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A poisoned process holds little hope

By David Gardner

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As the caravans of Middle East peace negotiators rumble into Washington next week for the umpteenth time, the pervasive cynicism and sense of déjà vu all over again is overwhelming – and with good reason.

The Middle East peace process long ago turned into a tortured charade of pure process while events on the ground – in particular the relentless and strategic Israeli colonisation of occupied Palestinian land – pull in the opposite direction to peace. “We have all been colluding in a gigantic confidence trick,” is how one Arab minister puts it, “and here we go again.”

While many factors had combined to hand veto powers to rejectionists on both sides, the heart of the question remains the continuing Israeli occupation. It is essential to remember that the biggest single increase of Jewish settlers on Arab land – a 50 per cent rise – took place in 1992-96 under the governments of peace-makers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres at the high-water mark of the Oslo peace accords. Many Israelis will point to the perfidy of the late Yassir Arafat, who wanted to talk peace but keep the option of armed resistance dangerously in play. But what killed Oslo was the occupation. The second intifada that erupted a decade ago was essentially the Oslo war.

A decade on, the Israeli settlement enterprise has turned the occupied West Bank into a discontinuous scattering of cantons, walled in by a security barrier built on yet more annexed Arab land and criss-crossed by segregated Israeli roads linking the settlements. Last month, B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, published a study showing Israel has now taken 42 per cent of the West Bank, with 300,000 settlers there and another 200,000 in East Jerusalem. The siege of Gaza has turned that sliver of land into a vast, open-air prison.

The main feature of the present situation is the disconnect between the high politics of the utterly discredited peace process and these – in Israeli parlance – “facts on the ground”.

At last month's White House summit, where Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu massaged their long estrangement into a political armistice, the US president praised the Israeli prime minister as a leader “willing to take risks for peace”. But there is no evidence for this whatsoever. True, in June last year, in response to Mr Obama's Cairo speech denying any legitimacy to Israel's settlements, Mr Netanyahu forced himself to utter the words “Palestinian state” – but he surrounded them with barbed-wire caveats that voided them of meaning.

Indeed, the words all sides use – peace, resolution, security, and so on – may be the same; but what each side means by them is different.

The mainstream Palestinian leaders, President Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad, the prime minister, and the Quartet made up of the US, the European Union, the UN and Russia, talk of a negotiated resolution. This means two states living in peace and security, and a Palestinian homeland on the 22 per cent of Mandate Palestine taken by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. East Jerusalem would serve as the capital of the West Bank and Gaza, with marginal land swaps to preserve some Israeli settlements near Jerusalem. But what does Mr Netanyahu mean?

He has been most clear on what he does not mean. For a start, he has set his face against any concessions on Jerusalem. He wants to keep most settlements except for the far-flung “ideological” ones and the 100-plus “outposts” established as pawns to be traded once the chess game began. His idea of a demilitarised Palestinian state is more like a sort of supra-municipal administration than a self-determined, independent government.

Will he surprise us, on the hackneyed Nixon and China principle that holds it is politicians of the right who most easily close difficult deals? There is little to suggest that:

The thinking of Mr Netanyahu, son of a celebrated promoter of Greater Israel, has always been profoundly irredentist. While his nationalist Likud faces the constraints of being in coalition with an assortment of ultra-rightist and ultra-orthodox parties as well as Labour, that was plainly his choice; the centrist Kadima party was (and remains) an alternative. To be fair, Israel's electoral system – with a low threshold for entry into the Knesset that makes multi-party coalitions inevitable – means lobbies such as the settlers can take the national interest hostage. But Mr Netanyahu magnifies this by his choice of partners and by diligently firing up the ultra-hawks in the pro-Israel lobby in the US.

As risks he has taken for peace, Exhibit A is the much-hyped moratorium on settlement-building, which expires next month and has, in any case, been speciously interpreted. While the bulldozers to build settlements have been idling, moreover, the bulldozers demolishing Palestinian homes have been roaring; the rate of demolition in and around Jerusalem has doubled this year, while the army has just razed the village of al-Farisiye in the Jordan Valley, in line with Mr Netanyahu's strategically obsolete obsession with keeping the valley as Israel's eastern border.

As diplomacy struggles to keep alive the viability of a two-state solution, three rival systems of control have crystallised in the occupied territories that would make up a future Palestinian homeland: the settlements; the crimped Palestinian Authority of Mr Abbas and Mr Fayyad; and then Hamas, which Israel and its Arab and western allies have tried and failed to marginalise. Time is short for a negotiated outcome; it may even have run out.

The outlines of a deal are clear, in the (Bill) Clinton parameters of 2000 and Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, endorsed by 22 Arab and 57 Muslim countries (as well as Hamas, as part of the 2007 Mecca accord). There has to be an end to the occupation, and the US and Quartet cannot just allude to this; they must demand it.

The writer is international affairs editor

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