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A Bridge to Nowhere: The Futility and Peril of the American approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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RAFAEL REUVENY, JUL 15 2011

It's déjà vu watching the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships continue across the U.S.-built bridge to nowhere under the watchful and guiding eye and still deep, though increasingly dwindling, financial pocket of the United States. Had this road not been so tragic and perilous for the three actors, and in fact for the world as a whole, it could have easily won the title of 'The Perfect Farce'.

American attempts to resolve the deadly Israeli-Palestinian conflict have essentially been going non-stop since 1967, when Israel began occupying lands from its neighbors in Jordan, Egypt and Syria. The Americans have declared their intentions to build a bridge between the two sides and push them to meet somewhere in the middle.

Lots of American energy has gone into building this bridge. From time to time, speeches are made on the need to resolve the conflict by Israeli, Palestinians and American leaders. Promises are given and hands are shaken. Intermediate agreements are signed. Leaders and messengers take first class trips across the ocean and back for these endeavors.

As they engage in these activities, these leaders and their messengers stay in beautiful hotels and resorts. They eat good meals, they meet in secrecy, they meet in public, they talk to the press, and they talk to the electronic media. At times, things get out of control and threats are made, at other times leaders and their messengers embrace and smile, and then... nothing – the American-built bridge leads to nowhere, the conflict continues, people die and are injured and the misery goes on without any sign of stopping anytime soon. And then the cycle repeats.

In the meantime, the Israeli and Palestinian people watch bewildered, and at times actively participate in acts of reciprocal violence. Israeli military forces control the roads in the occupied Judea and Samaria and surround Palestinian cities. A few thousands Palestinian workers go to Israel daily to do the menial jobs Israelis refuse to do. Militants on both sides attack each other, at times leading to loss of life. Israeli forces go on the offensive, Palestinian militants – or freedom fighters depending on one's perspective – fire rockets and mortars at Israeli civilians and soldiers. Israeli helicopters and commando forces hunt them down, and then this cycle too, repeats.

These cycles have been going on now for many years; at least since 1991 when Israelis and Palestinians were literally forced by President George H. Bush to come to Madrid and begin peace talks after more than four years of Palestinian revolt and Israeli violent repression. This was particularly so for Israeli Prime Minister Shamir, that old right wing 1948 warrior that refused to let go of even one square inch of the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria.

For an outside observer these two endless, ongoing cycles may seem inexplicable, strange, and yes, even stupid. After all, we know the disputed geographical areas involved are smaller than say half the State of Maryland. The distance between the areas in which Israelis and Palestinians are a majority are a few miles, at times much less. The disputed land is not known for its abundant natural resources, and, as Israel learned in the first Iraq War of 1991, and the Second Lebanon War of 2006, these occupied territories have no strategic importance in an era of long range missiles and rockets.

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On the other hand, it seems clear that the two sides would gain much from economic cooperation. The land has much to offer to the world, it is the home of both Judaism and Christianity, and Israelis and Palestinians are both full of business initiatives, both have a mentality of “let’s cut bureaucratic corners and do it” and are eager to make money in the game of world capitalism.

Then why don’t they make peace, if so? And who is to blame for this continuous impasse? Is it the Israelis? Or is it the Palestinians? Or perhaps there is something else going on? Indeed, there is, and simply and perhaps some may feel, starkly and unjustifiably, this something else is the American position since the Six Day War of 1967.

In other words: There is no Israeli-Palestinian peace because of U.S. policy. But hold on, the typical American may counter: The U.S. government has been sponsoring the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations in the Middle East for years now. There have been numerous peace conferences under U.S. guidance in the U.S. and in other countries. U.S. officials have visited the region numerous times, engaged in shuttle diplomacy, met with leaders, and offered peace plans. And in the recent years the U.S. has given hundreds of millions of dollars each year to the Palestinian authorities to prop up their economy following the devastation Israel inflicted on their territories during the more than six years of their second revolt of September 2000.

Yes, the U.S. has done all that, but it has also done something else, something that stands at the very center of the conflict, is the cause of the conflict, and is the primary, cross that, the *only* reason the U.S. has led the two sides on a bridge to nowhere: The U.S. has enabled and protracted the Israeli occupation, and by far its most destructive impact: the Israeli colonialism in the occupied territories.

Before I put forward my reasons for putting the full blame on U.S. shoulders, I must attend to the following question. In what way, if so, has Israel been a colonial power in the full historical sense of the word? The answer is really simple. It is not rocket science. It is not even a question that falls within the realist-liberal-Marxist-constructivist theoretical divide in the field of International Relations. No, none of that is really needed. It is all about empirics, cold empirics, clear as the sun in the day, and as the stars in the sky.

Israel has never stopped building or expanding existing settlements in the Gaza Strip (until 2005) and Judea and Samaria since 1967. Hundreds of thousands of settlers have moved their lives to these areas over the years. Today, there are more than half a million Jewish settlers in Judea and Samaria living in more than one hundred settlements, often situated in the best areas of land.

The Israeli government has subsidized the move of Israeli settlers from Israel proper to the occupied territories, and defended them militarily. It has given settlers land seized from Palestinians, employed many of them, and built the infrastructure for their settlements, including schools, public buildings, roads, water and sewage systems, and assisted their business to thrive based on cheap Palestinian work, and on and on and on. It has fought their wars with rebellious Palestinians, it had controlled Palestinian life with road blocks, sieges, and numerous restrictions on their daily life, including the use of land and water, and it has employed rough means, better said, a very heavy military hand, whenever Palestinians have risen to protest their miserable existence and have tried, at times forcefully, to break the Israeli shackles.

These are the very hallmarks of the European colonizers in their colonies and settlements since the 17th century, as well as the American colonizers in the Wild West, the Philippines, and the informal American colonizers in Latin America. Some colonizers did it more than others, but they all engaged in this to some extent.

Indeed, the Jewish settlements have continued to grow in area, and the Jewish settlers have continued to grow in numbers even after the arguably well-meaning Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared a complete freeze on settlement expansion following the 1993 Oslo Accord. I say ‘arguably’ because, as we all know, ‘the proof is in the pudding’, and talk is cheap. In fact, by the infamous Camp David summit of 2000, the failure of which led to the second, extremely violent, Palestinian revolt, the number of settlers in the Palestinian Territories had doubled since Rabin took office.

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When it comes to the settlements, it has never really mattered which party is leading the government in Israel; be it the center left Labor, the right wing Likud, or the new center Kadima (forward in Hebrew) party. Sure, the Labor governments talked about returning land to the Palestinians, and the Likud governments refused until 2009 to recognize the Palestinians even had a right of political self-determination (let alone return any lands to them), and the Kadima governments have painted themselves as the responsible logicians that would give some land to the Palestinians and retain some land in Israeli hands, and strike a rational deal. But all of these governments, since 1967, have never ceased building or expanding existing settlements.

The current Likud government of Prime Minister Netanyahu is no different from any of these previous governments. If anything, despite all Netanyahu's talk about Israeli willingness to make painful territorial concessions, he has intensified the rate of settlement expansion. This, of course, should have been expected, for it is a right wing government *par excellence*.

And how have the United States responded? There is really no other way to say it: The U.S. has turned into an enabler of Israeli colonialism, in the full historical sense of the word, much along the lines that it had supported the European colonialism in the first few decades after World War II in colonies such as Indonesia (the Dutch), Indochina (the French), Angola and Mozambique (the Portuguese), Kenya (the British), Algeria (the French, again), and until the late 1980s, in South Africa (the White Apartheid regime).

The United States provided these colonial powers foreign aid to rebuild their shattered economies after World War II, traded and formed other economic relationships with them, sold them arms and military technologies, and loaned them money, all which enabled them to fight their wars of decolonization as they refused to let go of their colonies in the face of indigenous revolts and demands for political self-determination.

The U.S., of course, was aware of the moral problem associated with this support. A country founded on the principle of freedom for all is preventing in its actions freedom for others, and enabling its proxies, or allies (depending on one's view) to repress others. Still, all of the U.S. presidents after 1945 have done it, and I say 'all the U.S. presidents' because even though European colonialism has long been gone and the South African White Apartheid regime has collapsed, Israeli colonialism is still going strong, with no end in sight.

Why the United States had taken this line could easily be the subject of a full blown research project, but it all boils down to the belief that the policy of supporting its European colonial allies has served its national interests. And so there is a similar American belief today that supporting Israeli colonialism in Judea and Samaria is in the U.S. national interest also.

Sure, the United States has said many times that Israel should return to its pre Six Day War borders. All the U.S. presidents since 1967 have essentially told Israel the same thing: We are against the settlements, and you must return to the 1967 borders, or the Green Lines (those borders were drawn green on maps before 1967). When Israel refuses to do so, the U.S. expresses its anger and sends its presidents and delegates to the region; Israeli prime ministers and their delegates are summoned to the White House; the United States promises, cajoles, and threatens.

Then what? The delegates and their hosts have a good meal and a good night in their luxurious hotels, and then take a first class flight home. This scene was recently played out vividly with the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to Washington in the spring of 2011. A somber President Obama told the nation that Israel must return to the 1967 borders and any future Israeli-Palestinian agreement must be based on these lines. An equally somber Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu refused to do it and said so both in the media and in his address to Congress. The media buzzed, politicians on both sides argued, talking heads and pundits spoke and interpreted, journalists and TV and radio figures interviewed, the issue appeared on the first page of newspapers worldwide, including in the U.S. and in Israel, and in Judea and Samaria, and in the Arab and European and Asian and African and Latin American worlds, and... that was it.

Like a rebellious child facing an ineffective parent who threatens without consequences, Israel continues to move about its business of colonization, and the U.S. continues to foot the bill. Nothing has happened to American financial

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and military support of Israel for years now. It comes into Israeli pockets and army bases at certain times like clockwork. Actually, take the 'nothing happened' back, for the assistance has only grown over time since 1967, now reaching about \$3 billion a year.

The Obama administration, despite its talk and the famous Cairo speech of 2009, has been no different than other administrations. The George W. Bush administration was equally inept. Although it commissioned an Israeli aerial mapping firm to verify that settlement expansion did not take place beyond lines delineated by the U.S., this effort also fizzled out. Israel continued to expand settlements during the second Palestinian revolt that began in September 2000 and continued well into 2006. It has never really stopped.

The U.S. approach has always been cheap talk, though under the current Obama administration, it is cheaper than usual. The president seems unwilling or unable to follow through on his promise to end this conflict once and for all. While Benjamin Netanyahu knows full well who holds the purse strings, he seems empowered by the lack of U.S. follow-through.

Yet, the real puppeteer seems to be the Israeli settlers and their supporters on the Israeli right wing. They get what they want: more settlers and more settlements in every part of the West Bank. The recipients of billions of American dollars are thumbing their noses at us and determining the future of our national security. Where is the outrage by the Obama administration? Where is the change we were promised by the man who won the Nobel Peace Prize?

If anything, this administration is walking backward. Israelis and Palestinians were already talking directly to one another. Now the U.S. is begging them to talk indirectly.

And what will they discuss? A dissected and minimalized Palestinian state that will take the form of enclaves surrounded by Israeli settlements defended by Israeli forces; a state that will have its capital in some village on the outskirts of Greater Jerusalem—their gift from a domineering Israeli regime?

The irony is thick as the American president and his chief military leaders agree that the conflict costs the U.S. dearly in both blood and treasure. On one hand, we have an America that—so it says—went to Iraq and to Afghanistan, and to Libya, to deliver democracy and freedom to millions. But when it comes to Israel, somehow these ideas do not apply.

If the U.S. really wanted to end the conflict, it could do so tomorrow. Israel is not really an independent state. No state that receives all of its weapons and a hefty \$3 billion annually from Uncle Sam is independent. The American tax payer is enabling a foreign government to settle in lands it occupied more than 40 years ago and, in doing so, prevent the right of self-determination for millions of Palestinians.

If President Obama threatened to stop this colonialism by freezing existing weapon contracts and the flow of money, and be ready to follow on its threat with actions should the threat not work immediately, Israel would listen and do as she is told. For, at the end of the day, Israelis are no different from anyone else. Take away their ability to buy luxury goods, jeans, and hamburgers, and they will listen. Israel has been eating from America's table for decades, and they've grown accustomed to the handout.

Things are now getting more dangerous by the minute. The Palestinians have begun their preparations to approach the United Nations in September and ask for a vote in the Assembly to declare and recognize Palestinian independence. It is clear, as of now (July 2011) that they have a majority. Most nations in the world will vote yes. While a vote in the Assembly is largely symbolic and unlike a vote in the Security Council has no real teeth (and a vote in the Security Council will probably be vetoed by the U.S., as it had done facing almost all of the pro-Palestinian votes in the past), it can stir the pot and lead to a new Palestinian revolt in Judea and Samara. Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Syria and perhaps even Jordan (whose population majority is Palestinian) may intervene this time, now that the world has stated its moral support. From here, things can only get worse.

Just do it, President Obama. Stop the financial and military aid to Israel unless it begins in earnest steps leading to

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decolonization. Sure, it will be hard, perhaps impossible, to evacuate the large cities, particularly the 200,000 or so settlers living in the settlements around East Jerusalem, though still in the occupied territories. But there are ways to deal with it which would exchange lands on a one to one ratio between Israel and Palestinians. It is really not that hard to figure out.

Just do it, President Obama. You would be surprised to find out how powerful you really are. History shows that whenever the American lion has roared at the Israeli poodle, the poodle has listened and has promptly done what she has been told. Of course, she has to listen and do what she is told. Any country that receives almost all of its arms and about three billion dollars a year from another country, and who is being defended diplomatically by this country from being acted against by the United Nations' Security Council, is not really independent. It is a vassal state of a master state. Even though the master state may not fully realize, or may refuse to realize because of deeply rooted reasons that fall outside of the borders of this piece, it has all this power over its follower.

The irony of it is that by supporting the Israeli colonial project, the U.S. is not doing a favor for Israel; it is actually threatening its existence as a Jewish state, which all polls consistently find is what Israeli Jews want.

The point is this: Already the number of Jews and Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is about equal. Jews hold only a slim majority. Should the U.S. support of the Israeli colonialism continue, the conflict will not be solved, for Israel incurs no real cost in doing it, it is paid for by Uncle Sam. As of now, the Palestinians still want a state of their own. But when their numbers grow larger than that of Jews, they could justifiably argue the Israeli regime has turned into the former South African or Rhodesian apartheid, where a minority prevents self determination from a majority, and demand to form a bi-national state. The world community would likely impose sanctions on Israel, and the U.S. would eventually go along, just as the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions on South Africa over President Reagan's veto.

With sanctions in place, Israel would have no choice but to accept a bi-national state, just as the South African whites did. There is no reason to expect this state would retain its Jewish character, or be stable. Having a majority, the Palestinians would demand and vote for a law allowing the 1948 Palestinian refugees and their offspring to come back. They would, of course, go for it, and demand their confiscated properties, which Israelis have taken over when the refugees fled or, at times, driven out. It would be a mess, a sure receipt for a perpetual violent conflict.

I find it hard to believe that this is what the U.S. has in mind when it gives so much money and military support to Israel today. This is all the more unbelievable considering the anti-Americanism it faces in the Muslim world. Indeed, if the U.S. seeks to destroy Israel as a Jewish state, which of course it does not want to do, there are much cheaper and safer (for the U.S., that is) ways to go about it.

But then if the U.S. genuinely cares for Israel, which I believe it really does, it should force it to decolonize now. It would be much like a loving father cutting the financial support he gives to a son using it to buy heroin. It would be an act of love.

Just do it now, President Obama. And then, truly, you would deserve the Nobel Peace Prize you were awarded in Oslo.

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