

Kerry's "Framework Agreement" - The End of Palestine?

Jamie Stern-Weiner interviews Norman Finkelstein

By [Norman Finkelstein](#)

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US Secretary of State John Kerry was in the Middle East again this week, conducting intensive talks with Israeli and Palestinian officials and other regional actors. His aim, it has been widely reported, is to reach a "framework agreement" as a prelude to a final settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Norman Finkelstein is the co-author, with Mouin Rabbani, of *How to Solve the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (OR Books, forthcoming). I spoke with him about the significance of the negotiations, as we enter what may be a decisive phase in the Palestinians' long struggle for self-determination.

You've been [warning for some time now](#) that the Israeli-Palestinian talks being brokered by Secretary of State Kerry might, unlike many prior rounds of negotiations, actually produce a deal to end the conflict. Its content would amount to Israel's long-standing terms of settlement. What's your assessment of where the diplomatic process is currently at?

A "framework agreement" will shortly be reached, and a final settlement will probably be signed in the last six months or so of President Obama's term in office. When the Kerry process was first announced I was virtually alone in [predicting](#) that it would actually go somewhere; now, it's widely assumed. Many respected Israeli commentators now take for granted that an agreement is just a matter of time.

In recent weeks the Kerry talks have apparently focused on Israel's demands for (i) an enduring military presence in the Jordan Valley and (ii) Palestinian recognition of it as a "Jewish state." The Palestinians will negotiate some face-saving deal on the Jordan Valley involving a US-Israeli joint presence for a period of time. The Jordan Valley was already essentially resolved at the Annapolis negotiations in 2008. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is raising it now only so he can later claim to be making a "heart-wrenching concession"—Israel is adept at "conceding" things to which it has no title in the first place—by allowing for only a temporary US-Israeli presence along the border. It's been received wisdom for years—even pro-Israel hack Dennis Ross concedes it in *The Missing Peace*—that the Jordan Valley has no strategic value.

On the "Jewish state," the agreement will probably resolve on the formula: *Israel as the state of the Jewish people and its citizens, Palestine as the state of the Palestinian people and its citizens*. It will afford (legal) protection for Israel's Palestinian citizens, but will negate the right of return for Palestinian refugees, which is what Israel really cares about. Palestinian President Abbas can then claim it as a victory because he secured the rights of

Palestinians in Israel.

The whole thing is diabolical. The Israelis—with, of course, active and critical US connivance—have managed to completely shift the debate and shape the agenda. The only issues now being discussed are the *Jewish state* and the *Jordan Valley*, which, in terms of the international consensus for resolving the conflict, never figured at all. (Even in prior bilateral negotiations presided over by the US, such as at Annapolis, these were at most peripheral issues.) The key issue (apart from the refugees), in terms of the international consensus and in prior bilateral negotiations, has been the extent of the land swap along the border: *Will Israel be allowed to annex the major settlement blocs and consequently abort a Palestinian state?* But the debate has completely shifted, because annexing the settlement blocs is a done deal.

The framework agreement will probably just speak of land swaps in terms of percentages, and merely insinuate—as the Clinton Parameters did—Israel’s annexation of the major settlement blocs without divulging the precise details. But it is striking that in all of the discussion over the last several weeks, *Ma’ale Adumim*—i.e., the largest settlement bloc that effectively bisects the West Bank—has never even come up. Because it’s already been resolved, *in Israel’s favour*.

And a final deal will follow?

A lot of politicking still has to be done, a lot of marketing, a lot of hysteria in Israel—its usual, Oscar-winning performance. It will take the full three years that remain of Obama’s presidency, climaxing in a Camp David-like summit (Obama also loves drama, speechifying is his forte and he’s probably already contemplating which hip black leather jacket to wear), before the final deal is sealed.

One of the principal obstacles at this point to reaching an agreement, in my opinion, is not the details, because those are basically known: the annexation of the settlement blocs by Israel and the annulment of the right of return. One of the big stumbling blocks, oddly enough, is *inertia*.

If you date the *political* origin of the conflict back to the 1917 Balfour Declaration (before then Zionism was basically a self-help operation), you’re talking about a century-long conflict. When a conflict endures for such a protracted period of time, huge numbers of individuals and institutions develop a vested interest not in its resolution but instead in its perpetuation; what’s now called, only half-facetiously, the Peace Industry. Many are now consumed by the dreadful prospect that after a full century, it might actually end. It does send shivers down the spine: *the Israel-Palestine conflict might be over*. All those UN special sessions and special committees; all those Ramallah-based NGOs, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organizations, and conflict-resolution getaways; all those IMF, World Bank, Crisis Group reports; all those academic programs—Israel Studies, Holocaust Studies—which sprung up to justify Israeli policy (none can lay a claim to intellectual content, and most have been subsidized by wealthy right-wing Jews); all those film festivals, scholarly studies, memoirs and “poetry”; all those Washington-based Israel “think”-tanks; all those Palestine solidarity activists, groups, websites, researchers, and analysts (present company included)... A huge, sprawling superstructure has been built on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and consequently a major obstacle to an agreement is now the fear and trembling across the political divide that it might actually be coming to a denouement. It’s not quite conceivable, is it?

But presumably inertia on its own can merely delay; it can't prevent.

I agree.

What is Kerry doing to shore up support for an agreement?

As Palestinian political analyst (and my co-author) Mouin Rabbani has observed, the big difference between President Clinton and Secretary of State Kerry is that Clinton ignored everyone outside the United States; he imagined that he alone, without any external assistance, could be the kingmaker. Kerry, on the other hand, has in a very deliberate fashion set about lining up all the ducks. The Saudis, Arab League, European Union—the Palestinians are being surrounded and besieged. So are the Israelis, but to a much lesser extent because it's essentially Israel's terms of settlement that are being imposed.

The Europeans in particular are turning the screws. Every day there's another report of an individual or collective European initiative severing ties with Israeli entities linked to the illegal settlements. My guess is, the threats currently emanating from Europe are being coordinated with Kerry, in order to convey, not so much to the Israeli government (for all his emoting, Netanyahu is on board), but to Israeli holdouts, that the settlement project *outside* the Wall has no future prospects. Within Israeli politics, those supporting the Kerry process—here's an irony worth savouring!—have exploited the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to the same end: "If we don't settle now, BDS is just around the corner."

And the various Arab states?

The Palestine issue has, at least, temporarily, died as a mobilising factor in the Arab-Muslim world. It's fairly easy now for the US to get Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran either on board or to set Palestine aside. Iran hasn't said anything about the Kerry negotiations so far, and probably doesn't much care. Syria is a null factor. Egypt is playing a positively nefarious role, as it tries (in cahoots with the US, Israel and the Palestinian Authority) to depose Hamas by tormenting Gazans. Saudi Arabia figures that by playing ball with the US on Palestine it can score points with the US on Syria-Iran. Turkey has its own agenda that for a while did (e.g., at the time of the *Mavi Marmara*), but no longer does, include Palestine. It is preoccupied by Erdogan's blunder on Syria and his fear that, in the event of an American rapprochement with Iran, Turkey will drop a notch on the regional totem pole, whereas he has harboured visions of a reborn Ottoman Empire.

The Palestine issue had political resonance in the Arab-Muslim world mostly because it was popular on the so-called street. But people don't much care now. They're focused, rightly or wrongly, on other tragedies, such as Syria. In places like Libya, where people used to give at least lip-service to Palestine, they obviously have other things on their minds right now. Kerry is no genius, but certainly he shrewdly assessed the lay of the land when he concluded that now was the perfect moment to impose a settlement on the Palestinians.

It has been interesting to see everyone wooing Israel's foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman. Suddenly he's the toast of the town in Washington, the British foreign minister is meeting with him, etc.

It cuts both ways, because Lieberman wants to be Israel's next prime minister. So it's time to shed the nightclub bouncer persona (the *New York Times* recently reported that

Lieberman reads weighty tomes on history; sure, and on weekends I do pirouettes in the Bolshoi...) and to don the persona of a Responsible Statesman. So, he'll go along with a Kerry agreement. He's already signalled his acquiescence, even enthusiasm, this past week. He's also been muttering about transferring Israel's Palestinian citizens to a new Palestinian state, but that won't go anywhere. It would violate basic norms of international law by sanctioning the right of established states to redraw internal borders in order to denationalize unwanted minorities. Nobody's going to buy that.

How serious are [recent moves](#) by Hamas and Fatah towards reconciliation?

One possibility is that the Palestinian Authority is playing a silly game of threatening the United States and Israel, "If you aren't more forthcoming, we're going to reconcile with Hamas and won't deal with you anymore." The second possibility is that Hamas wants a piece of the pie, and so will form a National Unity government that will guarantee it something in the final agreement. The third and, according to Mouin, most plausible possibility is that Abbas wants to neutralise Hamas by bringing it on board, thereby also reviving his claims to represent all Palestinians, while Hamas supports a reconciliation to bring it out of the cold after the disastrous developments in Egypt.

How binding will a framework agreement be upon future negotiations?

Nothing is inexorable, but there will be a lot of momentum behind it. The juggernaut will be hard to stop. For all the pieces to fall into place, a new Israeli coalition will probably have to form, a government of National Unity led by Netanyahu. Israeli public opinion polls show that a majority of Israelis would support the probable Kerry proposal. Hebron will have to be evacuated. Of course, there will be the usual Israeli anguish, but it won't be difficult to pull off. The IDF can just march out, and say to the four hundred *meschugge* Jewish settlers, "You want to stay? You can stay"—*alone*, amidst the 150,000 Muslim Hebronites.

Does the Palestinian leadership have the capacity to resist?

I can't, for the life of me, see how the Palestinians can extricate themselves at this point. There's such a broad array of political forces ranged behind the Kerry process that the Palestinians are trapped. Abbas and his sidekick Saeb Erekat are playing good cop/bad cop. Abbas says "yes, this agreement might work," whereas Erekat whispers to the media—you know, the "senior Palestinian negotiator who doesn't want to be identified"—that "oh, this agreement is horrible, it's terrible, it's awful, they can shove it." Erekat thinks that's being clever, it's putting pressure on the Americans, as if anyone on god's earth gives a flying fig what Erekat has to say about anything.

The Palestinians are cornered, they're isolated. When you're in such desperate straits, of course, you must play your strongest cards. A real leadership would, first of all, level with the Palestinian people, "We're in a bind, we're being steamrollered, stampeded. We need you, we need to draw on all our collective resources and reserves to resist"; and second, it would call on Palestine's supporters abroad, "We're about to be clobbered, we need your help." I can't say it would turn the tide, though, as you know, the Palestinian cause has sufficient resonance abroad that if Palestinians were to say, "We're facing the moment of truth now, we might be extinguished," it could perhaps, in conjunction with a mass civil revolt among the Palestinians themselves, do something. It could become a factor.

But the Palestinian leadership is irredeemably corrupt, incompetent and stupid (petty and

megalomaniacal, Abbas lost interest in Palestine long ago—he just wants the Nobel), while Palestine’s supporters abroad are, to put it politely, not acting smartly. They think the big issue now is the American Studies Association vote for an academic boycott of Israel and debating the virtues of academic freedom at a Modern Languages Association conference. (Watch what happens if and when BDS supporters try to introduce the academic boycott in a solid, established academic discipline such as History, Philosophy, or any of the Natural Sciences, where, among many other factors, Jews figure prominently. It won’t be a pretty sight.) But that’s the state of Palestine solidarity right now. They carry on as if the Kerry process is a meaningless sideshow, something that can be safely ignored. But it’s a very big difference, [as Mouin and I have pointed out](#), whether the Wall is illegal or whether it is a legal border. Why? It would turn what are currently illegal Jewish settlements into ordinary Israeli towns; Israel could legally confiscate Palestinian land and evict Palestinians from their homes. In India or China, when the government wants to build a big hydroelectric dam, it removes 100,000 people in one fell swoop. They expel masses of people from their homes, and the international community sits by mute. It’s the sovereign right of a country—it’s *seminent domain*.

The moment the Wall is re-baptized a border, the settlements behind it become a dead issue. They’re Israel’s sovereign territory. And of course most of the world will be glad to be rid of the Israel-Palestine conflict. They’ll be happy when the dotted line is signed. What are you going to do then? An American Studies Association boycott of The World?

Once the framework agreement is signed, won't it still be very difficult to implement? For example, for Abbas to agree to a formula that effectively nullifies the refugee question—that will be an extremely hard sell among Palestinians.

What can the Palestinians do? Israel just wants the refugee question excised from the international agenda; it wants a document stipulating, “That’s no longer Israel’s responsibility.” If Kerry succeeds, they’ll get it. Especially if they get “Israel as a Jewish state plus its citizens” in the framework agreement, which nullifies the refugee question. How can the Palestinians stop it? They’re totally in thrall to European and American money right now. Yasser Arafat signed the 1993 Oslo agreement because the PLO was financially strapped after he aligned with Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War. (The Gulf states retaliated by cutting off their subsidies to the PLO.) It was either agreeing to Oslo or—as it was put back then—“bye, bye PLO.” History is now repeating itself. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

At the popular level, though, Palestinians have influence over their own leadership.

The Palestinians have no leverage over the Palestinian Authority. The people are politically inert while the Palestinian police are quite effective now at quashing isolated dissent. It’s possible that Abbas will get a bullet in his head, which would probably slow things down because there’s no obvious immediate successor. But setting that possibility aside, I don’t see where Palestinians can exercise leverage. It’s not as if the refugees in Lebanon or Jordan can do very much. They haven’t been able to effect anything since Oslo, except languish in the camps.

What about Palestinians in the occupied territories? They won't stand for a renunciation of the right of return.

This scenario is more romantic theory than current reality. The place is hopelessly

fragmented. Gaza itself is alien to the West Bank now. What did the West Bankers do when Gazans were being massacred in 2008-09? Were there large demonstrations? We have to be realistic about the current situation. There's no *concerted* will among Palestinians. They're real, living *persons*, not a myth. Right now, the people's spirits are shattered. Of course, a little spark can change things. I noticed a *Haaretz* article by Amira Hass some weeks back hinting at the possibility that a real popular resistance might yet emerge. It's pointless speculating but, as of now, there aren't visible signs that Palestinians are ready, able or willing to resist an imposed solution. Quite the contrary, if the final agreement is sufficiently nebulous to the untutored eye (like the 1993 Oslo agreement), and is sweetened with a huge "aid" package, Palestinians might, however reluctantly, go for it. The US/EU will have three years to soften the Palestinians, turning tight the economic screws, but not so tight as to cause the whole edifice to snap.

If a final agreement on Israel's terms is signed, how big a set-back will it be for the struggle for Palestinian self-determination?

It would be almost irreversible. Many activists don't want to acknowledge it, but these sorts of agreements and codifications can have real consequences. Didn't the 1947 Partition Resolution, backed by Israeli wherewithal and will, already prove the point? There's no obvious reason why you can't have an agreement whereby a new border is drawn between Israel and the Palestinian territories, especially if such an agreement is ratified by the UN Security Council, which it almost certainly will be. Israel has the wherewithal and will to make that new border stick. Indeed, it already *is* a fact, except juridically. A political settlement would crown the already existing facts on the ground with the jewel of legality. It is a significant step, turning an illegal wall into a permanent, internationally recognized border; and it's not beyond Israel's reach. From then on, what claim will the Palestinians have beyond that border? None.

In your forthcoming book with Mouin, you recommend steps that Palestinians, solidarity activists and others should take to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict in a just and durable way. Will those steps, then, have to happen within the next three years? After that, will it be too late?

For anything to happen, it must begin among the Palestinians in the occupied territories. That would command international attention—though again, we have to be realistic about the political lay of the land right now. World attention is focused on Syria and Iran. There's going to be the meeting in Geneva. It will be very hard for Palestinians to seize the political spotlight at this point. But that's the only thing that can stop or slow down the juggernaut. Everything else is meaningless, it's Nero fiddling while Rome burns.

Jamie Stern-Weiner *co-edits New Left Project*

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Articles by: **Norman Finkelstein**

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