

Expanding Illegal Israeli Settlements in the West Bank. John Kerry's Success Worse than His Failure

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Global Research, August 07, 2013

The critical issue of the ever expanding illegal Israeli colonial settlements on the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in the West Bank (WB), which are peace killing in eastern Jerusalem in particular, will make or break the newly resumed Palestinian - Israeli negotiations.

On July 29, 2013, those negotiations were resumed in Washington , D.C. ; they are scheduled to begin in earnest in mid-August. President Barak Obama hailed them as a "promising step forward." However, in view of more than twenty years of failed U.S. - sponsored peace making, the new talks "promise" nothing more than being a new round of failure and "conflict management," in spite of Obama's belief that "peace is both possible and necessary."

According to Albert Einstein, "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" is "insanity," but that is exactly what John Kerry seems to have achieved after six tours of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East since he was sworn in as the U.S. Secretary of State.

Unless the issue of settlements is addressed in accordance with international and humanitarian law as well as in compliance with the resolutions of the United Nations, Kerry will be shooting himself in the legs and his success in his peace mission would be worse than his failure. The EU's recent anti-settlement move highlighted this fact.

However, Kerry seems and sounds determined to pursue his mission on the basis of contradictory terms of reference, laid down by the official letter sent by the former U.S. president George W. Bush to former Israeli premier Ariel Sharon in April 2004, whereby the United States pledged to annex the major Jewish settlements to Israel, to redraw its borders accordingly and to exclude the right of return of Palestinian refugees from any agreement in the future on solving the Arab - Israeli conflict in Palestine peacefully.

Top on the agenda of the resumed negotiations are borders and security; Israel has never defined its borders nor respected the borders set by the United Nations resolution No. 181 of 1947; in the name of security, it demands borders that compromise the viability of any independent Palestinian state on the WB.

From U.S. and Israeli perspectives, "the resumption of negotiations is seen as an objective in itself," in the words of Ghassan al-Khatib, the former spokesman of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

David Ignatius on August 2 described Kerry's efforts as a "mission impossible," which if it fails "this time, it will cost the parties dearly;" he described the ensuing negotiations as "a

kind of a benign trap, once the prey have been lured inside, it's difficult for them to escape without either accomplishing .. peace or damaging themselves."

Indeed in the long run, success of the resumed negotiations warn of creating a political environment that would give "legitimacy" to a new Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip to remove the "armed resistance" there to their outcome, with the overt blessing of the U.S. sponsor of the negotiations and the discreet blessing of the Arab "peace partners."

However, the expected failure of Kerry's efforts could be worse than the failure of the Camp David summit meeting in September 2000 of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and U.S. former president Bill Clinton.

By sending his negotiators to Washington, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is again compromising his personal credibility, but worse still he risks a Palestinian implosion in the case of success, but in case the negotiations fail he risks a Palestinian explosion in rebellion against both his PA and the Israeli occupation.

Abbas has already antagonized his old allies among the members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is considered the third influential Palestinian power after the two rivals of Fatah and Hamas – who accuse him of reneging on their consensus not to resume negotiations without a stop to the expansion of Israeli colonial settlements first.

National reconciliation between the PLO and Hamas will be put on hold for at least the nine months which the negotiators set as the time frame for their negotiations.

His decision put on hold as well any Palestinian new attempt to join international organizations to build on the UN General Assembly's recognition of Palestine as a non-member state in September 2012.

The new talks are merely "the beginning of the beginning" of "a long process" in which "there is no guarantee" for success, according to former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

All this boils down to winning Israel more time to dictate whatever borders it deems "secured," by creating more facts on the OPT. For Palestinians, this is a waste of time that makes their dream of a national homeland in an independent state more remote. No surprise then the Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu on July 27 saw in the resumption of negotiations "a vital strategic interest of the state of Israel."

Kerry's personal success seems to have pressured Palestinians into being fooled again into jumping to "final status" negotiations as the best way to absolve Israel from honoring its commitments in compliance with the "interim" accords it had signed with the PLO.

Bitter Past Experience

The Palestinian wide –spread opposition to the resumption of talks is accusing Abbas of being a "believer" in peace who is about to get "stung from the same hole twice," in reference to the bloody outcome of the U.S. – hosted Camp David summit in September 2000.

Then, the U.S. administration of Clinton pressured Arafat into “final status” negotiations. Barak, then the Israeli prime minister, found in the Camp David final status talks a golden pretext not to implement the third stage of the Oslo accords, namely to withdraw the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) from about 95% of the West Bank (WB) area and hand it over to the PA.

Linking the WB and Gaza by a “corridor” that allows free movement of people and goods between them was another commitment that has yet to be honored by Israel .

“Trying” and failing is better than “doing nothing,” Kerry said, but the failure of the Camp David trilateral summit led to the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising); ever since both the failure and the uprising were additional pretexts for the successive Israeli governments not to honor both commitments; moreover, both pretexts were the justification they used to reoccupy militarily all the PA areas and to coordinate with the U.S. the “removal” of Arafat and the “change” of his regime.

The critical issue of the illegal Israeli colonial settlements on the WB will make or break the new Kerry – sponsored talks. On July 29, James M. Wall wrote: “Israel plays the peace process game not to give away ill-gotten gains, but to protect them;” settlements come on top of those “gains;” they were “gained” under the umbrella of the “peace process,” with the tacit blessing of the well – intentioned Palestinian negotiator who did not make their removal a precondition to the resumption of peace talks right from the start.

The 2000 summit collapsed because of the Israeli insistence on continued building of colonial settlements, especially in eastern Jerusalem , which doomed to failure the peace process launched in Madrid in 1991. Kerry’s resumed negotiations opened while the settlement expansion continues unabated. Now Abbas seems too late to rectify this grave mistake. No surprise the failure of the negotiations seems inevitable and will only revive the Palestinian – Israeli stalemate.

Israel’s 2013 Herzliya Assessment concluded: “The status-quo in the Palestinian territories is not sustainable, and definitely not durable... the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate is untenable. It will lead to a Palestinian mass public uprising with sporadic violence.”

Obama appealed to the negotiators to “approach these talks in good faith,” but the Secretary General of the PLO Executive Committee, Yasser Abed Rabbo, questioned the “good faith” of the U.S. and Israel who were “conferring about security” without the Palestinians, as if it was “their bilateral security,” although security is “a central and fundamental issue of ours and concerns our future as a whole.” Abed Rabbo’s Israeli partner in the Geneva Initiative, former cabinet minister Yossi Beilin, writing in The Jerusalem post on July 30, questioned the “good faith” of Netanyahu who “has reneged on all that he has said throughout his political career.”

Defying the bitter experience of twenty – year old peace process and strong opposition at home, Abbas seems voluntarily dragged into his last test of U.S. credibility as the peace broker, which will make or break his political career at the age of 76 years.

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