

Israeli-Palestinian talks a cover for US aggression in Middle East

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Washington is using peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to provide a cover for its pursuit of hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

For the Obama administration, the talks beginning Monday are a necessary quid pro quo for the support of Jordan's King Abdullah, the military junta in Egypt and the venal oil sheikhdoms in the Gulf for the war to unseat the Assad regime in Syria and the isolation of Iran. All these sclerotic regimes face a restive working class, for whom the Israel-Palestine conflict and the US-led interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria are explosive issues.

The talks offer nothing to the Palestinian working class except more suffering and misery, even as they give Israel everything it wants. So blatant is the cynicism and bullying on the part of both the US and its European allies that chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat had said he would not attend. Erekat, a professional windbag, will naturally attend—on the basis of having secured a promise that 104 Palestinian prisoners will be released.

He will be joined by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, confirmation that the PLO and Fatah, its dominant faction, function as little more than clients of US imperialism.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, after six visits to Israeli and Palestinian officials during his six months in office, announced that Israel and the Palestinians would resume the talks abandoned by the Palestinians at the end of September 2010. They were halted when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu provocatively ended a temporary freeze on settlement expansion.

But the proposed talks are only “preliminary talks” about talks, and the details are sketchy. According to a Palestinian official, the talks proposed by Kerry will focus on borders and security arrangements and will

last up to nine months. While he claimed that Kerry endorsed the pre-1967 lines as the basis of negotiations, there has been no formal confirmation of this. There cannot be, as Israel has categorically rejected such a position.

The Palestinians are not attending because there is anything on the table or because the talks will lead to an end to the occupation and settlements, much less an independent Palestinian state. They fear the consequences if they did not go. Kerry had made it clear that US aid worth \$500 million a year would end if they do not attend. This is under conditions where the PA is unable to pay its monthly wage bill or subsidise rising fuel costs, a key element in the soaring cost of living.

Kerry initially said Israel would release, in phases, about 80 veteran Palestinian prisoners who served more than 20 years in Israeli jails and that 350 prisoners would be released in phases over the coming months. He threw a few additional face-saving crumbs to the Palestinians, with talk of building a hotel by the Dead Sea, the lifting of some Israeli checkpoints and the development of gas fields off Gaza's coast.

The release of Palestinian prisoners, who have been in jail since before the 1993 Oslo Accords, was one of the Palestinians' three core demands, along with a freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and a Palestinian state based upon the pre-1967 borders. Israel has rejected the latter two demands out of hand. The prisoners themselves have opposed the sell-out.

The Palestinians have been forced to drop their bid to seek membership in United Nations organisations or use the International Criminal Court to press their case against Israel for the duration of the negotiations.

The US House of Representatives has introduced

measures in the foreign operations appropriations bill that would terminate all aid to the PA should it obtain full membership in the UN or UN agencies without Israel's agreement. The bill allocates \$3.1 billion aid to Israel and \$1.3 billion to Egypt.

The Arab League has endorsed the talks. Ziad Abu Zayyad, a former PA minister and negotiator, told Israel's Army Radio Sunday that Abbas came under pressure from both America and the Arab League. "The Arab League is telling him, 'You can't be seen as responsible for Kerry's failure'."

Asked about reports that Abbas faced US threats to withdraw aid if he did not enter talks, Abu Zayyad said, "Of course there was a threat of economic sanctions, as much as \$500 million per year. There was pressure related to the end of aid."

On July 16, the European Union (EU), as part of its appearance of putting pressure on Israel, published new "guidelines" banning any EU funding of grants, scholarship and prizes to Israeli institutions operating in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Syria's Golan Heights, illegally occupied since the 1967 war.

The announcement, timed to coincide with Kerry's push for talks, refers only to bodies directly under the European Commission, not member states. It will also require future EU-Israeli agreements to include a clause in which Israel accepts the EU's position that all territory captured in 1967 does not belong to Israel, a requirement that Israel has vehemently rejected.

The EU is reportedly considering new rules concerning the labelling of Israeli goods made in the occupied territories and exported to Europe that are, according to *Der Spiegel*, worth \$287 million a year. While the EU has supposedly been considering this for years, it told *Ha'aretz* that such a requirement was designed in part to stave off a more general boycott of Israel and to ensure that Israel's participation in EU projects is "not put in question."

In a separate development welcomed by Israel, the EU responded to pressure from Washington, London and Tel Aviv and put the military wing of Hezbollah, the Lebanese political party allied with Syria and Iran, on its list of terrorist organisations.

The ban entails freezing the organisation's assets and paves the way for possible travel bans, hindering its fundraising. Since it will be almost impossible to disentangle Hezbollah's military wing from its political

wing, its real purpose is to hamstring and isolate Lebanon's major political party and power broker. It sends a clear message that the EU is backing Washington and Tel Aviv, and their war on Syria and Iran.

Last month, the UN Security Council voted to extend its peacekeeping force in the Golan Heights, which monitors the 1974 disengagement accord between Syria and Israel after their 1973 war, for another six months. It authorised Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to ensure that it has the necessary resources and boosted its strength by about 300 to some 1,250 troops in the wake of Austria's withdrawal of its forces following attacks by Syrian insurgents.

The new military junta in Egypt has stepped up its presence in Sinai, destroying and flooding the tunnels linking Gaza and Egypt used to smuggle goods and circumvent Israel's six-year-long blockade and closing the border with Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, the Palestinian off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.

A mini-Palestinian state is opposed by Netanyahu's Likud and his right-wing coalition partners, Israel Beiteinu and Jewish Home. Naftali Bennett, leader of Jewish Home, has called for Israel to annex all of Area C land in the West Bank, now controlled by the military. Netanyahu declared that such a demilitarised statelet would pave the way for a population exchange and "prevent the development of a bi-national state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River", where soon the Palestinian population will form the majority.



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