

Palestine and Israel: Kerry's Coup from Mediator to Antagonist

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was scheduled to start his ninth trip of shuttle diplomacy between Palestinian and Israeli leaders on this December 11. However, the bridging “security arrangements,” which he proposed less than a week earlier on his last trip, have backfired and are now snowballing into a major crisis with Palestinian negotiators who view Kerry’s “ideas” as a coup turning the US top diplomat from a mediator into an antagonist.

Kerry’s “ideas” had provoked a “real crisis” and “will drive Kerry’s efforts to an impasse and to total failure,” the secretary general of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasser Abed Rabbo, said on this December 9.

Resumption of the peace talks and U.S. involvement in the negotiations with Israel were both on record Palestinian demands. Disappointed by the deadlocked negotiations and more by the way Kerry decided finally to get his country involved, the Palestinian presidency expectedly stands now to regret both demands.

Kerry’s shuttle diplomacy during his current trip seems more aimed at controlling the damage his “ideas – proposal” caused than at facilitating the deadlocked Palestinian – Israeli bilateral talks.

On this December 6, Kerry said that (160) American security specialists and diplomats, headed by General John Allen, the former commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, had drafted the “proposal,” believing “that we can contribute ideas that could help both Israelis and Palestinians get to an agreement.”

According to leaks published by mainstream Israeli media, including Israeli Channel 10 news, Haaretz, Maariv, Yedioth Ahronoth and DEBKAFfile, as well as by the official Palestinian daily Al-Ayyam, the U.S. “security arrangements” propose:

- * Demilitarization of the future State of Palestine.
- * U.S. monitoring of its demilitarization.
- * To put the border crossings into Jordan under joint Israeli-Palestinian control.
- * Maintaining an Israeli military presence deployed along the western side of Jordan River after the establishment of a Palestinian state.
- * Installing Israeli early warning stations on the eastward slopes of the West Bank highlands.
- * Postponement of arrangements for the final status of Gaza Strip, i.e. severing the strip from the status planned by Kerry’s proposal for the West Bank .
- * All of the foregoing are on the background of the U.S. recognition of an understanding that the large Israeli illegal colonial settlements on the West Bank would be annexed to Israel, according to the letter sent by former U.S. President George W. Bush to the comatose former Israeli premier Ariel Sharon in April 2004, to which the incumbent administration of President Barak Obama is still committed.

Kerry and his administration have obviously coordinated a political coup by the adoption of the Israeli preconditions for recognizing a Palestinian state almost to the letter, turning the Palestinian priorities upside down and changing the terms of reference for the Palestinian – Israeli negotiations, which Kerry succeeded to resume and sponsor late last July.

When he announced the resumption of talks on last July 29, Kerry declared that his goal would be to help the Israelis and Palestinians to reach a “final status agreement” within nine months.

Now, President Barak Obama, speaking at Brookings Institution’s Saban Forum in Washington last Saturday, says there would have to be a “transition process” and that the Palestinians wouldn’t get “everything they want on day one” under an accord, which initially may exclude Gaza, and let the “contiguous Palestinian state,” which he had previously promised, wait. The aim of the negotiations now is to reach a “framework that would not address every single detail,” he added.

And now Kerry, on the same occasion, was speaking about a “basic framework” and establishing “guidelines” for “subsequent negotiations” for a “full-on peace treaty,” i.e., in his game of words, another “road map.”

Kerry moreover hinted that the negotiations might have to extend beyond the agreed upon nine months, thus, from a Palestinian perspective, planning to buy Israel more time to create more colonial facts on the occupied Palestinian ground.

Kerry’s “ideas” alienated the Palestinian “peace camp” and negotiators led by Fatah, which rules the Palestinian Authority (PA) and leads the PLO, who have put “all their eggs in the U.S. basket” for the past two decades, let alone all the other PLO member factions who are against the resumption of the negotiations with Israel for pragmatic reasons, but first of all because they did not trust the U.S. mediator; Kerry has just vindicated their worst fears. Non-member organizations like Hamas and al-Jihad oppose the negotiations as a matter of principle.

On December 8, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, according to The Times of Israel three days later, met with the American consul general in Jerusalem, Michael Ratney, and formally rejected the proposal, saying that the Palestinian position was “unequivocal”: no Israeli presence, though the Palestinians would tolerate a third-party military presence.

On the same day on the occasion of the first 1987 Palestinian Intifada against the 1967 Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territories, the PLO Executive Committee in a statement said the Palestinian people will not accept Kerry’s proposed plan, which the committee’s secretary general Abed Rabbo described as “extremely vague” and “open-ended.”

On the same day in Qatar, the PLO chief negotiator Saeb Erakat, commenting on Kerry’s proposals, said that the Palestinian leadership “perhaps” committed a “strategic mistake” by agreeing to the resumption of negotiations with Israel instead of seeking first the membership of international organizations to build on the UN General Assembly’s recognition last year of Palestine as a non-member state.

The former second in command in Erakat’s negotiating team, Mohammad Shtayyeh who resigned his mission recently because there was no “serious Israeli partner,” called for replacing the U.S. sponsorship of the negotiations by an international one, on the lines of the Geneva conferences for Iran and Syria, because the U.S. sponsorship is “unbalanced.”

Former negotiator Hassan Asfour wrote that Kerry’s plan, which he described as a “conspiracy,” would “liquidate the Palestine Question and end any hope for a Palestinian state,” adding that its rejection is a “necessity and national duty” because it “violates the red national lines.”

Member of the PLO executive committee and former Palestinian chief negotiator, Ahmad Qurei’, said Kerry’s plan replaces the land for peace formula by a security for peace one as the basis for Palestinian - Israeli talks.

Abed Rabbo said last week in Ramallah that if the U.S. accepts that final borders are set according to what Israel determines are its security needs “all hell with break loose.”

Kerry who on his last eighth trip warned Israelis of a Palestinian third Intifada seems himself

laying the ground for one. His “ideas” clash head to head with the Palestinian repeated and plain rejection of long or short term interim or transitional arrangements based only on Israel’s security.

He seems obsessed with Israel’s security as “the top priority” for Washington, both in nuclear talks with Iran and peace talks with the Palestinians. In his press availability at Ben Gurion International Airport on December 6 he used the word “security” and “secure” twenty times in relation with Israel, but no words at all about the Israeli “occupation” and “settlements.”

U.S. commitment to Israel’s security is “ironclad,” “spans decades,” “permanent,” “paramount” and a “central issue” in the work of the United States for both final agreements with Iran and Palestinians, he said. President Obama last Saturday said that this commitment is “sacrosanct.”

George Friedman of Stratfor on December 3 reported that “Israel’s current strategic position is excellent” and “faces no existential threats.” About “the possibility that Iran will develop a nuclear weapon,” Friedman wrote: “One of the reasons Israel has not attempted an air strike, and one of the reasons the United States has refused to consider it, is that Iran’s prospects for developing a nuclear weapon are still remote.”

Despite objections to Kerry’s “security arrangements” by the Israeli defense and foreign cabinet ministers, Moshe Ya’alon and Avigdor Lieberman, the chief Israeli negotiator and justice minister Tzipi Livni admitted that the proposed American security framework addresses a large part of Israel’s security needs.

Obsession with “Israel’s security” could not be interpreted as simply a naïve commitment out of good faith by an old hand veteran of foreign policy like Kerry.

More likely Kerry is dictating to and pressuring the Palestinian presidency with the only option “to take” his proposal or “leave it,” to be doomed either way, by its own people or by the U.S.-led donors to the PA. With friends like Kerry, Palestinian Abbas for sure needs no enemies.

Ironically, Kerry’s “ideas” create a solid political ground for a Palestinian consensus that would be an objective basis for ending the Palestinian divide and reviving the national unity between the PLO in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip as a prerequisite to be able to stand up to Kerry’s “coup.”

Such a development however remains hostage to a decision by President Abbas who is still swimming against the national tide because he has made peace making through negotiations only the goal of his life and political career.

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