

Palestinian President Abbas refuses to quit phoney peace talks

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The refusal of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to break off US-brokered talks following Israel's resumption of settlement construction on the West Bank confirms his role as a pliant tool of Washington.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was confident he could ignore Abbas's repeated threats to quit the US-brokered peace talks. On September 26, the 10-month freeze on new settlement construction was allowed to expire.

He cynically called on Abbas "to continue the good and sincere talks that we have just started, in order to reach an historic peace agreement between our two peoples."

Bulldozers immediately started work in Ariel, Adam and Oranit, and Israeli settlers held celebrations in Kiryat Netafim, where the cornerstone was laid for a new kindergarten. Danny Danon, a member of Netanyahu's Likud Party, addressed the settlers, saying, "For 10 months you have been treated like second-class citizens. Today we return to build in all the land of Israel."

The US, the European Union, the United Nations, London and Paris, all formally opposed to settlement construction, issued pro forma statements expressing their "regret" and "disappointment", and urged both parties to continue talking.

The talks are a diplomatic charade aimed at legitimising the support of the Arab states for a future military attack on Iran. Abbas was forced to quit the talks after Israel's murderous assault on Gaza in 2008-2009. To help him come back to the table, Washington extracted from Israel a miserable promise of a 10-month freeze on building new homes in the West Bank settlements, which Netanyahu had no intention of keeping. He refused point blank the request

to halt building in East Jerusalem.

The major powers also made numerous promises that would and could never be honoured. They offered a deal within one year that would end Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory captured in 1967, and the "emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state". But like the Oslo peace talks before it, they placed no "pre-conditions" on Israel—leaving Tel Aviv free to continue its land grab in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Israel for its part made it clear that any deal would have to ensure "a solid Jewish majority for generations", a euphemism for no right of return for Palestinians—and their descendants—who became refugees after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. There would be a redrawing of Israel's boundaries to include the main settlements blocs, while transferring some Israeli Arab towns and villages to the new, truncated Palestinian entity. East Jerusalem would not be given back, and the Palestinians would have to recognise Israel as a Jewish state. The Palestinian state would not be allowed to possess an army, and Israel would control its borders and airspace,

Barely had the talks resumed in Washington at the beginning of September than Netanyahu announced that he would not be renewing the freeze when it expired later in the month. In any event, recent figures from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics show that the freeze was a fraud. It was barely even a slowdown. At the end of the third quarter of 2009, before the freeze was announced in November, 2,790 housing units were under construction. New starts rose to 2,955 in the last quarter to avoid the ban. But in four months of 2010, when the freeze was supposedly in effect, 2,517 units were still under construction, a decline of around 10 percent on the number in the third quarter of 2009.

The Palestinian negotiators were well aware of this, but turned a blind eye as long as a freeze was official Israeli policy, because they needed it as a fig leaf for resuming the talks.

Abbas's only response to the ending of the freeze has been to refer the issue to a meeting of the Arab League in Cairo next Monday. He said, "We will not react quickly. We will study all the consequences with Arab countries, with the Palestinian leadership." He is to announce the decision after the conference and reiterated his demand for Israel to extend the construction freeze by three or four months.

The Palestinian negotiator, Nabih Shaath, made a desperate appeal to the US to put pressure on Israel, saying, "We cannot accept the American position that says it is against settlements but doesn't lead to an end to them.... We need a practical position from the United States against settlements. I am surprised that America is unable to stop them."

While the Arab leaders have condemned the settlements to appease their own publics, most of them have pressed for the talks. This particularly includes Jordan and Egypt, which would police the non-Israeli borders of the putative Palestinian entity and took part in the inaugural talks in Washington, as well as the United Arab Emirates. Syria, too, would like to reach some accommodation with the US and secure the return of the Golan from Israel.

Despite this compliance, the end of the freeze has created a political crisis for both the US and the Palestinians. It has set off a flurry of diplomatic activity as Washington seeks to ensure that the charade continues. US special envoy George Mitchell has returned to the Middle East. Tony Blair, the Quartet's envoy, has held meetings in Jerusalem. French President Nicholas Sarkozy has invited Israel, the Palestinians and Egypt to a peace conference to be held in Paris at the end of October.

Hamas leaders in Gaza called on Abbas to quit the talks and unite the Palestinians. Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman, said, "Resuming direct negotiations is a crime against the Palestinian people. It will come at the expense of national unity."

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), said it would pull out of the PLO in protest at Abbas's participation in the talks. Its decision in part

reflects the growing anger among the Palestinians, who have nothing but contempt for the Palestinian Authority, its politicians and institutions they view as Israeli collaborators. Abbas is widely believed to have encouraged Israel to attack Gaza in December 2008. PA security forces, trained in Jordan and financed by the US, have disbanded Fatah's own militia and closed down most of Hamas's social institutions, financial networks and military activities.

Amnesty International reported that Palestinian journalists were detained during the 2008-2009 assault on Gaza for reporting on government repression, which was so tight that there were more protests against the war in Israeli Arab towns than in the West Bank. According to the Palestinian Human Rights group, al-Haq, torture has again become routine.

While the West Bank economy has grown by 7 percent over the last two years, most of this has gone to a handful of people. This upswing has largely been due to the influx of donor money from the West. But this fell from \$1.8 billion in 2009 to \$1.2 billion in 2010 and is expected to fall further if talks stall. Exports to Israel, the West Bank's main market, fell by 18 percent last year, which the IMF attributed at least in part to Israeli restrictions. Prices have risen much faster than in Israel, due to the higher transport costs imposed by Israel's border controls and hundreds of roadblocks, eroding the purchasing power of the Palestinians' meagre income.

Abbas's term of office expired in January 2009, while Salam Fayad, the unelected prime minister, has postponed elections three times for fear that Hamas would win. The PA is now strapped for cash, as money from the Gulf has dried up, making it increasingly difficult to meet its payrolls on time. Without visible returns from the talks, the PA, upon which Tel Aviv, Washington and its client states in the region depends to keep the Palestinians in check, faces disaster.



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