech to the US Congress, ruled out any possibility of a Palestinian state and insisted there would be no return to the 1967 borders, no Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, no return of any of the Palestinian refugees or their descendants to their homes in Israel, no military withdrawal from the Jordan River that would form the eastern boundary of any Palestinian state, and no negotiation with a Palestinian government that included or was supported by Hamas.

Speaking about Jerusalem, Netanyahu said, "The government is obligated to building Jerusalem, as [Jerusalem] is the heart of the nation... It must never again be divided".

He insisted that settlement building in the West Bank would continue, saying that "in Judea and Samaria, the Jewish people are not foreign occupiers".

Describing the West Bank by its biblical name is meant to repudiate its international legal status as an illegally occupied territory. It effectively stakes an Israeli claim to all Palestinian territories, which can be activated whenever Tel Aviv chooses.

Netanyahu's speech received rapturous applause and was punctuated with repeated standing ovations. Back in Israel, a public opinion poll conducted by *Ha'aretz* found that his approval ratings had risen from 38 to 51 percent in one week. He has the wind in his sails, thanks not only to his close connections with the Republican right and the bi-partisan support he enjoys in Washington, but above all the abject crawling this elicited from President Barack Obama.

In a March 19 speech on the Middle East, Obama had stated innocuously, "We believe the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps."

"Mutually agreed swaps" is nothing but a codified reference to legitimising the illegal land seizures established by Israel as facts on the ground. But Netanyahu chose to attack Obama for his reference to the 1967 borders, which the Israeli prime minister said were "indefensible". He was rewarded by an ingratiating speech from Obama before the right-wing American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), pledging that the "commitment of the United States to the security of Israel is ironclad."

Any final settlement, he added, would have to take into account "the new demographic realities on the ground."

There is, however, an extraordinary element of hubris in Netanyahu's obdurate stance.

Obama has ultimately succeeded in undermining his key Middle East ally by successfully debunking all claims that his administration is in the business of pressurising Israel into an amicable and just settlement with the Palestinians. Given that Netanyahu has made abundantly clear that Israel is seeking no such solution, it is clear to all that the "peace process" is a fiction and that there not even the remotest possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

Such is the extent of Israeli settlement construction, roads, security zones and land seizure that less than 40 percent of the West Bank is now under Palestinian control and even this is non-contiguous, while Gaza is completely cut off from the

West Bank.

Obama has therefore left the Arab bourgeoisie, particularly the Egyptian and Palestinian bourgeoisie, completely exposed by their dealings with Israel. This in turn means that they must at least seek to distance themselves from Washington and Tel Aviv if they are to retain any credibility or hope of stemming the ongoing political radicalisation of the Arab masses.

Last week, in a move strongly opposed by Israel, Egypt reopened its border with Gaza at Rafah, allowing hundreds of Palestinians to leave the enclave which had been under a tight Israeli blockade, with full support from ousted President Hosni Mubarak, for nearly four years. Women, children and men over 40 years of age will be able to cross into Egypt without restriction, but men under 40, a significant proportion of Gaza's population, will need a visa. Commercial traffic will still not be allowed, a provision that maintains a decisive element of the blockade.

Egypt's partial lifting of restrictions follows its brokering of a reconciliation deal between Hamas, which controls Gaza, and Fatah, which controls the West Bank. The two rival Palestinian factions are expected to announce a transitional government by June 6 to lay the basis for elections later in the year.

This follows the arrest of Sameh Fahmy, the former energy minister and five other senior energy officials, including Mubarak's two sons, on corruption charges over Egypt's natural gas deal with Israel. Under a 15-year-deal negotiated in 2008, Israel gets 40 percent of its natural gas from Egypt at deeply discounted rates. There have been two explosions in February and April on the pipeline carrying gas to Israel and Jordan, believed to have been carried out by impoverished Bedouins angry over the government's persistent discrimination against them. The second explosion has cut off supplies, and Cairo has rejected any obligation to pay compensation for the non-delivery of gas.

Israel's relations with Turkey are also becoming increasingly fraught. Another aid flotilla, "Freedom Flotilla 2", filled with medicines, construction materials and other essential goods routinely banned by Israel, once again led by IHH, the pro-Palestinian Turkish Islamic organization, is due to reach Gaza later in June. Last year, Israel illegally seized the Mavi Marmora, a Turkish registered ship, in international waters, and nine Turkish activists died in a confrontation with navy commandos.

Israel is preparing to block Freedom Flotilla 2. Netanyahu said that if diplomatic efforts to stop the flotilla failed, Israel would use force against anyone who disobeyed its navy's orders and tried to land on Gaza's shore.

The European Union and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon have both urged that the flotilla be cancelled, but Turkey has refused. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that "No democratic country can think that they have full control over these NGOs (non-government organizations)" and insisted that Israel should end its blockade of the 1.5 million Palestinians

living in Gaza.

More serious still for the regime in Tel Aviv, the government has faced ongoing demonstrations in the East Jerusalem villages of Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and now Ras al-Amud over house demolitions and evictions to make way for Israeli settlements on land incorporated into Israel after the 1967 war.

Tensions were already high prior to Jerusalem Day, following the mass demonstrations by Palestinians on May 15 to mark the 63rd anniversary of the founding of Israel, known as the Nakba, or catastrophe. Israel killed at least 15 Palestinians and wounded many more involved in protests at the border posts facing Lebanon, Syria and Gaza. These were the first joint protests involving Palestinians outside Israel and the occupied territories. They also marked the first time in 38 years that the uneasy peace between Israel and Syria had been breached.

Since Syria tightly controls the border with Israel, it is likely that the government of Bashar al-Assad facilitated the passage of Palestinian refugees resident in Syria to divert attention from its own bloody crackdown on internal opposition to the regime and to warn Israel not to support the opposition—because if his government fell, it would destabilise the region. Just days before, Assad's billionaire cousin, Rami Makhlouf, warned in an interview with the *New York Times* that Syria's security was also Israel's security.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who has functioned as Washington's and Tel Aviv's stooge, has said that without a deal with Israel, he will seek recognition of a Palestinian state from the UN General Assembly in September. The Israeli army is preparing to counter potential unrest in the West Bank after any UN vote.



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