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Palestinian protesters hurling stones at Israeli security forces during clashes. Although Palestine is willing to have a peacekeeping force – from Nato states that are friendly to Israel – to replace Israeli troops in the West Bank, Israel is opposed to this. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Israel cannot have its cake and eat it too

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For The Straits Times

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process needs a fresh approach and the talks that commenced this week in Paris between foreign ministers of some two dozen countries, including US Secretary of State John Kerry, need to take that fact on board.

As it is, most commentators have expressed scepticism that the Paris initiative will work.

Neither Israel nor the Palestinians were invited to Paris.

The aim of these talks is to reset the parameters for the two sides to possibly engage in direct discussions later in the year on all of the outstanding issues between them: borders, security, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements and water.

France's motivations for convening this week's peace conference relate to security. France believes that the Israel-Palestine conflict fuels radical rhetoric and extremist violence and that its resolution is as urgent as ever.

Yes, the conference represents an opportunity to revive the two-state solution, but it comes after more than two decades of failed direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. It is senseless, therefore, to call on the two sides to repeat a process that has failed. All that does is raise expectations, only for those expectations to be dashed, thereby creating disillusionment, frustration and despair. The peace process has become sclerotic and that is why a fresh approach is needed.

The omens do not look good. Just last week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed the hawkish Avigdor Lieberman as Israel's defence minister, after extricating himself from a deal with Labour Party leader Isaac Herzog. While the Labour Party has supported the establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem in the past, Mr Netanyahu's Likud Party has always opposed it.

On the Palestinian side, divisions remain between the two main political parties Fatah and Hamas, with Hamas, like Likud, also opposed to the talks.

At the same time, the security situation in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza is deteriorating every day.

The onus is on the Paris initiative to shift this dynamic by recognising that the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians is an unequal one. Israel has been in military occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for nearly half a century and remains so, despite the formation of the Palestinian Authority and the recognition by the UN General Assembly of Palestine's observer "state" status. The continuation of Israel's settlement policy, which is illegal under international law, risks derailing the peace process altogether. Indeed, some think that it is already too late for a viable Palestinian state to emerge alongside Israel.

There needs to be a recognition that Israel and the Palestinians are not equal partners engaged in some real estate transaction. It is not a question of who blinks first or who is willing to make more concessions to the other side at the negotiating table. Nor is it even a question of getting qualified people or finding lawyers and wordsmiths to produce language that can satisfy the mutual interests of both parties. Of course, qualified people are always needed, but they cannot produce an agreement if one of the parties remains opposed to the process and does its best to sabotage peace talks at every opportunity.

Rather than reinforcing the status quo by calling on Israelis and Palestinians to engage in direct negotiations, it must be made clear to Israel – as the more powerful actor and one that is in control of Palestine's land and resources – that it will have to pay a price unless it takes steps to end the occupation.

The countries that have assembled in Paris must make it clear to the Israeli government that unless Israel embarks on a credible programme of withdrawal from the occupied territories through a negotiated process, which would allow the Palestinians to exercise independence in their own state, they will no longer subsidise the costs of the occupation.

The peace talks must, of course, address Israel's legitimate security needs. As Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly said, Palestine is willing to have a multinational peacekeeping force – from Nato states that are friendly to Israel – replace Israeli troops in the West Bank. But Israel is opposed even to this. It wants to have its cake and eat it too.

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Since the mid-1990s, the US government has committed more than US$5 billion (S$6.8 billion) in bilateral economic and security assistance to the Palestinians. EU aid is even higher. While much of this aid is necessary to keep the Palestinian Authority afloat (nearly half the aid is used to pay public sector wages), much of it is given to Palestinian security services. But as the occupying power, Israel is responsible for its security and for providing law and order for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel is also responsible for administering services to meet the population's basic needs, which include the provision of healthcare, yet many Palestinian hospitals are in chronic debt. Were Israel to face the prospect of having to pay for these services out of its own pocket, that may cause some members of the Israeli Government and the opposition to question the cost-benefit ratio of maintaining the occupation.

The donor community should make it clear to Israel that unless genuine efforts are made by Israel to realise the two-state vision, not just through the issuance of the occasional prime ministerial statement paying lip service to that vision but also by taking concrete steps to change the situation on the ground in talks with the Palestinians, it will no longer fund the Palestinian Authority. Instead, Israel would be expected to resume the costs of the occupation.

The international community has invested billions in the peace process, but this was always conditioned on a two-state outcome. Now that Israel is challenging that outcome, the time has come to call its bluff.

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