

John Kerry's Initiative: Bump in the Road or End of the Road?

An Edited Talk by Ziad Abu Zayyad and Hillel Schenker, Co-Editors, Israel-Palestine Journal

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Ziad Abu Zayyad, a veteran Palestinian journalist, member of Parliament and Hillel Schenker, a long time Israeli journalist and peace activist, spoke April 14 at a forum sponsored by the Foundation for Middle East Peace, Americans for Peace now, and Churches for Middle East peace. An edited transcript follows.

Phil Wilcox, President, Foundation for Middle East Peace: After eight months of very intensive diplomacy by Secretary of State John Kerry, to persuade Israel and Palestine to engage in real negotiations to create a two-state peace, the impasse has deepened. Today we will get a view on the ground from two veteran peacemakers: Hillel Schenker and Ziad Abu Zayyad.

Hillel Schenker: It is clear that without Secretary Kerry's determination, desire, stick-to-it-ivity, we would not have had any talks. However, for there to be any chance for this American effort to succeed, it is absolutely essential for Kerry and the Obama administration to put a U.S. paper on the table which defines solutions to all of the core issues. The failure to do this was the main reason for the failure of Bill Clinton at Camp David in 2000. Clinton finally proposed "parameters" for a final status peace, but when Arafat and Barak did not say yes unconditionally, Clinton withdrew the paper.

If we're going to move forward at all, this round cannot end the way the 2000 talks ended, with collapse and a blame game. Kerry and Obama, must say, "Here are the guidelines and parameters for what is needed." This may not be possible, given American politics, but there is still a chance to do this, and succeed.

If the talks end finally April 29, anyone who has delusions about managing the conflict and maintaining the status quo, is mistaken. The Palestinians will be going to the international institutions. Also there will be an increase, both by the Palestinians and by the international community, of some forms of targeted boycott, at least of the settlements. The Israeli business community is already very concerned about this. There was a campaign in the newspapers by a group calling themselves "Breaking the Impasse" of Israeli and Palestinian businessmen saying to Netanyahu without progress, the Israeli economy is going to suffer.

In the Israeli peace camp, we have a Palestinian-Israeli peace NGO forum consisting of about 50 Israeli and 30 Palestinian peace, human rights and democracy organizations. One of the ideas that's being formulated is that there should be a new Security Council resolution to update Resolutions 242 and 338, which will provide the international guidelines for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, and a reiteration of the two state principle of Resolution 181. The new Security Council resolution would be based on the 1967 borders in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, with mutually agreed land swaps, all of which the League of Arab States have accepted.

The majority of Israelis and Palestinians continue to support a two-state solution and yet they do not believe that it can be achieved in the foreseeable future. What we need is leadership on both sides. Also on the Palestinian side, the divisions between Fatah and Hamas, and also within Fatah itself, must be resolved. If Netanyahu is not ready or willing or capable of continuing negotiations, then we need an alternative Israeli leadership to be a partner. We already have a Palestinian partner. The big question is, do we have an Israeli partner? With the election of Isaac Herzog as the head of Labor in place of Shelly Yachimovich, there is now an opposition that supported the 1967 borders and dividing Jerusalem. It's very courageous of Herzog to say this.

In the current Knesset and political configuration, it is conceivable to see an alternative coalition, particularly if alliances are created with two critical groups. One is the ultra-orthodox, who are not as inherently opposed to political compromise as the nationalist right-wing religious movements of Bennett's Habayit Yehudi. An alliance with the Israeli-Palestinian Arabs is also possible. Herzog has said I'm ready to reach out to all of them. This is not easy, but it's possible at the next elections and it's possible in the meantime if Habayit Yehudi leaves the coalition and Labor is invited to join.

It would be preferable if it were a right-wing leader signing the peace agreement, like when Begin signed with Egypt, because there will be fierce opposition from the extreme right and from the settlers. So if it were a Sharon or an Olmert, it would be far better than a Herzog. But we don't have Sharon with us, Olmert has destroyed himself, and Tzipi Livni is not an effective politician.

So right now we're in the midst of turmoil. No matter what happens, nothing will stand still. Thank you.

Ziad Abu Zayyad: We have three pillars in this conflict: the Israelis, the Palestinians and the Americans. I will try to summarize what they think about their role and what each side is doing.

With the Palestinians, I think, amazingly, President Abbas is still committed to the negotiations. People always remember him saying, "my first option is negotiations, my second option is negotiations, my third option is negotiations." But Abbas is in a very difficult situation in Palestine. His people are very disappointed. They are suffering from the Israeli occupation, and from the aggression of the Israeli settlers, who are conducting attacks daily against our people. Palestinians have lost hope that negotiations can produce anything. In spite of all that, President Abbas is still committed to negotiations with the Israelis. But he has to prove to his people that his efforts have not been futile, that he will not leave them to suffer for nothing, and that at the end of the day he will deliver something.

I'm not sure whether he will succeed, but I can tell you that he is in a very difficult situation vis-à-vis his people, who have lost their faith in the peace process. So we are waiting to see what will happen.

About the Israelis, I feel, and perhaps many of you share the view, that the current Israeli government is not interested in the negotiations, nor in the peace process. But they are ingenious in diverting attention from the substance of the problem to marginal issues. When the real problem is the occupation. Our people want to see a Palestinian state. They want to live in peace, dignity and security. The Palestinian negotiators wanted to negotiate about borders, believing that if we agree on borders of the Palestinian state, then we can discuss all other related issues. Netanyahu from the very beginning insisted that he wanted to negotiate security arrangements, and later on he invented

the idea of recognizing Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Thus, everybody was talking about security guarantees and recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, instead of land, which is the core of the conflict.

The Palestinians cannot recognize Israel as the “nation-state of the Jewish people” for a very simple reason. Israel as a Jewish state is embodied in Resolution 181. Resolution 181 speaks about dividing Palestine into two states and one international zone, an Arab state and a Jewish state. So I myself, personally, and I’m sure that there are others like me, we have no problem with recognizing Israel as a “Jewish state”, because it is a Jewish state. But our problem is with the demand to recognize Israel as the “nation-state of the Jewish people”. In 1948, after the Nakba, many Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and lands, and became refugees. A very small number of them remained, but now they are known as Israeli Arabs, or Arab citizens of Israel. They are about 20 percent of the total population of Israel. From our point of view, to recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people is to deny the right of these Palestinian-Israeli citizens.

We have also a problem with the refugees of 1948. If we recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people, then the Palestinian refugees of 1948 have no right to claim the right of return to their homes or lands, or even to claim their right for compensation. No Palestinian leader will be able to recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people and deny the right of the Palestinians in Israel and the Palestinian refugees.

But all of a sudden, everybody now is asking, why don’t you recognize Israel? If we recognize Israel as the Jewish state, do you think this will solve the problem? We have been negotiating with the Israelis for more than 20 years. Every time they come with a new demand. When the Palestinians accept it, they make a new demand. So they have an endless list of demands on marginal issues which they force the Palestinians and the international community to deal with instead of focusing on the real problem of occupation, i.e. the Israeli settlements which are established in the Palestinian territories, and Jerusalem, where new settlements may undermine everything.

Yesterday we had meetings on the Hill and at the State Department. I was amazed. People are talking with us about recognizing the state of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. Nobody speaks about the settlers. They talk about the two-state solution.

Again, this general talk about the two-state solution is very misleading, because if you don’t define what you mean, it will mean nothing. The two-state solution from our point of view is a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel, on the borders of 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital. But the two-state solution which Netanyahu speaks about or some other Israelis speak about is totally different from what we want. Sometimes they speak about a state in the air, without any control or sovereignty on the earth. The Israeli people want a peace agreement with the Palestinians. But the leaders are trying to buy time.

When it comes to the Americans, I’ve been involved in negotiations at different stages. I was in 1985 with the group which started trying to open the way for a dialogue with the PLO. I was in Madrid and in Washington. After Oslo I was negotiating in Taba and in Cairo. All along the way we were meeting with American diplomats who always said the U.S. could facilitate the negotiations but could not interfere in them. This approach has been a total failure, because it means negotiations between two sides, one of whom is strong, occupies the land, and can twist our hand and hold it behind our back.

So the Palestinians have become a hostage. It's not only that we are weak. We are expected to give up any kind of resistance against the occupation. Any resistance is called terror. To prove to the world that we are not terrorists and that we are nice, disciplined, and law-abiding, we cannot do anything against the occupation, and we must repress our own people.

We are doing the job of security coordination well, and the Americans commend us. But what is the reward in return? Nothing. Some people who criticize the Palestinian Authority say it is becoming an agent of the occupation. We are doing the dirty job of devoting all our resources to protecting the occupation and the settlements, while Israel is not delivering anything in return.

As for Secretary Kerry, I believe there was no real serious effort by any American diplomat before Kerry to do anything. I admire Kerry for his great efforts. But he started in the wrong way by trying to talk first to Netanyahu about everything before going to the Palestinians. He thought that if he could give an answer to Netanyahu's security demands and his other demands, then he could get something in return for the Palestinians. But Netanyahu took what he wanted from Kerry, and gave nothing in return. This is not the way to mediate between the parties. He should have learned from the experience of former American mediators who tried to do the same thing and failed.

We heard in the last few days that Kerry is putting the blame on Israel because they did not release the last portion of the Palestinian prisoners and because of the announcements of building hundreds of new houses in the settlements.

As for the release of prisoners, the Israelis claimed this was a big concession, it was not. There were 104 prisoners who were arrested before the Oslo process, before the peace process started between the PLO and Israel. Ironically, many of the people who gave orders to those guys to carry out operations against Israel are now VIPs in Ramallah and moving freely, while the prisoners are still sitting in jail! These people should have been released immediately after the signature of the Oslo agreement, because there should have been a new era after Oslo. Some were not released. The current leadership feels a moral obligation towards them. Most of them are sick with heart problems, cancer, or paralysis. These people should have been released a long time ago. But they are not the central Palestinian cause. The Palestinian problem is regaining their land.

To conclude, what is the situation now on the ground? Hillel spoke about the two-state solution, but now we have one de facto state. Israel is integrating the settlements in the West Bank into Israel by infrastructure, roads, the electricity network, water supplies, and by the telephone system. If we look at the network of the highways, they are often for the benefit of the settlers only. So Israel is creating one state only for the Jews. This is the beginning of an apartheid regime. Maybe this is what the Israeli right wing wants? They don't want to allow any process to start that may cause the withdrawal of Israel from the Occupied Territories. I hope that the recent American statements that blamed Israel for the failure of the Kerry mission reflect a new American policy. I hope this administration will be different than previous U.S. administrations and will take practical steps to make Israel understand that they cannot keep us as hostages forever. We are encouraged by the new signals coming from Europe about boycotting the Jewish settlements. We believe that without pressure from Washington and the international community, Israel will do nothing.