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Reports

From Grandiose Arab-Israeli Talks to An Off-The-Table Jerusalem 'Peace Process': Is the Game Over?

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The Palestine Liberation Organization Central Council meeting in Ramallah, January 14, 2018 (AFP)

In a Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) conference in Ramallah held last January, the PLO's Central Council recommended that the Palestinian leadership suspend its recognition of Israel until the latter recognizes the state of Palestine. (1) The fact that the PA itself functions under Israeli occupation makes such a recommendation quite unattainable. The PA's birth in 1994 led to the slow and degrading demise of the PLO, which, with time became a shell of its former self, commanding little power and even less respect. For the PLO to have any real influence on the PA - at this point - is unlikely.

With nearly a quarter-century of 'security coordination', the PA has become an essential tool for Israel through which the Israeli military directly or otherwise controls the lives of Palestinians, especially in areas A and B of the occupied West Bank. These regions - which consist of 40 percent of the total size of the West Bank - are in theory, autonomous; ruled through security coordination between the Israeli army and Palestinian police. Area C, which constitutes the rest of the West Bank, is under total Israeli control.

For nearly 25 years, the PA merely existed to facilitate the status quo preferred by Israel. It has not changed reality for Palestinians in any positive way - there is still no statehood, no sovereignty, no rights, no freedoms, no national aspirations of any kind. In fact, the existence of the PA, whose role is constantly confirmed through the so-called 'peace process' or the unrelenting emphasis on 'resuming the peace process', has hindered Palestinian unity and thwarted any national Palestinian program to roll back the Israeli occupation.

Billions of dollars have been invested to keep the PA leadership content. The funds, provided mostly by the United States, European and a few Arab countries, have allowed the PA to operate with a degree of pseudo- sovereignty, enough to keep perpetuating the myth that peace and a Palestinian state are imminent. Meanwhile, illegal Jewish colonies throughout the West Bank grow unhindered, funded, often directly, by Washington.(2)

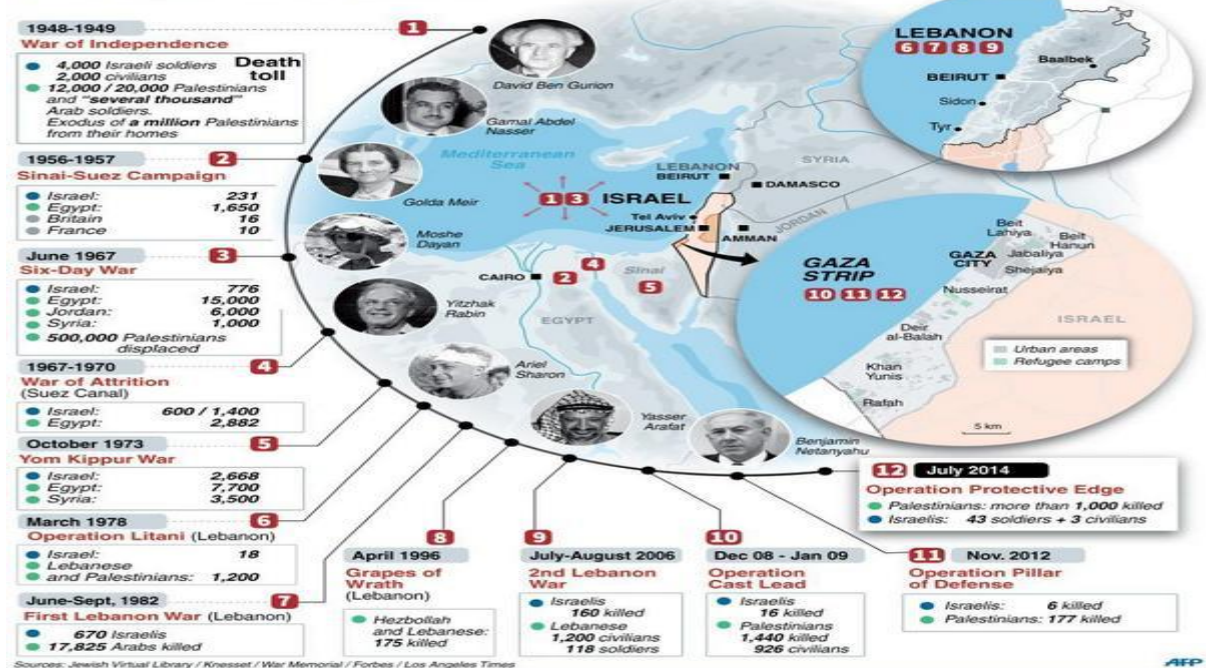
Dormant Nuances of the Peace Process

Occupied East Jerusalem, one of the core issue for Palestinians, has never been placed on the table in the first place, as far as Israel is concerned. It was left to the 'final status negotiations', when the 'peace process' was at its height in the early and mid-nineties. Israeli leaders made it clear that the status of Jerusalem, deemed in Zionist thinking as the 'eternal and undivided capital for the Jewish people', was non-negotiable. Although in defiance of international law, Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1981, effectively banishing Palestinians from their holy city. The city's population has been in constant decline. The ratio of Palestinian its Arabs compared to Israeli Jews has significantly dwindled, as the Israeli government routinely expanded the boundaries of 'Greater Jerusalem' and strategically wedges Jewish settlers and settlements between the shrinking pockets of Arab population centers.(3)

Gaza is an entirely different, yet even more tragic story. Soon after late Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon 'disengaged' from Gaza in 2005, Israel declared the Gaza Strip a hostile territory. That designation meant that Israel treats Gaza like a foreign entity, despite the fact that Israel only redeployed its troops from inside the Strip to the outskirts, leaving nearly 2 million people in a constant state of siege and war. Thousands perished this way, trapped between Israeli forces at the deadly border, the Israeli navy at sea and warplanes dropping bombs, leaflets, or just hovering above. The plight of Gaza is worsening.

In the background, Palestinian officials were corralled repeatedly to talk of peace with their Israeli partners in various political platforms; sometimes openly, oftentimes secretly. For many years, Palestinians were paralyzed in these juxtaposed realities, a tragic existence and continued resistance on the ground, and an interminable, futile political charade perpetuated by American funds, Israeli strategic interests and the PA's pursuit of its own self-seeking agenda.

The Arab-Israeli conflict



History of conflict (AFP)

Reversing the 'Process'

The peace process was launched in secrecy in Oslo, Norway in the early 1990's. When the news of the agreement was made public, leading to the famous handshake at the White House between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat in September 1993, many Palestinians were skeptical; but many more were also hopeful. The talks were meant to end decades-long injustices that impeded Palestinian rights for far too long, they were told by their own leadership.

Yet last December, U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, pledging to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, declaring that the city has been taken 'off the table' as far as the peace process is concerned.(4)

Trump's decision took many in the PA by surprise, as their entire political apparatus was created and sustained with the help of Washington. With Trump's new declaration, the PA found itself with little legitimacy and few options. Instead of recognizing the entire peace process - as a strategy to achieve liberation - has failed, PA officials went shopping for new sponsors of the peace games hoping that the status quo could be maintained, just a little bit longer. (5)

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and his men are yet to accept that the game is over. They are unsurprisingly yet to take any responsibility for going along with the U.S. and Israeli strategy, which, from the very start, was aimed at empowering Israel and trapping Palestinians.

Nearly a year and a half before the U.S. Jerusalem decision, then Republican Presidential Candidate, Donald Trump, stood before the influential American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to make his case of why the lobby and its powerful backers should support his bid for the White House. "When the United States stands with Israel, the chances of peace really rise and rises exponentially. That's what will happen when Donald Trump is president of the United States," he declared in March 2016. It was then that he announced that, once he is in the Oval Office, the United States "will move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem."(6)

Collusion between the Trump team and Israel began even before he walked into the White House. They worked together to undermine United Nations efforts in December 2016 to pass a resolution condemning Israel's continued illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories, including Jerusalem. Names of individuals affiliated with the administration's policy towards Israel spoke volumes of the extremist nature of the government's future outlook. David Friedman, Trump's bankruptcy attorney, was picked as U.S. Ambassador to Israel; Jason Greenblatt was appointed as the administration's top Middle East negotiator. Both men were known for their hardline, pro-Israel views – views that were seen as dangerous even by mainstream U.S. media.(7) Chosen to lead the 'peace' efforts was Trump's son-in-law and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's good friend Jared Kushner. Trump's dedication to Israel was clearly not fleeting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iwb45g6IS-Y>

The Politics of Winning Time

Still, it would be unfair to pin the blame on Trump alone. What differentiates the Trump administration from previous governments is that, simply he had the audacity to end an American political gambit that lasted decades, supporting Israel unconditionally; while posing as a neutral honest party. His administration's support for Israel is now blatant undaunted by the need to pay lip service to peace.

In fact, this gambit is even older than the state of Israel itself, and the 'special relationship' that supposedly bonds Washington and Tel Aviv. Western bias towards Israel and the Zionist movement, which served as the ideological foundation for Israel, can be traced back to over a century, starting with the Balfour Declaration – where Britain committed to establishing a Jewish State over the Palestinian homeland in 1917. The 'peace process' was the latest phase of that inherit Western partiality and unwavering commitment to Israel and the Zionist movement.

Knowing that despite occasional censure of the Israeli occupation, the West is squarely on Israel's side, and that US financial and military support (Israel receives more American handouts than the rest of the world combined) is unlikely to run dry any time soon, the Israeli government is in no hurry to achieve any kind of peace. Maintaining the status quo

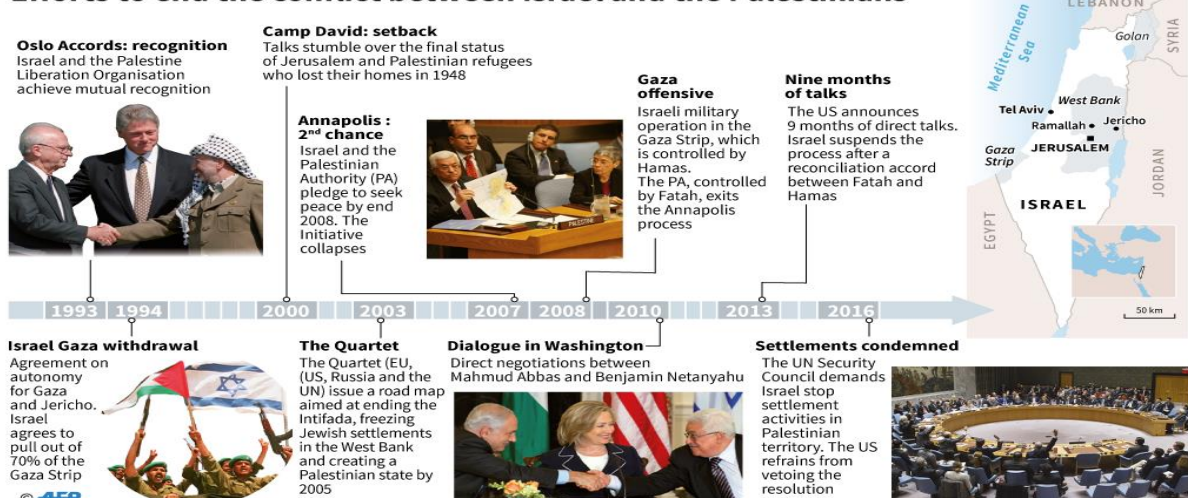
of the occupation, while slowly establishing more Jewish settlements; a strategy that Israeli historian Ilan Pappé refers to as 'incremental genocide'(8) are far safer strategies for the Israeli government than granting Palestinians even the most minimum of rights.

"History suggests that a strategy of waiting would serve the country well," wrote Nathan Thrall referring to Israel's quest to win time at the expense of the Palestinians. "From the British government's 1937 Peel Commission partition plan and the UN partition plan of 1947 to UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the Oslo Accords, every formative initiative endorsed by the great powers has given more to the Jewish community in Palestine than the previous one."(9)

Winning time has thus served as the core of the Israeli strategy towards the Palestinians. From an Israeli viewpoint, it is working quite well. Illegal Jewish settlements or colonies built on Palestinian land occupied after the war of 1967 are a reality that makes the word 'occupation' rather lacking. Military occupations are meant to be temporary, a phase before the occupied land returns to some state of normalcy. What Israel has done is far more sinister. Currently, there are anywhere between 600,000 and 750,000 illegal Jewish settlers, living in approximately 150 settlements and 119 outposts (settlements that are yet to be 'legalized' by the Israeli government.) These illegal entities control nearly 86 percent of the total size of Jerusalem and 42 percent of the West Bank.(10)

That growth in number of settlements, outposts and settlers never stopped. In fact, it was even accelerated during the futile years of the peace process, providing ample evidence that Israel had never, at any stage of its engagement with the Palestinians intended to respect the so-called 'land for peace formula' or any of the other axioms introduced by the Oslo discourse.

Efforts to end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians



timeline (AFP)

PA: History of Miscalculations

So, why did the Palestinian leadership go along with what is clearly a damaging political program? History is of essence, and successive American administrations were always at the core of this history.

In 1987, a popular Palestinian uprising (The First Intifada) renewed regional and international focus on the PLO - at the time languishing in Tunisia - five years after the latter was forced to leave its positions in Lebanon under US and Israeli pressure.

On November 12, 1988, the PLO's Palestine National Council convened in Algiers to approve of a political strategy based on UN Resolutions 242, 338, the habitual US condition for engaging the Palestinian leadership. The resolutions, which passed following the wars of 1967 and 1973 respectively had limited the discussion on Palestine to that of the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Under intense American pressure, the PLO relented, and it too, accepted the U.S. political agenda. Based on new priorities, Arafat announced an independent Palestinian state from exile, one that is to be established in the Occupied Territories, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It also meant that the PLO had shifted the struggle to achieving statehood through a negotiated settlement through an international peace conference on the basis of the aforementioned UN resolutions.(11)

Still, the United States argued that the PNC statement did not qualify as an 'unconditional' acceptance of Resolution 242 and continued to press Arafat for more concessions.(12) In response, Arafat flew to Geneva and addressed the UN General Assembly on December 13, 1988, since Washington refused to grant him an entry visa to speak at the UN headquarters in New York. He labored to be even more specific. "The PLO will work to reach a comprehensive peaceful settlement between the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli struggle, including the state of Palestine and Israel, as well as the other neighboring states, within the framework of an international conference for peace in the Middle East... in accordance with Resolutions 242 and 338".(13)

The United States was still obstinate, compelling Arafat, on the next day to once again, reiterate the same previous statements, this time, explicitly renouncing "all forms of terrorism, including individual, group or state terrorism."(14) That was only the start of the hemorrhaging of PLO compromises, which were only met with mere Israeli acceptance of the PLO as a representative of the Palestinian people.

The PLO then worked at two different fronts: on one hand, it labored to achieve international recognition of the newly-declared state. On the other hand, it coveted American validation. Soon after the Algiers declaration, 117 countries recognized the state

of Palestine, and the United States finally agreed to hold low-level meetings between American officials and a PLO delegation in Tunisia.(15)

For the Palestinian leadership, those early responses indicated that its strategy was working. What it failed to understand, and, sadly, is still unable to fathom until this day, is that its own strategy was already calculated into a grand American strategy to pacify the PLO and weaken, and eventually completely sideline Palestinian resistance.

Indeed, the long and arduous journey of the peace process starting with the Oslo Accords in the early and mid-1990s, the Wye River Memorandum (1998), the Camp David summit (2000), the Taba negotiations (2001), the Road Map to Peace (2003) and everything after and in between mounted to naught at the end as far as the Palestinians were concerned.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQrbPhrPJ7I>

In March-April 2002, Israeli army tanks crossed the imaginary line that supposedly separated Palestinian land, that was controlled by Israel and areas located in the autonomous areas controlled by the PA. Ironically, the peace 'achievements' of years evaporated in hours.

Israel was clearly not serious about achieving a just resolution to its conflict with the Palestinians, and by extension the Arabs, through a negotiated agreement. Its leaders spoke of painful compromises yet continued to impose the same painful reality on the Palestinian people. It merely used the peace process to break down any semblance of unity among its enemies. It first broke down Arab unity by isolating Egypt through the signing of the unilateral Camp David Accords in 1979(16), and eventually breaking down Palestinian unity through Oslo 14 years later.

Although the peace process was demonstrably a farce, the Palestinian leadership (whether in the PA or the PLO) continued their desperate attempts to resuscitate it. For the Palestinian leadership, investing in the US-led project was the last bridge they wished not to burn. Trump's decision to relocate his country's embassy signaled that the last bridge was indeed up in flames.

Throughout endless years of talks, the United States and Israel have jointly conspired to ensure Israeli dominance. They used the peace process to buy time to achieve their objectives to the last. The process is now complete. Understanding this well, but realizing its lack of options, PA President Mahmoud Abbas is now demanding an international conference in June of this year.(17) His 'chief negotiator', Saeb Erekat is threatening to implement the recommendation made by the PLO's Central Council last January to suspend recognition of Israel.(18) The threats are not an indication of a new strategy, but rather the lack thereof.

New Beginning?

From American and Israeli viewpoints, the peace process could be considered a success. They allowed the United States to define the political agenda in the Middle East and for Israel to shape the physical reality of the Occupied Territories in any way it found suitable. The Palestinian leadership emerged as the biggest loser. It first sat at the 'negotiation table' to talk of borders, refugees, water, territories and Jerusalem, only to be left with nothing at the end. It has lost both credibility and legitimacy.⁽¹⁹⁾ The space in which it was permitted to negotiate withers year after year.

Now, the Palestinian people must reflect on this current harsh reality, but also hope for a new beginning, one that requires neither a peace process or even a Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian people should now reclaim what the 'peace process' has robbed from them throughout all of these years: unity, the rearticulating of national priorities, a and new strategy ⁽²⁰⁾, one that is based on resistance and international pressure on Israel and its American benefactor, for these two have indeed been the 'obstacles to peace' all along.

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