

Obama needs to get tough with Israel if he is to retain any credibility and fulfill his 'Cairo promise'

ANALYSIS

By Zulaikha Abdullah



Obama in Cairo

Yesterday's approval by the Jerusalem municipal planning committee to proceed with the construction of 900 new housing units in the illegal Gilo settlement located in East Jerusalem has dealt the stalled peace process yet another death blow. It underscores right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's outright defiance of the international community and conveys a disdain for any meaningful peace negotiations as well as for those endeavouring to make them a reality.

Earlier this year, the U.S government backed the Palestinian demand for a freeze on all settlement construction as part of a broader deal aimed at the resumption of peace talks. However, Netanyahu's insistence on proceeding with construction of 2,500 apparently pre-planned housing units within existing settlements resulted in a deadlock. Since then U.S president Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S regional envoy George Mitchell have worked to bring the two sides together. This announcement, which flatly disregards direct U.S requests to halt the new construction programme, not only seriously undermines the Obama administration but so too does it undermine the Palestinian Authority, who has refused to resume talks based on this principle, as well as French President Nicolas Sarkozy who has, for the past week, been in high profile talks with leaders in the region pushing for a peace conference.

Israel claims that Gilo, which houses 40,000 Israelis, is an integral part of Jerusalem, and thus exempt from any negotiated freeze to facilitate talks. Mr. Netanyahu considers the whole of Jerusalem to be Israel's indivisible capital though it captured East Jerusalem from Jordan during the 1967 war and later annexed it in violation of international law. The international community continues to consider East Jerusalem occupied territory, nevertheless Israel rejects efforts to restrict building there.



Palestinians view the intended construction of these mainly four and five bedroom luxury apartments as a flagrant provocation. For them, East Jerusalem is non-negotiable as the capital of their future state and Israel's actions clearly jeopardise this. Saeb Erekat, chief negotiator for the Palestinians Authority strongly condemned the move saying: *"It shows that it is meaningless to resume negotiations when this goes on."* The intense frustration felt by the Palestinian Authority on account of Israel's unyielding stance last week resulted in the announcement that they are seeking UN endorsement for the declaration of an independent Palestinian state. In response, certain Israeli ministers called for the unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank containing settlements. Thus, the fear that Israel's continued settlement expansion along with its efforts to alter East Jerusalem's demographic makeup are aimed at permanently retaining the territory are not unfounded.



A statement issued by the British consulate in Jerusalem stated that *"The Foreign Secretary has been very clear that a credible deal involves Jerusalem as a shared capital. Expanding settlements on occupied land in East Jerusalem makes that deal much harder. So this decision on Gilo is wrong and we oppose it"* David Milliband elsewhere expressed his view that settlements constituted an obstacle in working out final settlement between Israel and Palestine and warned against alternatives to a two state solution. When MEMO asked what steps the British government was planning to take in light of this latest development, we were told that the issue of settlements is raised on a regular basis whenever there is a planned meeting between Israeli and British officials and that the issue will be raised in the next meeting.

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A statement from White House spokesman Robert Gibbs expressed 'dismay' at this very public Israeli snub and acknowledged its inevitably negative impact on their efforts to broker peace. In its rare criticism of Israel, the White House additionally voiced its objections to Israeli practices within Jerusalem, such as widespread evictions and the demolition of Palestinian homes and alluded to the obvious possibility of Israeli actions being construed as an effort to unilaterally torpedo negotiations. The barely perceptible clarification and toughening of the US stance could signal a shift in its tactics



after George Mitchell's untiring journeying to the region and Clinton's back-peddalling and softly-softly approach have gotten the U.S nowhere. *To the contrary, its apparent impotence and inability to force a dependant state to back down concerning an issue upon which there is international consensus does not bode well for Obama's credibility - as a peace broker or otherwise.* But do Obama and his administration have the courage to do what is necessary to get peace on the road?

Perhaps Obama has played into Netanyahu's hands; by demanding total freeze on settlements he helped galvanise Palestinian leaders, who had perhaps previously been open to the idea of land swap in principle, behind what some consider an unworkable demand; he unwisely put pressure on Mahmoud Abbas over the Goldstone report and has been discredited in the eyes of the Israeli mainstream. Regional tensions are rising once again and the Israeli-U.S relationship has reached a low. In this political 'chicken' match Netanyahu insists on playing with Obama; whether it is meant to force re-affirmation of the U.S-Israeli alliance, as a symbolic show of strength or as payback for what some Israeli officials see as the Obama administration having deliberately picking on settlements in order to cause them maximum embarrassment, Obama blinked first.

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Nevertheless, all is not lost. A lesson may lie in the 1990 gambit played by George Bush Sr. in a similar stand off on settlements when he sought to link a \$10 billion dollar loan guarantee to settlement policy. The courageous bid ultimately failed but not before having faced down the Israeli Lobby and forced Israel to accede to US demands and participate in the international conference in Madrid.

Obama must stick by his principles and policy to end this conflict by all means available to him if he is to retain any credibility and fulfill his 'Cairo promise'. He needs to get tough and in the case of Israel, this would most obviously entail withholding military and economic aid or applying sanctions. What is needed at this point is action and results. And as must surely be realized, there has to be quid pro quo.

