

Palestine: A Peace-killing Linkage, De-linkage

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Global Research, December 26, 2007

26 December 2007

Linking the “aliyah” to what the Jewish literature has been describing as Eretz Israel or Yisrael HaShleima (Greater Israel) to the Israeli colonial settlement of the Palestinian land, which the Hebrew state occupied in 1967, while at the same time negating the Palestinian Right of Return, is torpedoing whatever prospect is left for a peaceful solution for the Arab – Israeli conflict, undermining the latest U.S.-sponsored launch of the Palestinian – Israeli talks in Annapolis and further splintering, so far politically, the only viable Palestinian partner to Israel in any viable peace process, namely the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Head of North America’s Reform Movement, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, in an interview published by *The Jerusalem Post* on December 25, hailed “Israel’s creation” as a “miraculous, momentous event in itself. Every day that goes by with Israel surrounded by a wall of Arab hatred is a miracle;” however he could have this linkage on mind when he noted what he described as “Arab hatred” and the “anti-Israel feeling among Jewish Americans” as an “aspect of the problem” of increasing identification with the Jewish state’s subscription to that linkage, although he stopped short of blaming the “hatred” and the “aspect” on this peace-killing linkage.

On the evening of December 26, (40) new Jewish immigrants from Iran landed in Israel in the framework of a special Jewish Agency covert operation, which this year hit the record number of (200), on the backdrop of a 20-year drop of (6%) of the overall Jewish immigration into Israel according to the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption.

To judge from the trend of the one million aliyah of the “Soviet” Jewish immigrants late in the last century, a high percentage of the new comers this year (19,700) will end up landing in Israeli colonial settlements built on the Israeli-confiscated Palestinian land in the West Bank, notably in eastern Jerusalem where at least (12%) of Soviet Jews had settled according to Israeli media reports.

The “absorption” of newcomers in the occupied Palestinian territories is not an Israeli policy dictated by geographical or economic inability to absorb them in Israel proper, but rather by Israel’s strategy of unsatisfied appetite for territorial expansion.

For example the Israeli Labor party in 1999 considered a plan to settle five million new aliyah in the Negev in southern Israel as a strategic goal for the next fifty years. Moreover Israel is also capable of absorbing the return of the Palestinian refugees it dispossessed and displaced from about (500) towns and villages in 1948: According to Salman Abu Sitta an expert on the Palestinian refugee issue, “90% of the village sites are still vacant, 7% are partially built-over, and only 3% are totally built over in Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem.”

Nor could the Israeli leaders be excused by “unawareness” of the Palestinian plight in their

“de-linking” the peace-making from the Palestinian Right of Return and their persisting denial of this right and their persistence on “linking” their territorial expansion through the colonial settlement strategy to making peace with the Palestinian people.

Referring to the Palestinian plight, the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, stated in his Annapolis speech on November 27: “Your people, too, have suffered for many years; and there are some who still suffer. Many Palestinians have been living for decades in camps, disconnected from the environment in which they grew up, wallowing in poverty, in neglect, alienation, bitterness, and a deep, unrelenting sense of humiliation.”

Israeli Minister of Absorption, Ya’acov Edri, said recently that “Aliya is the single greatest Zionist enterprise in our sixty years of statehood,” but he failed to state that illegally (according to international law) directing aliyah to the occupied Palestinian and Syrian land was another forced-by-the-sword success for the “Zionist enterprise,” as more than half a million Jewish settlers live now in more than 170 colonies in the West Bank and the Golan Heights, and constituting the second major obstacle to peace-making after the 40-year old military occupation.

The declared Annapolis plan of Israel and the Quartet of the U.S., U.N., EU and Russian mediators to shore up the ruling Palestinian “peaceniks” in the West Bank with promises of political, security and economic “horizons” towards the creation of a Palestinian state according to the two-state “vision” of the U.S. President George W. Bush, while at the same time totally sealing off the totally dependent on foreign charities Hamas ruling compatriots in the Gaza Strip, is proving to be a non-starter tactic essentially because Israel is not subscribing in action to what it has verbally committed herself to in Annapolis, namely to commit to its obligation according to the Road Map peace blueprint not to expand her settlements.

Donors Miss Political Will

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was pledged (\$1.8) billion more than they requested from their donors in Paris, but nonetheless there was no Palestinian euphoria; the donors were only “showing financial generosity because of the absence of political audacity and political courage,” according to Afif Safia, the most prominent Palestinian diplomat who is accredited to represent his people in Washington D.C.

The political will of the U.S.-led donors faces a critical test of credibility to match their financial “generosity” with a diplomatic will to dispel their image of impotent leverage to put their politically promised “vision” of the two-state solution where they donate their tax payers’ money, to erase what Safia described as an Israeli “stain on the conscience of mankind” in the “open-air prison” of the Gaza Strip and to let loose their colonial grip on the West Bank.

The “unreasonably reasonable” Palestinian negotiators are still “disturbed” by the “absence of the political will” and “the political impotence that we have witnessed throughout the decades” because “so far there is no indication” that the U.S. sponsors of the resumed Palestinian – Israeli talks are ready to “vent their annoyance with the obstacle towards advance,” namely the Israelis who invested “all their genius to lower expectations in the weeks that preceded Annapolis” and “immediately after Annapolis they invested all their brilliance into torpedoing the modest results that emerged,” according to Safia (Newsweek, Dec 18, 2007).

During the twenty days that separated the Annapolis conference on November 27 from the Paris donors' conference on December 17, the Palestinians were optimistic and viewed the two events as complementary en route to the nation building of Palestinian statehood.

However less than a month on, Israel was not only "torpedoing the modest results that emerged" from Annapolis, but also threatening to drain the (\$7.4) billion pledged by the donors into the political sewage that siphoned more than ten billion dollars donated to the PA since 1993 and to torpedo both the credibility of the newly resumed talks and that of the Palestinian leadership, which has risked the semi-consensus Palestinian opposition to Annapolis.

Israel has since embarked on a two-pronged "real war" on two fronts: A military war on the Hamas-led Gaza Strip and a colonial war on the rival PLO-led West Bank, while officially rejecting a reciprocal truce proposal from Hamas to trade ceasefire for lifting the siege Israel imposes on the strip and at the same time unofficially refusing to make peace with the PLO, thus undermining both rival leaderships in Gaza and Ramallah.

"There is no other way to describe what is happening in the Gaza Strip except as a true war ... This war will continue," a statement by the Israeli government said on Sunday.

Since June this "real war" claimed more than 200 Palestinian lives in Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert boasted last week, excluding 22 more killed by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) during the Islamic Eid Al-Adha according to the Palestinian Center of Al-Mizan for Human Rights.

The Israeli colonial war in the West Bank is much more detrimental to the Annapolis process and the prospect of creating a Palestinian state because it is focusing on strategically severing any territorial contiguity between this prospective state and its capital in the Holy City.

In less than a month since Annapolis, Israel announced an aggressive three-pronged drive to expand its colonial settlements in and around the eastern part of Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967, with the aim of sealing off with Jewish demographic and construction barriers whatever possible routes might link up the future Palestinian state with its capital.

On the southeastern route Israel decided to beef up its colony of Jabal Abu Ghneim (Har Homa); "Peace Now" revealed Sunday that 50 million shekels were allocated in the 2008 state budget to build 500 homes in Har Homa. On the northwestern route the Israeli housing ministry decided to create the brand new colony of Atarot, with 35.000 houses, on the Palestinian land of Qalandia. On the eastern route 48 million shekels were allocated in the 2008 budget for the construction of 250 homes in the Maale Adumim colony, home for more than 35 illegal settlers.

Meanwhile the construction of a bridge and other "tourist" facilities continued in Bab Almagharbeh on the Al-Buraq Wall, the "western wall" of Islam's third holiest site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, despite Islamic and archeological protesting outcries.

This Israeli colonial drive is sure to make or break the fragile resumed talks. Final status negotiations can resume when the Palestinian side gets a "clear-cut answer" on Israel's readiness to immediately halt all settlement activity in "all Palestinian lands, without exception," said chief Palestinian negotiator, Ahmad Qurei, and the Secretary General of the

PLO Executive Committee, Yasser Abed Rabbo.

But Israel was defiant both to Palestinian warnings as well as to those of the U.S. sponsors of the Annapolis process. The colonies targeted by the Israeli settlement drive are “an integral, organic part of Jerusalem” and, “No promise was ever given to anyone that we wouldn’t continue to build” in them because they are “within the municipal borders of Jerusalem,” Israeli Minister for Jerusalem Affairs, Rafi Eitan, told Army Radio.

“The international community did not show the political courage needed in Annapolis or in the pre-Annapolis period, which necessitated some confrontation with the Israeli territorial appetite,” Safia said. This courage is still missing after Annapolis, before and after the 87-donor conference in Paris, despite what Safia hailed as “the reservoir of goodwill and the diplomatic and universal unanimity the birth of a Palestinian state enjoys” as shown by the donors.

PLO on Verge of Splintering

The Israeli colonial drive and the impotence of the international Quartet to stop it are discrediting the PLO leadership not only in the eyes of its people but also in the eyes of its coalition member factions. The Palestinian – Israeli Steering Committee of negotiators failed to make any progress in their second meeting since Annapolis on Monday. Abbas himself acknowledged publicly the talks are facing obstacles because of the Israeli settlement expansion.

The Popular and the Democratic Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP and DFLP respectively) have gone public in demanding in official statements last week that President Mahmoud Abbas stop all contacts and negotiations with Israel in protest against her military escalation and settlement expansion. Both fronts represent the third strongest electoral and political power after Hamas and Fatah and wield a leading influence on intelligentsia, media and public opinion. As PLO members both sided with Fatah in its rivalry with the non-PLO Hamas.

However by calling for a stop to all contacts and negotiations with Israel after voicing strong opposition to the Annapolis conference both fronts are in fact adopting a key Hamas demand and reinforcing the arguments of the Islamic movement against the Abbas-led PLO.

The PFLP went a step further in practically moving independently from the Fatah-led PLO. Despite Abbas leadership’s protests the PFLP decided to attend a 10-faction Palestinian “national conference” that was scheduled to coincide with the Annapolis conference in the Syrian capital, Damascus; Syria’s participation in Annapolis led Damascus to appeasing the PLO protests and postponing the conference. However the Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara’ revived his country’s dispute with the PLO over the issue when he announced two weeks ago Syria’s disappointment with the outcome of Annapolis and with Israel’s settlement drive and “welcomed” the Palestinians to convene their Hamas-led conference in Damascus.

More detriment to the Abbas-led PLO’s unity is a simmering undeclared opposition that is now surfacing into public among the rank and file of Fatah to the negotiations as well as to the government of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Fatah’s 40-year old monopoly of the decision-making and finances of the PLO and later the

autonomous Palestinian Authority (PA) under the Israeli occupation has kept the coalition of member factions under tight control, but the deadlocked peace process with Israel, the corruption of the PA and the integration of the movement and the self-rule have all exhausted the credibility of the national liberation movement, creating the right environment for the rise of the Hamas challenge and as well an opportunity for those factions to show more independence and even dissent.

The Central Committee of Fatah on Monday warned in a statement after a meeting chaired by Abbas that the Israeli government is dooming the peace talks to failure before they start and that the settlement expansion could abort the Annapolis process. Negotiator Qaddora Faris of Fatah announced Monday he will not take part in future negotiations and demanded the Palestinian negotiating team do the same because it will be “a big strategic mistake” to negotiate while Israel continues its settlement expansion.

Fatah Opposition on the Rise

Whereas the Fatah-Hamas bloody race for controlling the PA institutions is self-evident, all indications refer to an emerging third power, which seems gradually snatching the reins of the self-ruled authority from both rivals, first and foremost in the West Bank.

Fatah is gradually becoming a “former” ruling party and developing into a de facto opposition to both rival governments of the Fayyad-ruled West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, which the Israeli journalist Amira Hass described as the two “quasi-state” entities or the “two non-states for one people” (Haaretz on Dec. 12, 2007).

Following the military showdown of “Hamas,” which bloodily forced Fatah out of the driving seat in the Gaza Strip in June, Fatah grudgingly yielded the governmental seat to a western-oriented grouping led by the World Bank veteran Salam Fayyad.

The grudge seems to be no more tolerated by Fatah, who sees its power and influence eroding further while in the public eye the movement is held responsible for all the “politically sensitive” as well as the repressive measures that the Fayyad government has taken or plans to take. Its simmering opposition has recently surfaced into public.

Member of Fatah’s Central Committee and former cabinet minister of information Nabil Amre, in an article published Nov. 11 by the Ramallah-based Al Hayat Al Jadida, described the protests within Fatah as a “snow ball” of concerns, criticism and accusations, seeking an answer to the question whether the Fayyad government is an “established ally or an illusionary alternative” to Fatah.

Acknowledging there is a “crisis” between Fatah and what he described as the “phenomenon of Salam Fayyad” and confirming that several cabinet ministers of Fayyad government as well as politicians around him, “whom Fayyad influences or influenced by them,” are attacking Fatah “in their private councils,” squeezing Fatah employees out of their ministries or refusing to employ them, Amre asked: “Are we facing an intractable crisis?”

Amre however suggested “preserving” Fayyad but after “separating” the premier from his cabinet ministers and political entourage “for self-evident reasons,” including the “post-Annapolis” commitments, the upcoming visit by U.S. President George W. Bush and the Palestinian donors’ conference in Paris, in addition to the paralysis of the Palestinian

Legislative Council (PLC), which makes any cabinet reshuffle unthinkable.

He concluded by preferring “calming down” the Fatah opposition to Fayyad government “in exchange for doubling his efforts towards more and clearer internal balancing” that would add to the “most important card which Fayyad maintains, namely the absolute American support to him.”

Although Fatah’s complaints seem so far confined to partisan reasons, they are politically important because they add the opposition of the mainstream wing within the movement, which backs President Mahmoud Abbas’ policies, to the opposition of another wing inside and outside the occupied territories which contests Abbas’ peace strategy and strongly oppose Fayyad’s U.S.-backed policies. Sensing a real threat to his government, Abbas has reportedly intervened to curb further Fatah opposition.

Definitely Fayyad’s government would be in a very critical impasse were it to face a united Fatah opposition that would join Hamas in opposing his IMF and World Bank-advised economic policies.

Fayyad was on record that his government is bent on two “politically sensitive” economic measures, decreasing the public sector payroll, which so far has left about 40,000 people unemployed, including a large number of security personnel, and lifting the subsidies to electricity and fuel, which has yet to be implemented. Both measures are preconditions to solicit more of the donors’ money.

But both measures are sure recipe for antagonizing more and more of the Fatah rank and file, for partisan as well as for economic and political reasons. Fayyad’s government now has to face opposition from Fatah while preoccupied with neutralizing the Hamas threat to the PA in the West Bank.

However the major threat to Fayyad’s government remains Israel’s military occupation. The World Bank on Thursday warned that even if the donor countries meet all of PA’s demands for financial aid, the Palestinian economy will continue to deteriorate and the Palestinians will get poorer if Israel does not lift its siege of Gaza and its restrictions on free movement of people and goods in the West Bank.

All indications confirm the Israeli settlement expansion, siege and blockade are staying, the World Bank’s warning is valid, Fayyad can promise his people only more of the same, and opposition to his government and the PLO will grow deeper and wider by the day to dispel whatever illusions of peace are left over from the Annapolis conference last month.

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