

Letters: Peace talks

Alex Whisson's article ("**Actions speak louder than talks for Israel**"), World Commentary, 31/8) is disingenuous at best and dishonest at worst.

The evidence is irrefutable that Israel has put on the table a string of peace offers in recent years, each of which has been consistently knocked back by the Palestinian leadership.

The latest talks have the potential to usher in peace. The major obstacle to that happening is that the Palestinians are at war with themselves: while Fatah claims to talk peace, Hamas, which rules Gaza with a brutal fist, is committed to Israel's destruction. That's the reason for the stalemate. Everything else is secondary.

Vic Alhadeff, CEO, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies

Actions speak louder than talks for Israel

Alex Whisson | The Australian | 31 August 2010

Casual observers of the Israel-Palestine conflict would understandably have welcomed the news that direct talks are set to resume between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The symbolism of two leaders on opposing sides of the world's most intractable conflict shaking hands and talking directly to one another can be seductive and powerful.

Unfortunately, all is not what it seems, and there are good reasons to suspect the talks will not only fail to deliver any positive outcomes, but collapse altogether within a matter of weeks if not days -- assuming they go ahead at all.

Indeed, it is difficult not to draw the conclusion these talks will bear little if any relation to any genuine effort to take the peace process forward, and instead have far more to do with the approach of mid-term US congressional elections.

President Barack Obama's much-heralded Cairo speech in June last year, seen at the time as a light unto the Muslim nations, now seems like a barometer of his epic failure to even set a coherent agenda for peace in the Middle East, much less implement one.

Just over two months out from an election that could seriously damage the Democrat brand and sweep away forever what little remains of the Obama mystique, and mindful of the conflict's role as a recruiting sergeant for a veritable kaleidoscope of anti-US forces from the Nile to the Euphrates, the President is desperate to at least be seen to be making progress on the Israel-Palestine front.

As far as the Israelis are concerned, one can't help but feel they are deliberately crafting a set of circumstances under the oppressive weight of which the Palestinian delegation will be left with no choice but to pull out of the talks, lest they lose all credibility with their own people.

It almost goes without saying that Saeb Erekat and his negotiating team will at that point be accused of intransigence and an unwillingness to embrace the extended hand of peace.

We have seen this tawdry and transparent script played out endlessly in the past 20 years. Israel promises to negotiate in good faith, delivers nothing, scarcely even hints that it might deliver something in the future, all the while continuing to expand the illegal Jewish colonies in the West Bank, demolish homes in East Jerusalem as part of its effort to Judaize the city and crack down on non-violent protest against its manifold policies of apartheid.

Yet when even one of these measures is pointed to by the Palestinian Authority as an obvious stumbling block on the road to peace, Israel reacts with outrage, the Western media goes into overdrive insisting there is no Palestinian partner for peace and the "negotiations" promptly collapse in a sorry heap.

At a press conference held last week, Erekat made the PA's position clear by categorically stating that "if Israel resumes settlement activities in the Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem, we cannot continue negotiations".

Far from demonstrating an inability to compromise in the cause of peace, Erekat was being kind. There never has been a settlement freeze.

Netanyahu knows it; Erekat knows it; the whole world knows it.

A real settlement construction freeze and an in-principle agreement that so-called "final status" talks will lead to the establishment of a viable, contiguous, independent Palestinian state ought to be the basis of any meaningful negotiations.

These are not preconditions, as the mainstream media are reporting.

These are matters relating to fundamental principles of international law that, if not respected at the outset as the bare minimum starting point of direct talks, will quickly render such talks a preposterous and counter-productive farce.

Netanyahu's repeated public declarations that a "united" Jerusalem will forever remain the capital of Israel, his insistence on maintaining an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley and a plainly ridiculous demand that any future Palestinian state be demilitarised and therefore made utterly defenceless constitute a set of preconditions that most certainly will act as an impediment to real progress.

Senior US State Department official Philip Crowley more or less confirmed the farcical nature of the talks when he was reported to have told the media late last week that settlements would be discussed only in the context of other final status issues.

In other words, the US would ignore the terms of reference for negotiations that it had itself agreed to in a statement issued by the Quartet (the US, the UN, Russia and the EU) on March 19 of this year, which urged Israel to "freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, to dismantle outposts erected since March 2001, and to refrain from demolitions and evictions in East Jerusalem".

No advocate for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine takes pleasure in predicting the failure of talks designed, ostensibly at any rate, to once and for all achieve an end to the world's most protracted conflict. Seventeen years on from Oslo, we are long since past the point where talking in and of itself is a useful endeavour. Indeed, the phrase "talks about talks"

has entered popular parlance as a satirical comment on the steady deterioration and vacuity of the so-called peace process.

If actions really do speak louder than words, then it would appear Israel through its own actions is determined to shout from the rooftops: "Though we may say we are, we are not a nation interested in peace."

Such a state of affairs ought to be of grave concern not just to the Palestinian people, but also to every decent-minded citizen of Israel.

Alex Whisson is the public advocate for Australians for Palestine