

Jewish Settlement Expansion in the Occupied Territories: Who is Aiding Judaisation?

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Since 1860, when the American Jewish tycoon Judah Touro donated \$60,000 — a fortune for that time — towards the construction of the first Jewish settlement outside the old walls of Jerusalem, public and private American funds have aided the creation and territorial expansion of Israel. Israel today is the foremost recipient of US aid. According to a USAID green paper, between 1946 and 2008 Israel has received more aid than Russia, India, Egypt and Iraq. In fact, the US has poured more money into Israel than it did into the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. However, a recent New York Times article adds a new dimension to the story. On 5 July, the Times reported that, over the last decade more than 40 American groups have collected more than \$200 million in tax-deductible gifts for Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, indicating that the US Treasury is effectively aiding and abetting illegal settlement expansion and the Judaisation of Jerusalem.

While the New York Times honed in on the irony of how a US government organ was facilitating the funnelling of private funds into activities and goals that ran counter to official US policy, and as significant as this is, the article failed to mention that the amount of private tax-exempt “donations” pales in comparison to the public funds that Washington has steadily poured into the Zionist project. For example, the US federal budget for 2011 has earmarked \$3 billion in aid for Israel, or 42 per cent of the total amount of aid to be allocated to the so-called Near East for that year. It is also interesting to observe that the policies of USAID, an instrument that the State Department uses to pursue the US’s objectives overseas, also conflict with Washington’s official stances. USAID programmes for the Palestinians effectively exclude East Jerusalem. Its green papers and other official reports and statements make frequent mention of “the West Bank and Gaza” as headings for its activities, but rare are references to East Jerusalem. It is as though, for USAID, East Jerusalem is not an indivisible part of the occupied territories, in spite of Washington’s official acknowledgement that it is and in spite of the inclusion of East Jerusalem among the final status issues in the US- brokered negotiating process between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel, the occupying power. One cannot help but suspect USAID — and by extension the State Department — of perpetrating a certain calculated deception through its deliberate and systematic omission of East Jerusalem in its programmes and documents.

PA officials in Ramallah expressed outrage at the tax breaks for private US donations to fund Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied territories. One suspects that the sentiment was primarily geared for local consumption, because they were quick to stress that the Palestinians were not ungrateful to the US and urged USAID to keep up its efforts. “The US is the chief supplier of bilateral economic and development aid to the Palestinians, supplying

more than \$2.9 billion since 1994,” wrote the Palestinian Investment Promotion Agency (PIPA) on its website in May. “The US helps facilitate the movement of Palestinian people and goods, while improving the security of Israel,” it added, as though it and other PA agencies were somehow detached from USAID “efforts” and the policies it is helping to implement. USAID has slated \$550.4 million for the PA in its budget next year. The continuation of this aid is contingent on the continuation of the Palestinian Fatah-Hamas rift and the blockade. Nothing is allocated for East Jerusalem and the bulk of the funds are to be spent on “fighting drugs, law enforcement and security programmes”.

However, the reference to “facilitating movement” is even more suspect, and requires further elucidation in light of the part this aid plays in consolidating the occupation, entrenching Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and promoting the Judaisation of East Jerusalem. Successive US administrations and the countless shuttle visits by their envoys and emissaries have failed to lift the military barriers Israel imposes in the West Bank and around Jerusalem, to open a “safe corridor” between the West Bank and Gaza, or to open the crossings into Gaza even for the passage of humanitarian assistance. But they have been superbly successful in building “alternate” roads. These are the ring roads planned by the occupation authorities in order to link Jewish settlements that now control 42 per cent of the area of the West Bank, which does not include the area of occupied territory that Israel annexed to the Jerusalem municipality, according to the BTselem human rights centre. The ring roads also serve to carve the rest of the West Bank into cantons densely populated by Palestinians.

The Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ) reports that USAID funded 23 per cent of the ring road network built by occupation authorities in 2004. Most of this roadwork is located in areas B and C which comprise more than 80 per cent of the area of the West Bank and which fall under the control of the Israeli occupation, which supervises all road works. The donor countries that are supervising and financing the “peace process” had approved the construction 500 kilometres of such roads, at the cost of \$200 million, \$114 million of which was footed by USAID. Another 120 kilometres is scheduled for completion by the end of this year. Most of this segment will skirt around the Jewish settlements in Greater Jerusalem, creating a wall of paved highway to reinforce the barrier wall severing the West Bank from Jerusalem and to reinforce the tipping of the demographic scale in Greater Jerusalem in favour of Jewish settlers and against its indigenous Palestinians.

The rest of the roadwork, which snakes through the valleys and up the hills and down the ravines of the West Bank, is hailed as an “accomplishment” by the Salam Fayyad government in Ramallah. Indeed, Fayyad goes further to boast of these roads as Palestinian projects that “penetrate” areas B and C and, therefore, “defy” the security partitions of the West Bank as defined by the Oslo Accords. In fact, neither can USAID claim these roads as one of its “achievements” in facilitating the movement of Palestinians under the occupation, nor can the PA claim them as a subtle victory. As Suhail Khaliliey, head of ARIJ’s Urbanisation Monitoring Department, explains, “What happens is that USAID presents this package of infrastructure projects to the PA and essentially says ‘Take it or leave it.’ So the PA is basically forced to accept Israeli-planned roads it doesn’t want.”

Ingrid Jaradat Gassner, director of the Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, puts it more poignantly: “It’s sad that the PA is helping to build its own cantons while the settlers control the main roads.”

Last month, Fayyad issued a statement denying that the PA contributed to the construction

of a network of roads proposed by the occupying power. Ghasan Al-Khatib, a spokesman for the Fayyad government, added that the PA was doing all in its power to prevent the rise of “an apartheid system” in the West Bank. Unfortunately, realities on the ground belie such denials and assertions.

Nicola Nasser is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit, West Bank of the Israeli – occupied Palestinian territories. This article was translated from Arabic then published by Al-Ahram Weekly on July 22, 2010.

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