

Settlements authorised as Kerry tries to restart Israeli-Palestinian talks

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Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government has begun the legal process to retrospectively authorise four outposts as settlements in the Occupied West Bank.

The move came on the eve of United States Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to the Middle East. Kerry's muted response makes clear that both the US and Israel have rejected any notion of establishing a truncated Palestinian state alongside Israel.

All settlements and outposts built on occupied land are in violation of international law.

Many of the 100 or so outposts, established on hilltops by nationalist zealots, now have cement houses, paved roads, playgrounds and day-care centres, because the Israeli authorities are providing the resources to link them to water, sanitation and electricity, and to fund the housing. Their purpose is to establish "new facts on the ground" that make it impossible to negotiate a mini-Palestinian state, as anticipated under the Oslo Accords signed two decades ago, in the West Bank, occupied by Israel since the 1967 war.

The government instructed the Civil Administration, the unit within the Defence Ministry that administers the West Bank, to initiate the legal process. Its intention to legalise four of the outposts in defiance of court orders dating back to 2003 only emerged from the government's official response to a Peace Now petition to the Supreme Court. The settlement watchdog had petitioned the court to effect the evacuation of six of these outposts, including Givat Assaf, east of Ramallah, which had had a court order for its demolition, Haroeh, north of Ramallah, Maale Rehavam, east of Bethlehem, and Mitzpe Lachish, south of Hebron.

US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki issued a pro-forma statement stating that "We don't accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity."

Israel also gave preliminary approval for nearly 300

new homes in Beit El, to re-house settlers from Ulpana, a nearby outpost, reversing an apparent moratorium on settlement construction.

All of these steps were taken as Kerry attempted to breathe life into the moribund talks between Israel and the Palestinians. The US secretary of state had announced his intention of going to Israel and to President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority, his fourth visit in his four months in office, at the end of his four-day visit to the region to lobby for further military intervention against Syria.

Peace talks with the Palestinians have only served as a cover for Israel's land grab. Numerous reports by the United Nations, European Union and NGOs have warned that Palestinian land in Area C, the rural 60 percent of the West Bank where Israel has full military and civilian control under the 1993 Oslo Accords, is under threat. Armed with military instructions, Israeli soldiers are driving Palestinians from their villages and farms and into the cities.

In addition to the 250,000 Israelis living in east Jerusalem, some 350,000 now live in settlements and outposts, twice the number of Palestinians in Area C. The government fully endorses all the settlements, including the outposts.

Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home Party, a member of Netanyahu's coalition government, wants the outright annexation of Area C to Israel. This has largely already taken place. As a senior Israeli army official explained in court recently, the army has distributed 70 percent of the land in the West Bank designated as state-owned to either the settlers or the World Zionist Organisation during the 45 years of occupation, with only one percent of the land going to the Palestinians.

According to the UN, this year alone the army has evicted 400 Palestinians and demolished 200 homes,

the fastest rate for two years. This has increased sharply since the new right-wing pro-settler government took office in late March, aided and abetted by the thuggery, intimidation and murders carried out by settlers.

Talks about a mini-Palestinian state have long served as a sop to wider public opinion in the Arab world. As such, the talks are a cynical diplomatic cover for the continued suppression of the Palestinian people by Israel and the pursuit of Washington's geo-strategic objectives of regime change in Syria and Iran.

Negotiations broke down in September 2010 over Israel's resumption of settlement construction on land in the occupied West Bank that would form a future Palestinian state. Kerry was attempting to restart the talks on the basis of a new initiative from the Arab League, which had dusted off a Saudi 2002 plan. Moshe Ya'alon, then Israeli army chief of staff and now Defence Minister, had rejected the plan, saying that Israel's highest priority was a military campaign to "sear defeat deep into the Palestinian consciousness."

This time round, under pressure from Kerry, the Arab states abandoned the notion of a Palestinian state that required Israel to return to its 1967 borders and endorsed "minor" and "comparable" land swaps. In effect, they now recognise the settlements as part of Israel and sanction a Palestinian state made up of non-contiguous bits of land.

One element in Washington's calculations is the parlous state of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and simmering discontent over the gross inequality between Abbas and his wealthy cronies and the broad mass of Palestinians who confront rising prices, particularly for electricity, and shortages of water and electricity. This situation has forced the resignation of Prime Minister and Washington protégé Salam Fayad, who has yet to be replaced. The US approved the resumption of aid to the Palestinians, enabling the PA to pass its budget for 2013 at the last moment.

Netanyahu was having none of it. He dismissed the Arab League's plan, demanding that the Palestinians must first recognise Israel as a Jewish state, a demand made of neither Egypt nor Jordan before they signed treaties with Israel. He knew full well that his settlement announcement would provoke exactly the same response as in 2010, incur no sanctions from Washington and thus pre-empt Kerry's charade.

There was no dissent from within his cabinet. Tzipi

Livni, Israel's justice minister charged with any possible negotiations with the Palestinians, and the only member keen to pursue an agreement with the Palestinians, said Israel could not accept the Arab League's insistence that Palestinian refugees and their descendants had a right to return to Israel.

There is likewise no peace lobby outside the governmental parties, including the Labour Party and Peace Now, much less the leaders of Israel's 2011 mass social protest movement, mainly based upon middle class layers.

Kerry went along with Netanyahu, praising him for the "seriousness" with which he was looking at ways to revitalise peace "hopes". He claimed that Israel could stop some of the settlements being built in the West Bank, but refused to demand a full settlement freeze, saying this issue could best be handled after restarting the talks, whose task was to agree borders.



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