

Israeli-Palestinian talks collapse

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Last-ditch efforts on Sunday failed to prevent the collapse of talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), brokered by Washington and due to conclude at the end of the month.

The collapse was precipitated by the refusal of Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to release 26 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, as agreed at the start of talks in July 2013.

Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the PA, who did not wish to be seen as doing nothing, responded by applying to join 15 international treaties and protocols that seek to protect the rights of women, children, the disabled and civilians in times of war and conflict.

The latest round of talks were from the start a cynical manoeuvre on the part of the Obama administration, which, having allowed Israel to ignore all previous agreements, now refuses to pressure Israel into making the slightest concessions to the Palestinians. It has now called "time out" on the talks.

US secretary of state John Kerry, speaking in Morocco at the end of a trip to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, said, "There are limits in the amount of time and effort that the United States can spend if the parties themselves are unwilling to take constructive steps in order to be able to move forward."

He added, "Neither party has said they have called it off, but we are not going to sit there indefinitely."

The *Washington Post* cited White House sources to the effect that Washington faced a string of more important foreign policy issues and that Kerry had already spent far too much time on the issue. Kerry has made 11 trips to the region in the past year to speak with both Netanyahu and Abbas.

As well as the Ukrainian crisis, the Obama administration is beset by disagreements with regional allies Saudi Arabia and Turkey over Middle East policy, while illegal wars of intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and covert war against

Syria have destabilised the region far beyond those countries' borders.

The "two-state solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has always been a criminal fraud. Within a few years of the 1993 Oslo Accords, Israel rejected any notion of a Palestinian mini-state, however truncated and non-contiguous, imposing impossible demands on the Palestinians. While Yasser Arafat balked at signing a worthless deal with Israel in July 2000, his successor, Abbas, and the corrupt wealthy clique he represents have been prepared to grovel ever further to the US and Israel.

Even now, the Palestinians are prepared to continue talking. Senior Palestinian official Nabil Shaath said, "We have not abandoned the process.... We will continue these negotiations as we agreed, and I wish for once that America's patience runs out—with Israel and not the Palestinians."

Washington was never an "honest broker" between Israel and Palestine to be swayed by the PA's diplomacy. The talks were about piling the pressure on the Palestinians to submit to Israel, whose demands escalated continually.

Zionist settlements have already gobbled up nearly half of the land occupied by Israel in the 1967 War, which was supposed to be the territory of a Palestinian mini-state. There are now 575,000 Israelis in this territory, 75,000 more than when Obama took office.

Just last week, in a deliberate attempt to torpedo the talks, the housing and construction minister, Uri Ariel, reissued housing tenders for 708 new homes in Gilo, a neighbourhood in East Jerusalem, illegally annexed in 1967. This is in addition to the 11,000 new homes built on Palestinian land since the talks began in July 2013.

A statement released by 25 aid agencies said the number of housing demolitions has increased by almost half, while the displacement of Palestinians grew by nearly 75 percent between last July and the end of

2013, compared to the same period in 2012.

The talks have thus served once again as a cover behind which Israel has extended its land grab and tightened its control over the Palestinian people, while at the same time allowing the US to further its intrigues in the energy rich region.

As far as the Obama administration was concerned, the talks represented a face-saving quid pro quo for its support of Jordan's King Abdullah, the military junta in Egypt and the venal oil sheikhdoms in the Gulf in the effort to organise a war to unseat the Assad regime in Syria and isolate Iran. All these sclerotic regimes face restive populations, for whom the Israel-Palestine conflict and the US-led interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria are explosive issues.

The talks only began in the first place because the US threatened Abbas it would withdraw US\$500 million a year in aid, assistance that enables the PA to pay its monthly wage bill and subsidise rising fuel costs, a key element in the soaring cost of living.

The Palestinians were, in addition, 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.

In return, Kerry threw out the crumb that Israel would release, in phases, about 80 veteran Palestinian prisoners who have served more than 20 years in Israeli jails and a further 350 prisoners by the end of April. The release of Palestinian prisoners, who have been in jail since before the 1993 Oslo Accords, was one of the Palestinians' three core demands. There are 5,000 political prisoners in Israeli jails, including more than 130 who have never been charged.

The talks proceeded as an elaborate farce, with little direct contact between the two sides since November. As far as Israel was concerned, there was little to discuss, as it had already rejected the Palestinians' two other key demands prior to the talks: a freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and a Palestinian state based upon the pre-1967 borders.

As a result, the "talks" soon degenerated into discussions on "a statement of principles", then a "framework for talks" and most recently a non-binding American paper. In February, Abbas even gave up on the Palestinians' right of return to their homes in Israel,

saying publicly that the Palestinians did not want to flood the state of Israel with refugees.

Netanyahu, in his first public statement since the talks collapsed, said Israel would take its own "unilateral steps" in response to the Palestinians' move last week to join UN bodies, and insisted that the only Palestinian state on offer was one achieved through negotiation with Israel.

Israel's chief negotiator and minister of justice, Tzipi Livni, has been involved in the diplomatic process for more than a decade and fought for re-election on the basis of supporting a deal with the PA, so as to prevent the Palestinians forming an overall majority in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. She has now backed Netanyahu and made it clear she would not resign from his coalition government.



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