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Once More into the Dead End of the Palestine- Israel “Peace Process”

By Jonathan Cook
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It may not have reached the level of fevered expectation unleashed by that famous handshake between Israeli and Palestinian leaders on the White House lawn in 1993, but the sense of hope inspired by the long-awaited revival of peace talks is both tangible and deeply misplaced.

The talks, which it was agreed this week will begin in earnest in the region in mid-August, are taking place not because either Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, or the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, believe a deal is in reach. The two sides are talking each to avoid being blamed for embarrassing John Kerry, the US secretary of state.

The mistaken mood of “change is in the air” was illustrated last week by a much-touted poll showing that 55 per cent of Israelis would vote for an agreement if presented with it, with 25 per cent opposed. Overlooked was the fact that many more Israelis – 70 per cent – believe an agreement cannot be reached, while 60 per cent say the reason is that Netanyahu will never partition the land.

Palestinians are no more sanguine. A recent poll revealed a measly 8 per cent had any degree of trust in the US as mediator.

But if ordinary Israelis and Palestinians are either despondent or uninterested, their leaders and many observers are talking up the chances of a breakthrough.

In part, this optimism is underpinned by the European Union's unexpected and largely symbolic decision recently to penalise the settlements. From next year, the EU is supposed to deny funding to Israeli institutions in the occupied territories.

This is a bitter pill for Israel to swallow, and it is already seeking to punish Europe. Last weekend it emerged that the Israeli military was denying EU staff access to Gaza, and blocking European projects in Area C, the nearly two-thirds of the West Bank exclusively controlled by Israel.

But while Europe's move has infuriated Israel, it looks suspiciously like it paved Netanyahu's way to the negotiating table.

Israel and its supporters have long cultivated the idea that strong-arm tactics, such as boycotts and sanctions, only serve to push the Israeli public and politicians further to the right. This has been the US and Europe's rationale for treating Israel with kid gloves since the Oslo process began two decades ago.

And yet the EU's anti-settlement initiative suggests the opposite to be true. Both Netanyahu and Abbas hurried into the talks in the wake of the EU announcement – and for much the same reason.

For Netanyahu, Europe's move was a stick he wielded to frighten into compliance those to his right in the government. He could argue persuasively that continuing Israeli intransigence on talks would only intensify the country's isolation – the substance of his opaque references to “Israel's strategic interests”.

Israel has much more to fear from the Palestinians outside the confines of a bogus peace process. There is the threat of the Palestinians building the momentum for further sanctions from bodies like the EU, or of their again taking their case for statehood to the United Nations, or of their referral of Israel to the International Criminal Court at the Hague for war crimes.

For Abbas, the same EU decision was a carrot used to disarm critics who have been warning that the revival of futile negotiations will damage the Palestinian national cause. Claiming the Europeans had forced Israel on to the backfoot, Abbas could argue that the moment had finally arrived to negotiate.

Uncharacteristically, the US has not appeared overly troubled by Israel's patent displeasure at the sudden stiffening of EU resolve. Or as a senior US official told the Israeli media: “The Europeans are giving us the time and allowing us to try and get the talks going.”

But while the US, Europe, Netanyahu and even Abbas will gain some breathing space from months of empty talk about peace, there is no sign that the pressure bringing Israel to the table will continue once it is seated.

The most worrying indication that the US is heading down the same failed path is the announcement of Martin Indyk's return as mediator. Indyk, a long-time Israel lobbyist, has been intimately tied to previous diplomatic failures.

In addition, the negotiators themselves are the same compromised figures who have been down this route before. The Palestine Papers, leaked by Al-Jazeera in 2011, revealed that in earlier talks Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat had dared to give away far more than observers had ever imagined possible, while even these generous concessions had failed to satisfy Israel's Tzipi Livni.

There is also something puzzling about a peace process driven by a nine-month timetable rather than the logic of the negotiations. A possible motivation for the White House's desire to drag out the talks was suggested by an official on Wednesday: the US desperately wants to avoid the "train wreck" of the Palestinians returning to the UN.

Another barometer for judging the chances of a breakthrough are the relaxed smiles of Netanyahu's far-right ministers, who are clearly undisturbed by thoughts that the settlements are in imminent jeopardy.

In fact, quite the reverse. Israel has announced it will build 1,000 settler homes over the coming months, in addition to continuing private construction. A train line linking the settlements to Israeli towns, making them even more accessible and attractive, has also been unveiled.

Regarding the peace process, Kerry has previously warned that there is "a year, a year-and-a-half, or two years and it's over". But what would "over" actually entail?

For one thing, someone will have to be blamed and all past evidence suggests that the someone in question will be the Palestinians. For another, Netanyahu will be able to argue that, just as Kerry feared, the peace process is dead. No Palestinian leadership, he will claim, will ever be capable of making peace.

That may prove a tempting moment for Israel to carry out the much-longed-for annexation of Area C, the bulk of the West Bank and the site of the settlements. With as few as 100,000 Palestinians left in Area C after decades of ethnic cleansing, Israel can offer them citizenship without threatening the state's hallowed Jewishness.

Not only would such a move satisfy Netanyahu's hunger for more Palestinian land, but it would solve another problem, this time for Europe and the US. They would no longer have to fret about boycotting the settlements; annexation would mean there were no more settlements to oppose.