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The US-Israeli dispute is more comedy than reality

By Diana BUttu

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In the latest episode of a popular Palestinian comedy show, comedian Imad Farajin courts a young European, asking for her hand in marriage. Espousing the benefits of marrying a Palestinian, Farajin jokes, “We now have ‘indirect talks’ for four months and in just four months’ time, we will have a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, no checkpoints and the refugees will all return. The Palestinian passport will be worth a lot.”

Farajin’s words are greeted in the same way as the statements uttered by the Americans, the Quartet and other members of the international community: with laughter. The latest “row” between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu regime is no different to Palestinians.

Undoubtedly, Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai’s announcement – during US Vice President Joseph Biden’s visit to Israel – of plans to build 1,600 units in an East Jerusalem colony was meant to embarrass Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (for reasons of coalition politics) and, more importantly, send a message to the United States that, despite any “indirect talks” or otherwise with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Israel’s colonization will continue. The announcement was condemned by Biden and mainstream media rushed to affirm the so-called “strain” in US-Israel relations with some proclaiming that the “sky is falling.”

But the sky is not falling. Rather, we are witnessing a repeat of history – and sadly with a familiar outcome. As far back as the George H. W. Bush administration, official US visits were almost always greeted with an Israeli announcement of colony expansion or creation, as then Secretary of State James Baker lamented. These announcements have continued until now so it

was hardly surprising that the announcement of the Ramat Shlomo expansion came during Biden's visit.

While the US "condemned" the announcement – in part to boost the position of "friendly" Arab regimes that pushed for "indirect talks" between the PLO and Israel – it has quickly become clear that that condemnation was aimed at the timing of the announcement rather than its substance. Indeed, the statement subsequently issued by Netanyahu's office offered a polite apology to Biden, indicating that the plans for the further colonization of East Jerusalem should have been announced at a different time. To drive home the point, Netanyahu later made sure to say that construction in East Jerusalem was no different than construction in Tel Aviv and confirmed that, like all Israeli prime ministers over the past 42 years, he would continue to colonize East Jerusalem.

With Netanyahu's position firmly stated, the Obama administration appears to have followed the path of its predecessors: it backed down in the face of Israeli intransigence. President Barack Obama met with Netanyahu yesterday at the White House, and with that meeting it was again business as usual in US-Israel relations, "harsh" statements aside.