

New settlements on West Bank as Israeli-Palestinian talks begin

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Just days after the preliminary “talks about talks” between Israel and the Palestinian Authority began in Washington, Israel approved new settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Palestinian negotiators have long insisted on a settlement freeze as a precondition for talks, walking out of previous talks in September 2010. Israel’s provocative move confirms that it has no intention of reaching a deal on anything other than its own terms. These include:

*The annexation of all of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians consider as their capital, and of Area C—the two thirds of the West Bank temporarily entrusted to the Israeli military under the 1993 Oslo Accords, where Israelis outnumber the 100,000 Palestinians still living there 3 to 1.

*The demilitarisation of the West Bank, whose borders will be controlled by Israel.

*The recognition of Israel as a “Jewish State”, a de facto mechanism for preventing any “return” of the 1948 and 1967 Palestinian refugees and their descendants to their former homes, and ensuring the transfer of Israeli Arabs to any putative Palestinian state.

Such a state, non-contiguous and without sovereignty, would be unacceptable to the Palestinian people, though not to large sections of the Palestinian nationalist organisation, Fatah. It relies on exploiting Palestinian cheap labour—and on handouts from the United States, Europe and the Gulf States—for its own enrichment.

The Obama administration exerted heavy pressure on the Palestinians to restart talks, which aim to provide the necessary *quid pro quo* to encourage Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf oil sheikhdoms to support a war to topple Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad and isolate Iran. All

these sclerotic regimes face a restive working class, for whom the Israel-Palestine conflict and US-led wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria are explosive issues.

The US-sponsored talks also serve to cover Israel’s ever more rapacious land grab. On Sunday, Housing Minister Uri Ariel of the pro-settler Jewish Home party gave his final approval to the construction of 1,187 apartments. Of these, 793 will be built in East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel in defiance of international law shortly after the 1967 War; 394 will be built in the West Bank settlements, including Maaleh Adumim, Efrat and Ariel. This last settlement, located in the heart of the West Bank, makes it impossible to create a contiguous Palestinian statelet.

Ariel issued a statement saying, “No country in the world takes orders from other countries where it can build and where it can’t. We will continue to market housing and build in the entire country.”

This came after the approval of hundreds more housing units in settlements and a new settlement in East Jerusalem.

A few days earlier, Israel published an expanded list of settlements (from 85 to 91) in the West Bank eligible for special government subsidies, including several previously deemed illegal—without official approval by the Israeli authorities.

The settlement expansion is part of a broader plan to drive Palestinians off their land and replace them with Israeli communities.

While this takes place, world media has focused on the release of a first group of Palestinian prisoners, 26 out of a total of 104 pledged. The US pushed for this as a “confidence building measure” to provide Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas with a fig leaf to justify returning to the talks.

Some of the prisoners had objected to their release.

The longest-serving prisoner wrote to Abbas saying they “didn’t want to be used as a bargaining chip.” The letter continued, “You should not agree with the releases to give way in any way in these peace talks.”

The prisoner release is much less than it seems. As all except one of the prisoners were arrested before 1994, eight were due for release in the next three years and two in the next six months. Few are well known. Ministers stressed that “if one of those released returned to hostile activities against Israel, he will be returned to complete his sentence.”

Israel has already backtracked on its agreement with the Obama administration, saying it would release a further 78 jailed for attacks carried out before 1993 in several stages over the next few months, “depending upon progress in the talks”. Clearly, Israel anticipates that the Palestinians will pull out as Israeli demands increase, thereby justifying its refusal to release the prisoners.

US secretary of state John Kerry had earlier said that Israel would release, in phases, about 80 veteran Palestinian prisoners who had served more than 20 years in Israeli jails and that 350 prisoners would be released in phases over the coming months.

Both the prisoner release and the settlement construction were, according to the BBC, coordinated with US officials as part of the pre-talks framework agreed by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in late July. Speaking during a visit to Colombia, Kerry said that Israeli announcements “were to some degree expected because we have known that there was going to be a continuation of some building in certain places.”

The US, European Union (EU) and UN issued standard, pro forma statements criticising the settlement expansion plans. However, Washington has long supported Israel’s expansionist drive, financially and diplomatically. It even vetoed a UN Security Council resolution backed by the 14 other members in February 2011 that would have merely “urged” a halt to settlement building.

Kerry’s comments make clear that Palestinians should expect a browbeating. He called on the Palestinians “not to react adversely” to Israel’s latest plans, urging the parties to move ahead with the talks.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said that Israel’s plans for new homes on occupied land aimed to scupper peace talks that resumed yesterday, but he

was optimistic that talks with Israel would continue. This all but confirms that the nod was indeed given to the settlements at the pre-talks in New York, with tacit Fatah support.

The current talks in Jerusalem take place in the aftermath of the army coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood regime of President Mohamed Mursi in Egypt.

Encouraged by the US, Egypt’s new military junta is working closely with Tel Aviv, continuing the long-standing foreign policy of US imperialism since the Camp David Accords of 1978-1999. Together, they struck targets in the Sinai Peninsula last weekend in an apparently coordinated campaign against Islamist forces active among Bedouin tribes of the region.

The junta has also destroyed and flooded the tunnels linking Gaza and Egypt, used to smuggle goods and circumvent Israel’s six-year-long blockade, and is closing the border with Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In this way, it is acting to further isolate Gaza, divide the Palestinians, and thus aid Israel’s expansionist plans.



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