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Article (Published version)

Original citation:

Tartir, Alaa (2010) ‘New’ direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations: doomed. [openDemocracy](#) (30 Sep 2010) Blog Entry.

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[Alaa Tartir](#) [1] 30 September 2010

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From Ramallah, a Palestinian student tries to explain to readers 'outside' how he thinks the negotiations appear 'internally' to Palestinian eyes.

In January 2010, I began researching for a PhD at the LSE. I wanted to pursue these studies partly in order to better understand the society that I was born into, Palestinian society, and why we still don't have our own state and freedom despite being involved in direct peace talks and negotiations for twenty years. Since I was born in 1984, I have never experienced freedom. I am from a family that comes from Al-Lud, a city in historical Palestine where what is now the Israeli Ben Gurion International Airport began to be built after they kicked out our families in the 1948 Nakhba. My family was forced to move to Ramallah, and I was born there. Therefore, I am a refugee, and I am still waiting to become a normal citizen. Meanwhile, I have figured out that for the Palestinians, at least, our country must live in us and not vice versa.

I witnessed the first intifada, the peace accords, although I was young, and I saw how a calm development period gave way to the second Intifada/Uprising and the duress of the re-occupation of the West Bank in 2002/3. I lost friends to the conflict and many others were arrested. In retrospect it seems almost dreamlike that I was able to come and go safely from the university there, when I think of the Israeli occupation checkpoints and their policies. However, I have been living there for a quarter of a century, trying to plant hope and waiting to see if we can harvest good outcomes.

Since the first of July, I have returned to Ramallah for my preliminary field research, and as I write this, am heading back to London tomorrow. These three months that I have spent in Ramallah and the West Bank, I mainly spent talking. I have interviewed many Palestinian Authority representatives, the Prime Minister, ministers, leaders. More importantly, I met there and talked about the situation and the restart of negotiations, to friends and ordinary citizens. I can claim that I met hundreds of people, most of them people I had never talked to before. The vast majority of them, including leaders of the Palestinian Authorities, believe what I am about to try and explain in this article. I have tried simply to translate the voices of the people in the streets of the West Bank, especially in Ramallah, so that they might reach the ears and eyes of listeners and readers elsewhere in the world.

While I was there, I went to many public gatherings that came out against the direct negotiations in their current uneven format. I felt the real anger inside people who wish for nothing other than peace and justice. During my three months' stay, I felt more than at any other time that people were desperate to be heard by their own leadership in particular. And this is what I believe they would like to say...

The last few months have witnessed an unprecedented level of diplomatic effort, led by the U.S. administration, aimed at reviving the direct 'peace' talks between the Palestinian Authority and its negotiators and their Israeli counterpart. The US administration was able to 'force' both Palestinians

and Israelis, along with the Jordanian and Egyptian leaderships, to sit at one table again, talk for hours on end, have nice dinners, and announce the re-commencement of direct talks despite a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty. So, what is 'new' about this? It may be argued that such meetings have occurred over the last 20 years and following each round of negotiation, 'history' teaches us that Palestinian life only becomes more difficult and complex. Indeed, the 'Hilliarian' year ahead will be full of old-new talks by the same people who have been negotiating for many years, without achieving any tangible success. In fact they have so far only procured an outstanding failure.

Unanswered questions scatter the surface: What kind of innovative diplomatic tools will Hillary Clinton use? Can these 'magical solutions' end the prolonged Israeli occupation and do away with the apartheid status of Palestinians? Can this preliminary and 'framework' peace talks be sufficient for creating an everlasting peace? Can people thirsty for peace and freedom accept again another 'framework' agreement instead of real positive changes on the ground? How long will ordinary citizens have to scour the news on TV before they can arrive at any glimpse of an understanding of what their 'leaders' are doing in Washington, Oslo, Geneva, Sharm El-Shakeh and elsewhere? Can illegitimate negotiators bring legitimate peace accords? And finally, is it possible to negotiate when you are not free? These are questions very difficult for the Palestinian negotiators to answer. However if their response is not clear, that of the Palestinian majority of ordinary citizens is obvious enough: these negotiations will fail sooner or later: they are doomed to failure.

Why is the Palestinian 'ordinary' man or woman in the street so certain about the ultimate failure of the negotiation when their leadership think differently? Put simply and bluntly, this is because the 'ordinary' citizens are the people who cross the checkpoints. They don't have the VIP cards; they suffer daily harassments by Israeli settlers; they suffer while crossing the 'Bridge' which their negotiators traverse with ease; their lands are confiscated and their houses are demolished; they strive to have sufficient clean water while their negotiators enjoy time out in the swimming pools or on the beach; they are the people who care about their rights in their land, while their negotiators care about their positions, cars and bodyguards; they are the people who can't compromise at the expense of their dignity, because they want to live freely. The difference between the Palestinian citizens and their negotiators can be listed forever. However, such inequalities can only partially explain this distance. What is key is that the negotiators, although they also live under occupation, are still far removed from listening to their citizens' demands, beliefs and perceptions. The Palestinian negotiators forget that those who afford them any legitimacy and credibility are their own people and not the people of Israel or the international community. The Palestinian negotiators forget that having all of the superficial trappings of a nation-state is not like having a real state.

Until this gap can be bridged between the Authority and its negotiators and the ordinary citizens, negotiations as a tool to end the Occupation remain fundamentally unpersuasive. When Palestinian ordinary citizens inform their negotiators about various issues that must be raised if renewed failure is to be avoided in the peace negotiation, their negotiators fly to Washington to 'apologise' to the Israelis for the disappointments that the Palestinians cause them. The Palestinian negotiators (the colonized) consider themselves partners with the colonizers - a typical slave mentality. The Palestinian negotiators have forgotten to read Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Azmi Bishara and others before going into negotiation. The Palestinian citizens told their negotiators, who are supposed to represent them, that you can't negotiate without having our support, you can't negotiate with the continuation of the Wall and settlements expansion and the creation of more isolated lands cut off in the West Bank. You can't negotiate while thousands of Palestinian are in Israeli prisons. You can't negotiate without having a clear national consensus, while isolating the role of Hamas and their supporters as key players in Palestinian life, while 1.5 million Palestinians are struggling to survive under the Israeli siege in Gaza. You can't negotiate while ignoring the other opposition leftist parties and civil society, while your jails are full of political prisoners; you can't negotiate while you oppress people who try to express their opposition to the direct talks, and you can't negotiate with the Israelis and at the same time apologise to them as if you were the problem. You can't negotiate with the same people who have failed so many times previously, that they forget that the problem is with the negotiators and not with the Cause.

The Palestinian negotiators have never understood the way Zionist ideology envisages the fate of Palestinian territory, spelled out very clearly by successive World Zionist Movement conferences from the sixth conference held in Basel in 1903 until the eleventh conference held in Vienna, in

1913. It can perhaps be best summarized as a myth that Palestine was uninhabited - a myth that duly had to be put into practice. The chauvinist principle is made quite clear in the demand to be given, 'a land without a people for a people without a land.' The Israeli occupying authorities' ideology is based on imposing a technique of colonization and hegemony that is different in type from experiences witnessed over the past century. Israeli colonization derives from a colonial ideology as well as a denial of the Palestinians' right to land. From an Israeli perspective, occupation of the Palestinian territory is not temporary and Israeli colonization is not only in place for economic gain, cultural hegemony, or annexation of strategic territories. Settlement activity throughout the occupied Palestinian Territories is the spine of Israeli policy and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was elected in order to maintain this policy and avoid the establishment of a Palestinian state. How can a 'negotiator' ignore such facts!

For all of these reasons ordinary Palestinian citizens believe that the new direct talks and rounds of negotiations will fail sooner or later. The regular meetings may progress well in relation to security arrangements and economic conditions. However, when the negotiators reach the 'serious and important' talks about the refugees, Jerusalem and the borders, all will vanish. So, the ordinary citizens ask why they need to waste more time? Why do the negotiators ignore all attempts to re-build Palestinian unity, preferring to satisfy the international powers rather than their own people? Why are the Palestinian negotiators so keen not to isolate the Israeli apartheid state? And why do they want to give the legitimacy to the occupier in such uneven positions which can only favour the colonizers?

There is after all, an alternative way forward. Firstly, the Palestinian leadership should consider the Israelis as the colonizer and not the partner in these negotiations. The Palestinian leadership shall remind the international community and all the people they are meant to represent that the Palestinian people are living under an apartheid Israeli regime and occupation. This will help the international community not to waste their time and money on trivial issues, but to address the problem at its roots. The international community and powers will finally recognise that the Israeli occupation is illegal, contradicting all human values and justice, and that the priority is to end the occupation rather than helping it to sustain itself. All the media chat and pragmatism in the world will not achieve success until stakeholders recognize that the Israeli occupation is the main obstacle to peace. Meanwhile, negotiations in their current settings can never bring any good news to Palestinians either inside or outside the occupied territories, simply because those who are negotiating are not free men. If negotiation will lead one day to the end of the occupation, it shall be because it is based on justice, equality and freedom.

Country or region: Palestine

Topics: Democracy and government
International politics

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 About the author

Alaa Tartir is a Palestinian PhD candidate in Development Studies and Global Governance at the London School of Economics, researching the role of good governance in state formation in Palestine. His research areas include international aid and development, non-governmental organizations, public policies, and politics. He is also a research fellow at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS.



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