

RABBLE INTERVIEW

As peace talks flounder, Palestinians need more BDS, says Diana Buttu

BY PAUL WEINBERG | MARCH 18, 2014

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John Kerry's inspired peace process since July between the Israelis and Palestinians is "worse than going nowhere," and so "the big question becomes what to do next," argues the Ramallah based Palestinian-Canadian human rights lawyer, Diana Buttu.

"There might be an extension to the talks, but that extension is actually going to be a bad

thing, not a good thing. The longer negotiations go on, the worse the situation gets on the ground" she told rabble in a recent interview.

"The international community has been putting a lot of emphasis on the Kerry talks; the Palestinian people are not. They are recognizing it for what it is, which is a sham and a process to allow Israel to build more settlements and buy more time," Buttu continues.

The Toronto born Buttu is a past legal advisor to the PLO and a major catalyst in a high profile case opposing Israel's separation wall that resulted in a favourable landmark decision by the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2004.

An independent consultant since 2005, Buttu is back home slated to give a reality check, courtesy of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, delivering talks this week in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto.

"People are putting all of their faith in Kerry and this idea that somehow he is going to resolve the problem, but without looking at it [and] stopping the bleeding that is continuing to take place."

Amnesty International recently released a report, "**Trigger-happy, Israel's use of excessive force in the West Bank**," which suggested that the Israeli military turned a blind eye towards peaceful protests. Israeli forces killed 22 Palestinian civilians in 2013 in the West Bank, of which 14 were involved in protests and the majority were under 25.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Occupied Palestinian Territory reported that **during March 4-10 2014**, two Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces and 29 others were injured by Israeli forces. In the same time period, 122 Palestinians in the West Bank were searched and arrested by Israeli forces.

Buttu maintains that less attention is being paid by the international community to a "worsening" human rights situation experienced by Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem and that the Israelis are acting with "impunity" when it comes to the increased violence and human rights violations.

Buttu notes that more settlement housing is being built on occupied Palestinian land in the West Bank and east Jerusalem "despite the fact that every government around the world has condemned the settlement as illegal under international law," and that there is a "a spike" in the displacement of Palestinians through home demolitions

To demonstrate the scale of Israel settlement construction, *Haaretz* **has reported** that the so-called settlement outposts (settlements built without government approval) are receiving millions of dollars in state funding even though they violate both Israel and international law.

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The only alternative is an intensification of the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) campaign to pressure Israel, Buttu argues.

"I am trying to implore people to move beyond the negotiation process, and perhaps push to hold Israel accountable."

Buttu expects what she describes as moribund peace talks to drag on until possibly the end of the second term of Barack Obama's administration. She says it is in the interest of all three parties involved to maintain this status quo at the expense of the Palestinians.

"It is in the United States' interest to make it look as though they are doing something [and] unfortunately, it is in Mahmood Abbas's interest to extend these talks because he hasn't created any alternative to negotiations, and that's a bad thing. It is also in the Israelis interest to extend the talks, because all the while, while they are talking, nobody is condemning their ongoing actions on the ground."

U.S. Presidents since Jimmy Carter have shied away from using the word "illegal, under international law," in describing the Israeli building of housing on Palestinian land, notes Buttu.

Instead, they will make vague statements such as "continued settlement is illegitimate," without defining what that actually means.

In Obama's last statement, Buttu recalls, he made reference to these settlements being "unhelpful," but they haven't done really anything "to address" that problem.

Buttu notes that Palestinian civil society is spearheading the international BDS movement, which the Palestinian Authority (PA) and President Abbas have opposed. Instead, the latter has called for a more focused boycott of Israeli products made on Israel settlements.

Buttu says the Palestinian society has been unfairly criticized for not being sufficiently mobilized to oppose the Israeli occupation, but the reality is that Palestinian NGOs are struggling to maintain services such as housing, food and water in face of a weak PA.

"This is a community that is dealing without a functioning government for close to five decades, there has never been a government that has been responsive to their political needs and so these civil society organizations work on the grassroots level, trying to make sure that their needs are met."

The PA is much like a municipal administration reliant on senior levels of government for major financing beyond the property taxes that it is allowed to collect.

It can tax the salaries of its 150,000 civil servants, but sometimes the money isn't there to pay them. This happens, for instance, when the Israelis decides to punish the PA for a public pronouncement by withholding revenues from taxes on imported goods, or another major funder, the European Union, goes through a fiscal crisis.

But Buttu is not one of those who supports abolishing the PA. Rather she would like to see it reconfigured to "address and confront" the occupation directly.

However, Buttu has a message for Canadians. Our government is contributing \$300 million over five years to the PA. However, how much goes to the security force is unclear.

"That is entirely the wrong focus. The Palestinians are insecure, not because they don't have a good police force. They are insecure because of the very issue that we just mentioned. Israelis can come into Palestinian areas, arrest people and kill people."

Buttu adds that Canada has always officially said the settlements are illegal including the ones in east Jerusalem.

"Yet we have a Prime Minister who is the most pro-Israel prime minister in Canadian history. I implore people to press this government to the stated Canadian position. "

*Diana Buttu will give a talk "What Future For Palestine?" this **Wednesday March 19 at 7 p.m. at McGill University in Montreal**, this **Thursday March 20 at 6:30 p.m. at the Sheraton Hotel in Ottawa** and this **Friday March 21 at 7 p.m. at Sandford Fleming Bldg U of T in Toronto**.*

Paul Weinberg is a Toronto-based freelancer writer who has written for IPS since 1996. He is also a regular contributor to local weekly magazine NOW and specializes in Canadian politics, in particular foreign, security and defence policy. Paul is currently writing a book on the RCMP's spying on academics in Canada during the 1960s.

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