ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

US-Palestine Relations After the Iran Deal

By: Mouin Rabbani, Diana Buttu, Ali Abunimah · September, 2015

Much of the discussion around the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent member states of the Security Council plus Germany) has centered on US relations with Israel. What of US relations with Palestine insofar as these are distinct from US-Israeli relations? How will they be impacted by the deal, if at all? And how should the Palestinians position themselves to avoid any fall-out? Al-Shabaka Policy Advisors Mouin Rabbani, Diana Buttu and Ali Abunimah tackle these questions. While their analysis differs in key respects, they share the view that there is little hope for a shift in US positions toward Palestine.

In what ways are US-Palestinian relations distinct from US-Israeli relations and/or US engagement in the now moribund peace process?

Mouin Rabbani I do not think it is possible to distinguish between US-Palestinian and US-Israeli relations; the United States conducts relations with the Palestinians as an extension of its relations with Israel rather than independently of them. Similarly, US engagement with Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy is also first and foremost an extension of American relations with Israel.

In practice this for Palestinians has meant that Israel, the United States, and Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy are indistinguishable. The agenda is set by Israel, endorsed and adopted by the United States, and promoted by it as American diplomacy. There are of course exceptions here and there, but these are ones that prove the

rule. When retired senior American officials refer to their role in this relationship as one of serving as "Israel's lawyer" vis-a-vis the Palestinians and particularly in the context of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy they're neither engaging in sound bites nor exaggerating. It is, as virtually any retired American official will tell you, an accurate description of reality.

Diana Buttu US-Palestinian relations are intimately and only linked to one issue: security for Israel. This relationship is not to the Palestinian people as a whole – for if it were, one would not see the US block efforts at reconstructing Gaza – but is only linked to this current Palestinian leadership and only insofar as this leadership continues to maintain security cooperation with Israel and continues to pay lip service to the defunct peace process. One can see this in relation to the various conditions placed upon US aid provided the Palestinian Authority (PA) when the PA attempts to move beyond the peace process by, for example, pursuing upgraded status before the United Nations.

Ali Abunimah When we talk about US-Palestinian relations, we must first ask which Palestinians? If we are talking about US relations with the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas then we are talking about a relationship between a superpower and its abject and subservient client. In this respect, US relations with the Abbas Authority are mediated through Israel and its lobby. For example, US aid to the PA is seen as part of US aid to Israel and it is always justified by the fact that the PA serves Israel by suppressing legitimate Palestinian resistance to Israel's apartheid regime. Any US or Israeli dissatisfaction with the Abbas Authority is always based on an assessment that the PA is not sufficiently subservient and not collaborating enough. This is why from time to time Israel disciplines the PA through withholding funds and so on. But matters are never pushed to the point of breaking or forcing the PA to collapse because Israel and the collaborationist PA are co-dependent.

As far as US-Hamas relations are concerned, there are some recent developments

that suggest a possible opening with and to the US. This may also be related to the Hamas rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and may reflect an effort to fully bring Hamas into a Saudi-led sectarian regional coalition. It has been reported that the talks mediated by Tony Blair between Israel and Hamas have the blessing of the US. Whether Hamas will fall into the same trap the PLO did more than a generation ago, or whether it can use this opening to achieve real gains for Palestinians is far from certain.

If we speak more broadly about US relations with the Palestinian people, then the relationship is one between the murderer (or the murderer's accomplice) and his victims. There is absolutely no point sugarcoating this or putting it in the polite and civil language acceptable to Washington think tanks or The New York Times. As far as Palestinians are concerned, President Obama has and continues to be a direct, willing and witting accomplice to Israel's horrific crimes and massacres, from the theft of land in the West Bank and Naqab (Negev) to the butchery in Gaza. I deliberately use Obama rather than the "Obama administration" because the latter allows people to depersonalize the fact that it is human beings, not faceless institutions, making these calculations. For too long we've allowed those with blood on their hands to hide behind such depersonalizing terminology. If Obama is going to personally collect the credit for the Iran deal or ending the embargo on Cuba, then he should be credited for the butchery in Gaza.

Not only does the Obama administration support this but Obama personally, enthusiastically defends these crimes as reflecting America's "shared values" with Israel. The manner in which the US, and specifically the Obama administration, assists in these crimes is well known and does not need to be repeated here. Suffice it to say that it includes arming and financing Israeli terror, doing nothing to stem the flow of private US "charitable" funds to Israeli terror groups in the occupied West Bank and using the full political and diplomatic weight of the US to ensure that Israel continues to enjoy impunity.

What impact do you expect the Iran deal to have on US-Palestinian relations per se?

Mouin Rabbani None. US-Palestinian relations will remain an extension of and subservient to US support of Israel. If the Obama administration does launch another diplomatic initiative before its time is up, it will as during the entirety of its tenure do so on the basis of Israel's best interests, or at least an American assessment of Israel's best interests. Palestinian rights and interests are simply not on the agenda in Washington, least of all when it comes to Middle East diplomacy. More broadly, I don't see the Iran deal leading to American-Iranian strategic cooperation in the region. Should such a relationship nevertheless eventually materialize, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be the last item on the agenda, for primarily American but also Iranian reasons. Both have bigger fish to fry. In the meantime Washington is likely to compensate Israel for the Iran agreement in Palestinian coin, and Tehran will be keen to demonstrate that it has not fundamentally altered its regional policies.

Diana Buttu I do not expect that it will change much. I think that, if this US leadership is rational, it will begin to question the nature of its relationship to Israel in general and to Netanyahu in particular. It should be recalled that Netanyahu was the person who led the US down a path of war in Iraq. At the time, Netanyahu stated, "*If you take out Saddam, Saddam's regime, I guarantee you that it will have enormous positive reverberations on the region.*" [Author's emphasis] Moreover, one would expect an ally to support the deal with Iran, not actively work to undermine it as Israel is seeking to do. Beyond that, however, US-Palestinian relations will remain the same as these relations are not built upon mutual interest but upon the PA's subservience to Israel, for which the US rewards the PA. The Iran deal will not change this.

Ali Abunimah If the Iranians see in the deal a way to avoid the type of ideologically and religiously driven US war that destroyed Iraq and sowed

catastrophe across the region, then they alone can judge the merits of the deal for them. The lifting of sanctions imposed by Obama and America's European vassals, with the support of Israel, may relieve the suffering inflicted on the poorest Iranians. There is no doubt however that some Iranian elites see the end of sanctions as an opportunity to open the country to foreign capital, sell off public assets and fully insert Iran into global neoliberalism.

As for US-Palestinian relations, the impact it has already had is that President Obama has deepened US involvement in and support for Israeli crimes as a form of compensation to Israel and its lobby for mildly defying them on the Iran deal. Israel can and will live with the Iran deal, but has been adept at extorting the US administration to give it even more in terms of aid and weaponry. Barack Obama justly boasts that no administration has been more generous to Israel than his. I expect that before he leaves office he will sign a deal giving Israel even more money over the next 10 years. As a direct consequence of Obama's actions, more Palestinians will die

How should the Palestinians – the "leadership" and Palestinian civil society – position themselves to take advantage of this agreement and, at a minimum, to ensure that Palestinian rights are not eroded?

Mouin Rabbani Palestinians today have neither national leadership nor a national movement, and I think the role, influence and capabilities of what is termed Palestinian civil society is routinely and greatly exaggerated. If Palestinians are to position themselves to take advantage of opportunities created by this agreement, or at least prevent others from using this agreement to weaken them yet further, they will need to adopt the same approach that is required for anything else they want to achieve or prevent. Namely, revive and rejuvenate the national movement on an inclusive, institutional basis, with a legitimate, representative and credible leadership, and pursuing a coherent national program and dynamic strategy that before anything else mobilizes the main and most

important available resource – the Palestinian people in its entirety.

The essential first step in this direction is ending the Fatah-Hamas schism and reconstituting the PLO as a national liberation movement committed to and capable of promoting Palestinian self-determination. The latter furthermore requires a definitive Palestinian renunciation of Oslo and all it represents. The idea that civil society can substitute for a national liberation movement rather than play a supportive role as part of or in support of one is a dangerous (and I would add in a number of cases also self-serving) illusion. Vietnam and South Africa were not liberated by NGOs, intellectuals and solidarity groups (or social media activism for that matter), and Palestine won't be either. Absent a coherent and organized national movement, the Palestinians cannot position themselves for anything, nor prevent others from positioning themselves against their rights and interests.

Diana Buttu There is a belief among many Palestinian political leaders, largely unfounded I believe, that this agreement will lead to a resumption of some political process aimed at ending Israel's military rule. The problem, however, is that there is no impetus from the US to press for an end to Israel's military rule, particularly as we get closer to the elections. Irrespective of whether the US presses for a new political process, the Palestinian leadership should start embracing new modes of holding Israel accountable by pressing for boycotts, sanctions and divestment actions against Israel and holding Israel legally accountable for their actions. Political actors should make clear that our rights are not negotiable and find alternative mechanisms to decrease the PA's dependency upon foreign funding.

Ali Abunimah I do not think they possess the influence or capacity to affect the deal directly either by opposing it or actively lobbying for it, and should not do so. It does not involve them. Palestinians should continue to work in all forums to isolate Israel as a racist, apartheid settler-colonial regime. Their most successful means of doing that in recent years has been and continues to be boycott,

divestment and sanctions.

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