



June 26th, 2009

Daily News Issue Date: June 26, 2009

News Blurb: An op-ed in the Washington Post looks at how private American support is central to Israeli settlement activity (1). The U.S. rejects criticism from Hamas on the pace of the peace process (4). The BBC looks at how industry in Gaza continues to struggle, six months after the war (6). Foreign Ministers from the G8 back international calls for a full Israeli settlement freeze (7), as the Quartet prepares to make a similar statement today (9). Israeli officials play down reports that they are close to reaching an agreement with Hamas on the release of Gilad Shalit (8).

Want to Stop Israeli Settlements? Start With Americans

Article Author(s): Ronit Avni

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

Article Type: Opinion

Date: June 25, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/25/AR2009062503427....>

[1]

This month, both at Cairo University and from the Oval Office, President Obama has called on the Israeli government to stop the expansion of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. He should send the same message to the Americans who are funding and fueling them.

There are more than 450,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, according to Peace Now, an Israeli organization that opposes the settlements. Some of them are Americans. And some of the most influential, militant figures in the settler movement have been Americans, too. Among them were Baruch Goldstein, the doctor from Brooklyn who fired 100 shots at worshipping Muslims in Hebron in 1994, killing 29; Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Kach party, which was banned in Israel in 1988 on the grounds that it was racist; and convicted terrorist Era Rapaport, a member of the Land Redemption Fund, which coordinates the acquisition of Palestinian land in areas targeted for settlement expansion.

Before the settlers were removed from Gaza in 2005, I visited a group of them while shooting my last film. Some of the settlements' most passionate advocates spoke about their deep roots in the Gaza Strip even though they were actually Americans. Years earlier, while working as a human rights advocate, I had received reports from colleagues who had been threatened or physically attacked by young settlers as they tried to protect Palestinian farmers during harvest. The attackers often included North American Jews, my colleagues said.

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Evangelical Christians in the United States also support the settlements, raising millions of dollars for them, according to a recent National Public Radio report. The Colorado-based Christian Friends of Israeli Communities, for example, encourages churches and ministries to connect with "the pioneers of Biblical Israel" through the "adopt-a-settlement program." Sondra Oster Baras, director of the organization's Israeli office, estimates that more than half of the West Bank settlements receive direct or indirect support from Christians, according to the NPR report.

A handful of wealthy businessmen, including American casino magnate Irving Moskowitz, are widely reported to have donated to groups such as the Brooklyn-based not-for-profit Hebron Fund, which raises money to support residents in the West Bank city of Hebron. According to the donation page on its Web site, the organization aims to "keep Hebron Jewish for the Jewish people." Friends of Itamar, also based in Brooklyn, engages in domestic, tax-deductible fundraising for the West Bank settlement of Itamar. All this comes at the expense of the U.S. government, which loses tax revenue by allowing these groups to operate as not-for-profit entities.

Not all support for the settlements comes through charitable organizations. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz has reported that in 2007, the settler organization Amana held "housing fairs" in New York and New Jersey to encourage American Jews to buy property in the West Bank. According to the Jewish Voice and Opinion, a self-described "politically conservative Jewish publication" in New Jersey, approximately 250 people attended and as many as 10 properties were slated for purchase.

Last year the Palestinian village of Bil'in filed suit in Canada against two Quebec-based companies that built and sold residential units in a West Bank settlement. The case is still pending, but it demonstrates that people are beginning to pay attention to non-Israeli influences on settlement growth.

If the courts can't find a way to dissuade settlement expansion, perhaps the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control should intervene. The U.S. government has already designated Kahane's movement a foreign terrorist organization for reasons unrelated to settlement financing, but in doing so, it has prohibited U.S. citizens from providing financial support to this group.

The First Amendment protects the right of the settlement advocates to express their views, and so it should. I am not suggesting that non-profits should lose their tax advantages simply because they are at odds with American foreign policy. But the settlements are widely considered a violation of international law. Thirty years ago, a U.S. State Department legal adviser issued an opinion that called the settlements "inconsistent" with the Fourth Geneva Convention. In recent weeks, officials at State and in the White House have declined to say whether the 1979 opinion reflects official government policy, but President Obama's comments have hardly been ambiguous. "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements," he said in Cairo. "It is time for these settlements to stop."

Maybe it's also time for Americans to stop supporting them.

Will Obama Buckle?

Article Author(s): M.J. Rosenberg

Media Outlet: Israel Policy Forum

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.israelpolicyforum.org/commentary/will-obama-buckle> [2]

There is considerable discussion in Washington about whether President Obama is maintaining or easing the pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu. There is no real evidence pointing to the latter other than the silence from the administration on the just-announced plan to expand the Talmon settlement by some 300 units, a provocation and a test of Obama's resolve. Beyond that is the general fear that the Israeli government has invariably won these battles with previous administrations and the feeling that Obama will, like his predecessors, blink as the lobby quietly (or loudly) pushes back.

Only time will tell whether Obama will choose to prevail; I say "choose" because he holds all the cards in the U.S.-Israel relationship. If he wants an end to settlements, he can make it happen. Beyond that is the simple fact that the largest foreign policy challenge he faces, Iran, is directly linked to Israel-Palestine. Although the usual suspects say that the Iran crisis is a reason to turn away from pressuring Israel over settlements, more fair-minded observers take the opposite approach.

Robert Kaplan, the author and Washington Post columnist, believes that with deft handling the changes taking place in Iran can lead to not only a transformed Iranian relationship with the United States but with Israel as well. He rejects the idea that Israel's salvation lies in alignment with the Saudis and other "sclerotic" Sunni regimes. Instead Israel should look toward Iran-not the current government, but the reformers who will assume power sooner rather than later.

"Iran is so central to the fate of the Middle East that even a partial shift in regime behavior-an added degree of nuance in its approach to Iraq, Lebanon, Israel or the United States-could dramatically affect the region. Just as a radical Iranian leader can energize the 'Arab street,' an Iranian reformer can energize the emerging but curiously opaque Arab bourgeoisie. This is why the depiction of presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi as but another radical, albeit with a kinder, gentler exterior than President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, completely misses the point," he writes.

Kaplan, no softie on matters Middle Eastern (he served in the IDF and was a big Iraq hawk), believes that the United States must seize the opening presented by the post-election developments in Iran.

But he adds a caveat. Neither the United States nor Israel will get anywhere with Iran unless it addresses the issue that inflames Iranians as much as it does Arabs: the issue of Palestine.

"A future behind-the-scenes battle between Sunni Arabs and Shiite Iranians for a silent strategic contract with Israel can be affected only if the United States exerts strong pressure on Israel to cede West Bank territory. Never has there been a better time to push for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, even if it requires the collapse of today's Israeli coalition in the process," he writes.

So add Iran to the long list of Middle East countries whose relationship with the United States could be transformed if Obama continues his push for an end to settlements and a Palestinian state.

Actually, it is not so much the substance of what Obama demands that matters as it is the fact that he maintains pressure. Neither Arabs nor Iranians believe that America will ever stand firm in a confrontation with an Israeli government. Quite simply, they believe that Israel owns U.S. policy toward the Muslim world. While this may not be true, it is believed widely enough to prevent America from making much headway with Muslims, whether Shi'ite, Sunni, or secular. It was only with Obama's Cairo speech that they began to consider the possibility that the United States was capable of approaching them with some degree of even-handedness.

Marc Lynch, the professor and Foreign Policy magazine analyst, has another set of reasons why Obama has to maintain the pressure: it is working.

"Obama's pressure has actually been quietly working," he writes. "Lost in the public pyrotechnics over Netanyahu's grudging utterance of an emasculated two state phraseology, Israel has over the last few weeks actually been making serious changes to the checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank and to the blockade of Gaza. The siege of cities such as Nablus has been lifted, major choke-points on key West Bank roads have been significantly opened, and journalists report being able to drive to Jenin without being stopped at a checkpoint. This is new."

He writes: "That Israel has quietly made significant changes to the checkpoints in the last few weeks-after ignoring six years worth of Road Map commitments, snubbing Tony Blair and the Quartet's persistent demands, dismissing the recommendations of the World Bank and other international development agencies, and greatly expanding them even while negotiating during the Annapolis process-suggests that Obama's tough love approach has actually been the only one able to achieve real results. It hasn't gotten much publicity, and it's only a minor thing in the wider context of the occupation, the battle over the settlements, the tortuous politics of the final status issues, the trends in Israeli politics and the disastrous Palestinian political divisions. But it shows that there is already something to show for his policy and that it's worth fighting for."

Lynch adds that Obama can lose these advantages in a heartbeat if he backs down. "Obama has to stand tough on the settlement expansions if he hopes to not squander the tentative gains of the last few weeks-and, more broadly, to see his administration's credibility on Israeli-Palestinian issues shattered forever," he writes. "This is going to be hard to do, since the administration is badly distracted by the events in Iran and might not see this as a good time or an important enough issue to pick a costly fight with Netanyahu. But that would be a huge mistake, because credibility lost here will be very, very hard to recover. Mitchell's abrupt cancelation of a meeting with Netanyahu should only be the beginning: he and Obama need to be ready to take concrete steps to force Israel to back down, or see all of the tentative progress they've seen made evaporate."

He believes Obama will take those steps and "surprise a lot of people."

But, fair is fair. It would not only be Obama who surprises "a lot of people" but Netanyahu as well. It is just possible that he has decided not to go to the mat with Israel's only ally in the world. Perhaps Netanyahu will begin the process of extricating Israel from a situation that is destroying it.

We have heard for years that beyond the rhetoric, Bibi is a pragmatist and not an ideologue, capable of the kind of flexibility Menachem Begin demonstrated when he evacuated every last inch of Sinai in order to achieve a real peace with Egypt that has held for 30 years. Maybe he sees the handwriting on the wall; the occupation cannot be sustained without ultimately losing the support of the United States. As an Israeli patriot, he may just understand that he has to do everything in his power to prevent that from happening. In his heart of hearts, Netanyahu may believe that it would be nice to hold on to the West Bank. But in his brain he knows that maintaining Israel's friendship with the United States, and achieving the kind of peace Begin did, is infinitely nicer.

Americans' Unfettered Support for Israel Is Beginning to Erode -- And That May Help the Peace Process

Article Type: Analysis

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): [http://www.alternet.org/world/140910/americans%27_unfettered_support_for_israel ...](http://www.alternet.org/world/140910/americans%27_unfettered_support_for_israel...) [3]

The Israel Project hired pollster Stanley Greenberg to test American opinion on the Middle East conflict -- and got a big surprise. In September 2008, 69% of Americans called themselves pro-Israel. Now, it's only 49%. In September, the same 69% wanted the U.S. to side with Israel; now, only 44%.

How to explain this dramatic shift? Greenberg himself suggested the answer years ago when he pointed out that, in politics, "a narrative is the key to everything." Last year the old narrative about the Middle East conflict was still dominant: Israel is an innocent victim, doing only what it must do to defend itself against the Palestinians. Today, that narrative is beginning to lose its grip on Americans.

Well, to be more precise, the first part of the old narrative is eroding. Nearly half the American public seems unsure that Israel is still the good guy in the Middle East showdown. But the popular image of the Palestinians as the violent bad guy is apparently as potent as ever. The number of Americans who say they support Palestine remains unchanged from last September, a mere 7%. And only 5% want the U.S. government to take such a position.

Those numbers reflect the narrative that President Obama recited in Cairo on June 4th. He chided the Israelis for a few things they are doing wrong -- like expanding settlements and blockading Gaza. To the other side, though, his message was far blunter: "Palestinians must abandon violence." Of Israeli violence he said not a word. The president's speech implicitly sanctioned the most up-to-date tale that dominates the American mass media and public opinion today: The Israelis ought to be reined in a bit, but it's hard to criticize them too much because, hey, what would you do if you had suicide bombers and rockets coming at you all the time?

That view is a political winner here. In the latest Pew poll, 62% of Americans say Obama is striking the right balance between Israel and Palestine; of those who disagree, three-quarters want to see him tougher on the Palestinians, not the Israelis. A Rasmussen poll finds even stronger support for a pro-Israel tilt.

There are, however, two things wrong with his narrative. First, though it's somewhat less one-sided than the story that prevailed during the George W. Bush years, it is far from impartial, which means the U.S. still cannot act as an even-handed broker for peace in the region. Since no one else is available to play that role, it's hard to see how, under the present circumstances, any version of a peace process can move forward.

The second problem is that the popular narrative just doesn't happen to match the facts. In reality, unjustified violence is initiated on both sides -- and if anyone insists on keeping score, Israel's violence, official and unofficial, outweighs the violence coming from the Palestinians.

Coming to Grips with Jewish Settler Violence

Israeli violence is often overlooked here because so much of it is done by official order of the state. Americans are quick to side with the man who wears the badge. Even when he lets loose the kind of violence that recently devastated parts of the Gaza Strip, the reigning assumption is that his gun is a force for law and order.

But what about the kind of violence Palestinians are so often accused of, the unauthorized civilian-on-civilian kind -- what the experts term "non-state-actor violence" and the rest of us simply call "terrorism"? Though you may not know this, much of it these days is done by Israeli Jews.

"Palestinian civilians bear brunt of settler violence," Agence France-Presse recently reported: "Nestled

amid rolling hills and with an eagle eye's view to the Mediterranean coast, Nahla Ahmed's house has all the elements of Eden... if it weren't for the Molotov cocktail-throwing neighbours. 'We put bars on the windows after the first attack, three years ago,' says the 36-year-old mother of four. 'Now they come each week.'

The attacks aren't always with Molotov cocktails; sometimes Jewish settlers throw tear gas canisters, simply spray a Star of David on a wall, or cut down trees owned by Palestinians. In other incidents, settlers have shot and killed a 16-year-old boy, fractured the skull of a 7-year-old girl with a rock, set a dog on a 12-year-old boy, and shot dead an Arab man but let his companion go when he identified himself as Jewish. These are not egregious, isolated cases of mayhem; they're just a few random examples of what's happening all too often on the West Bank. To see how depressingly common such violence is, just Google "West Bank settler violence" for yourself.

It's easy enough to see what the violence looks like too, since a lot of it has been captured on video. And this is just violence against people. The violence against property is far too common to begin to catalog.

Last December, Jewish settlers in Hebron went on a rampage, shooting at Palestinians, setting fire to homes, cars, and olive groves, defacing mosques and graves. Ehud Olmert, Israel's prime minister at the time, said he was "ashamed" of this "pogrom."

Yet few such settler crimes are seriously prosecuted by the Israeli authorities. The Israeli rights group Yesh Din has documented this in an extensive report, which, the group carefully notes, is merely one more in a long line of similar reports:

"Since the 1980's many reports have been published on law enforcement upon Israelis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. All of the reports... warned against the failure of the authorities to enforce the law effectively upon Israelis... who committed offenses against Palestinian civilians... Yet the problem of attacks against Palestinian people and property by Israelis has only grown worse, becoming a daily occurrence."

Assessing Hamas Violence

Jewish settlers who commit violence claim just what the Israeli government claims when it directs state-sponsored violence at Palestinian areas: Self-defense -- it was nothing but self-defense. And it's certainly true that there are incidents of individual Palestinians venting their frustration violently. After all, they've been living under an arbitrary, demeaning, and sometimes brutal occupation for 42 years.

According to the common Israeli and American narratives, however, the real culprit and chief roadblock to peace is the constant violence -- suicide bombings and rocket attacks -- planned and carried out by a well-organized political party, Hamas. Again, as it happens, this popular version of events is simply not borne out by the facts.

Consider suicide bombings. In 2003 Israel's premier newspaper, Ha'aretz, reported that Hamas had decided "to stop terror against Israeli civilians if Israel stops killing Palestinian civilians." Though it's not clear that Israel did stop its own killings, Hamas soon halted its devastating suicide attacks. There were two in 2004 and not a single one in the nearly five years since then, according to the Jewish Virtual Library run by the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (a source hardly sympathetic to Hamas).

The same source counts no "major attacks" on Israeli civilians by any Palestinians since 2006. Though there have been other attacks since then, their frequency has dropped dramatically, and none have been carried out by Hamas itself.

Israelis generally know what most Americans still don't: Suicide bombing, supposedly the trademark of "Palestinian terrorism," has virtually ceased. As a result, Israel's chief complaint has switched to Hamas rocket attacks. How can we let them have the West Bank, the argument goes? Look what happened when we pulled all our settlements out of Gaza and got nothing in return but thousands of rockets. That's why we had no choice but launch our full-scale assault on Gaza in December 2008: to put an end to them.

In fact, though, Hamas rocket attacks had ended in July 2008, when Israel agreed to the ceasefire Hamas had been asking for. That agreement held for four months until Israeli troops killed six Hamas operatives -- shortly before Hamas and Fatah were scheduled to create a unified government. It's a familiar Israeli tactic: block Palestinian unity and then complain of "no partner for peace."

Hamas was also moved by the plight of its people in Gaza, growing increasingly short of food, medical supplies, and other basic goods due to an ever-tightening Israeli blockade.

Yet all this is lost in the story that most Israelis tell, and most Americans believe, about why Hamas began shooting rockets (which, compared to the massive Israeli onslaught in response, did relatively little damage). Equally lost is Hamas's return to its moratorium on firing rockets after the recent Gaza war, formally confirmed by the party's leader, Khaled Meshal, in the New York Times.

Occasional rockets do fly out of Gaza, provoking the usual Israeli demand that Palestinian authorities must prevent every single incident of violence before there can be any talk of peace. That's something like holding the U.S. government responsible for the recent shooting at the Holocaust Museum in Washington or the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

A Mirror Image?

Still, the Palestinian governments in both Gaza and the West Bank could do more to control the private violence of their people, just as the Israeli government could do more to control Jewish settler violence. Yet none of these governments act vigorously because they risk alienating a small but significant portion of their political support.

As the Times's Ethan Bronner recently wrote: "There are striking parallels between the hard-core opponents of a peace deal on each side. They are generally driven by a belief in a law higher than any created by human legislatures; they are exceptionally motivated; and they are very well organized... Many Israeli governments have fallen over the issue."

For the risk of offending hard-core groups, neither side sees obvious countervailing political gain. While a minority on both sides condemns the violence of its compatriots, the majority seems to accept it as an excessive, unfortunate, but understandable response to provocations initiated by the enemy. So neither Hamas, nor Fatah, nor the Israeli government see any clear advantage in bending over backwards to stop attacks by non-state groups. What's more, as Uri Avnery, the grand old man of the Israeli peace movement, explains: "On both sides, the overwhelming majority want an end to the conflict but do not believe that peace is possible -- and each side blames the other." Each side blames the other because so many on each side believe that those who perpetrate the violence represent the entirety of the other side. We could have peace, the universal complaint goes, if only "the Palestinians" or "the Israelis" would stop their violence.

The tragedy is that, on both sides, those who inflict violence gain little of practical value from it. Indeed the motives that keep the conflict boiling may have little to do with any hope of practical gain from it. When researchers asked nearly 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians what it would take to make peace, few focused

on tangible benefits like gaining more land or resources. Most on both sides wanted see "their enemies making symbolic but difficult gestures." They agreed that they would be willing to make concessions, but only if "the other side agreed to a symbolic sacrifice of one of its sacred values." The violence done by non-state actors is perversely satisfying, even if ultimately useless, because it's the most visible way to win little symbolic victories.

A New Narrative

Palestinians can argue, with good reason, that treating the two sides as mirror images creates a false equivalence. After all, one side is the occupier, constantly inflicting symbolic defeats through the use of state-sponsored violence that dwarfs the violence of its private citizens, or sometimes even more powerfully just by using its ability to re-organize the landscape. The other side is the occupied, a people with virtually no tools of state violence to wield even if they want to, struggling every day just to survive. In the U.S. and around the world there is growing pressure to reverse the traditional narrative of these last decades and turn the Israelis into the bad guys.

Given the tiny fraction of Americans who identify as pro-Palestinian, it's fruitless to think that a majority of us would ever adopt such a reversed narrative -- nor would it be very helpful, regardless of the facts. If the Obama administration really intends to be an even-handed broker, forcing the two sides to move towards genuine compromise at the negotiating table, it needs to represent a nation that tells an even-handed story.

Old narratives don't die out simply because they fail to fit the facts. They die out when a more appealing story comes along. The eroding support for Israeli policies in this country signals a growing appetite for a new, more even-handed narrative, one that says this:

The crucial conflict is not between Israel and Palestine. It's between peace and violence. Violence comes from both sides. But there's also the possibility of fostering a strong push for peace on both sides. Here in the U.S., we should urge our government to stop taking sides in the blame game, condemn all the violence -- including, for the first time, Israeli violence -- and support all forces of peace that exist or arise.

It is hard for many of my fellow Jews to accept the painful truth that we are as capable of violence as the Palestinians, or anyone else. But this new narrative is gaining ground rapidly in the American Jewish community, where groups like J Street and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom are making well-organized efforts to promote it and act upon it.

As non-Jewish Americans become aware of that change, they are likely to feel freer to adopt the even-handed narrative as their own, too. When enough of them do, the political winds in this country will change. Then the White House will feel safe enough to tell Israel, as well as Palestine, to stop both state and non-state violence. That's a necessary first step for an even-handed broker who hopes to open a path to peace.

U.S. Rejects Hamas Criticism Middle East Peace Process Too Slow

Article Author(s): Paul Tighe

Media Outlet: Bloomberg

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601103&sid=axUDLvF.hC7k> [4]

June 26 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. rejected criticism by the leader of the Palestinian Hamas group that the Middle East peace process is too slow, saying it is trying to bring all parties back to talks.

"We're encouraging all parties to take steps that will lead to a positive context, that will lead to renewed negotiations," State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said at a briefing in Washington.

Hamas wants "change on the ground that will bring an end to the occupation" of the Palestinian territories, Khalid Mashaal, the group's leader, said late yesterday in Syria's capital, Damascus, Agence France-Presse reported.

President Barack Obama, in a speech in Cairo earlier this month, said he was seeking a "new beginning" with Muslims and said Israel and the Palestinians deserved separate states. Mashaal at the time welcomed Obama's "new language."

"We hail the new line from Barack Obama toward Hamas," AFP cited Mashaal as saying yesterday. "It is the first step toward direct talks without preconditions."

Kelly said he didn't agree with Mashaal's assessment that progress is too slow. The U.S. is working hard to reach the "goal we need for the region, a comprehensive peace agreement," he said, according to a State Department transcript.

Control of Gaza

Hamas defeated the Fatah party led by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in January 2006 elections and, in an armed confrontation with Fatah's militia, took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 after a coalition government ended.

The U.S., European Union and Israel designate Hamas as a terrorist organization and won't have dealings with the group until it renounces violence and recognizes Israel.

The Obama administration has said Israel must stop settlement expansion in the West Bank. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed to stop construction of new settlements while continuing to expand existing ones.

Netanyahu said yesterday he expects to be able to resolve differences with the U.S. over settlements in the West Bank.

"I believe that with good will it is possible," Netanyahu said in Paris yesterday. He spoke at a news conference after meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Hamas rejects Netanyahu's positions on the status of East Jerusalem, settlements and the return of Palestinian and "his vision of a demilitarized Palestinian state deprived of sovereignty over its lands, airspace and territorial waters," Mashaal said, according to AFP.

Israel in plan to expand West Bank settlement

Article Author(s): Vita Bekker

Media Outlet: The Financial Times

Date: June 24, 2009

Source Link(s): http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/05a4176e-6022-11de-a09b-00144feabdc0.html?nclick_check...

[5]

Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, has approved a plan to construct hundreds of new homes in an unauthorised outpost in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, an Israeli rights group said on Tuesday in a report that appeared to defy Washington's calls for a freeze on settlement growth.

Mr Barak, whose nod is needed for any construction in the West Bank's Jewish settlements, allowed 240 housing units to be built and 60 existing residences to become legalised in an outpost northwest of the Palestinian city of Ramallah, according to Bimkom, a Jerusalem-based group specialising in planning issues. A spokeswoman for the defence ministry had no immediate comment.

The report may spur further tensions with the administration of Barack Obama, the US president, who has repeatedly urged Israel to stop expanding its settlements on occupied territory that Palestinians want as part of their future state. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has rejected the US demand for a total halt on expansion, though he has pledged not to establish new settlements.

Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's centre-right prime minister who has cultivated close ties with Israel, told reporters on Tuesday he had urged Mr Netanyahu at the start of his first visit to Europe as prime minister to send 'significant signals about freezing settlements'. An aide to Mr Berlusconi said that he had asked Mr Netanyahu during their talks to make a 'concession' on settlements. The aide gave no further details.

Mr Netanyahu did not mention settlements during their joint press conference in Rome, but reporters travelling with the delegation quoted him as saying Israel would not build new settlements or expropriate more land for existing settlements. Bloomberg news agency said he stopped short of saying Israel would freeze settlement expansion on existing land.

Mr Barak approved the plan in April, shortly after Mr Netanyahu's predominantly right-wing government came to power, and it is likely to receive the final go-ahead in coming months, Bimkom said. The homes are located in Water Reservoir Hill, one of more than 100 so-called wildcat settlements that have been set up without formal state authorisation, though government ministries have often cooperated with their construction.

According to the group, the new homes are meant to 'create territorial contiguity' between Water Reservoir Hill and the established Jewish settlement of Talmon, and their building will block residents of a nearby Palestinian village from reaching their agricultural land.

Alon Cohen-Lifshitz, an architect who works with Bimkom, said in a statement: 'This proves that Barak has no intention of freezing construction in existing settlements, and not even of refraining from building new ones.'

Gaza industries struggle to rebuild

Article Author(s): Heather Sharp

Media Outlet: BBC News

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8119457.stm [6]

One of the building's corners stands on a precariously buckled concrete pillar.

But the small assembly line swishes on in the middle of the vast room, spitting out blue-wrapped ice lollies.

Al-Wadiya group, Gaza's largest food manufacturer, suffered extensive damage during Israel's 22-day military operation in January.

But six months later, recycled scrap metal covers a gaping hole, and the factory is making ice-cream again. Just.

Before the conflict, Chairman Yaser al-Wadiya employed 276 people to make 127 food products. Now 45 employees produce only four items.

"They damaged everything," he says, flicking through an album of pictures of charred vehicles and pointing out a heap of rubble that was once a biscuit factory.

Recovery has been "very difficult," he says, because of the Israeli blockade, which includes a virtual ban on all exports, and on imports of raw and construction materials.

Israel imposed the restrictions in an attempt to end rocket attacks on Israel and weaken Hamas, which seized control of the Strip in 2007.

Israeli authorities say building materials can be used to make rockets, and to build the tunnels through which weapons and other goods are smuggled into Gaza from Egypt.

GAZA UNDER BLOCKADE: June 2009

40% unemployed

750,000 receive Unrwa food aid

No petrol or diesel since Nov 2008 (except UN)

Half required cooking gas allowed

Recently blocked items: light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, shoes, mattresses, sheets, blankets, tea, coffee, chocolate, nuts

Virtually no building materials allowed in

Source: Unrwa and World Bank

Mr Wadiya has bought some materials and machinery sold off from other damaged businesses, and imported much of the rest at inflated prices through the tunnels.

He paid \$65 each for bags of cement that cost \$5 before the blockade, he says.

"We will fix whatever we can," says Mr Wadiya, the third generation in the family business. "We are not going anywhere, this is our land."

Even before the conflict, the blockade had devastated Gaza's industrial sector.

By June 2008, all but 90 of Gaza's 3,900 industrial enterprises had ground to a halt, laying off 97% of their 35,000 staff, according to the Palestinian Trade Center, although things improved slightly in the six-month Israel-Hamas truce that followed.

In an air-conditioned office in Gaza City, Amr Hamad has just returned from giving his latest international visitor, Norway's foreign minister, a tour of Gaza's ruined industrial zone.

The Palestinian Federation of Industries, which he heads, says many of the 324 businesses damaged in the Israeli operation were those that were still functioning.

He says the Israeli troops' destruction of economic infrastructure was "very much deliberate".

Mr Wadiya, for example, has photographs of caterpillar tracks amid the ruins of the biscuit factory, which he believes the Israelis finished off with bulldozers after hitting it from the air.

The UN's top humanitarian official, John Holmes, has accused Israel of the "systematic levelling" of Gaza's industrial area, where the al-Wadiya factory is located.

The site is close to the border with Israel, so a desirable rocket launching zone for Palestinian militants, but Mr Wadiya says his factory was surrounded by a 3m security fence.

The Israeli military says it "did not specifically target industrial premises".

They were damaged, it says, either because they were being used by Hamas, or because "there was a specific military need to do so".

The damage was "proportional", the military says, and due to Palestinian militants' use of civilian buildings for cover.

Both Israel and Hamas deny allegations that they violated international humanitarian law during the conflict.

Mr Hamad cites the case of al-Badr flour mill, Gaza's largest, the only one that was operating at the time and the only place in the Strip that can store large volumes of grain.

Mahmoud Hamada, manager of al-Badr flour mill, amid destroyed machinery
Mr Hamada says new machinery would cost \$1.5m

Pigeons now fly in and out of a mess of charred machinery, open to the sky where a huge section is missing from the top two floors.

Manager Mahmoud Hamada says it was hit from both sides by F16s and helicopters on 16 January, following telephone warnings that the building would be targeted, but he insists there were no Hamas fighters in the area.

At the time of publication, the Israel military had not responded to questions about why either the flour mill or the al-Wadiya factories were attacked.

There were no casualties from the strikes, but his 35-year-old nephew, a doctor and father of five, plunged four floors to his death while trying to clear debris after the attack.

Mr Hamada says he needs 60 tonnes of iron, 200 of cement and some \$1.5m worth of machinery to rebuild. But none of it is available.

He says, politically, he is neutral and simply cares about "how to bring bread for the people of Gaza".

View from damaged part of al-Badr flour mill, Gaza Strip

A large section of the top two floors of the al-Badr mill was completely destroyed

This is typical, says Amr Hamad, of much of Gaza's business community - who he says tend to be either politically unaffiliated, or supporters of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority rather than the more

militant Hamas.

"These people are very keen on good relations with Israel, because for them, peace means money," he says.

He says the business community is losing influence in Gaza, as it is replaced by black marketeers who run the tunnels, on which Hamas is widely thought to levy taxes.

An Israeli government official recently admitted to the BBC that the blockade, which is currently under review, may inadvertently benefit Hamas - but pointed out that easing it might be taken as a victory for the Islamic movement.

Mr Hamad is concerned that if things do not change soon, Gaza's industrial sector will be beyond recovery, leaving isolation, aid-dependency and unemployment that he believes would be "dangerous":

"I have grown up to know other people - Jewish, Muslim and Christians. The coming generations don't mix with Western people. They will not be able to accept others unless they mix with them."

G8 calls for Israeli settlement freeze

Media Outlet: Reuters

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3737443,00.html> ^[7]

The Group of Eight (G8) powers called for a freeze in Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank and urged all parties to "re-enter direct negotiations on all standing issues consistent with the Road Map," according to a final draft statement seen by Reuters on Friday.

The G8 foreign ministers, who are meeting in Trieste, Italy, also deplored the post-electoral violence in Iran.

Following his meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu in Paris on Wednesday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy called on the Israeli prime minister to take "every trust-building step possible" in negotiations with the Palestinians, including a complete halt to construction in settlements.

He also called on Israel to ease Palestinian movement restrictions in the West Bank.

The tensions between Jerusalem and Washington over the settlement issue have yet to be resolved. The Americans will not accept anything but a complete freeze of all construction in the West Bank, including the neighborhoods adjacent to Jerusalem itself. Israel however says that the understanding with the previous administration allowed for the building of new housing units within the boundaries of existing settlements.

It is with these tensions in the air that the meeting between Netanyahu and George Mitchell, President Barack Obama's special envoy to the Middle East, was canceled. Defense Minister Ehud Barak is to leave for Washington next week in an attempt to bridge the gaps with Mitchell.

Netanyahu has said on a number of occasions that he agrees that no new settlements would be built, but that he cannot tell families in the existing ones "not to have children."

Elliot Abrams, a senior advisor to the Bush administration, wrote in the Wall Street Journal on that "despite

fervent denials by Obama administration officials, there were indeed agreements between Israel and the United States regarding the growth of Israeli settlements on the West Bank."

The editorial validates the Israeli government's claim that then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President George W. Bush came to an agreement that would allow for some degree of growth within existing settlements.

Israel plays down reports of imminent Gaza deal

Article Author(s): Adam Entous

Article Author(s): Alastair MacDonald

Media Outlet: Reuters

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s):

<http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE55P2N220090626?pageNumber=1&virt...> [8]

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Israeli officials played down reports on Friday that a deal was close with Hamas that would include the release of an Israeli soldier held captive in the Gaza Strip in exchange for Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

Israeli and Palestinian political sources and Western diplomats confirmed, however, that Egyptian mediators were still working on a package of measures that could combine exchanges of prisoners, ceasefire agreements, an easing of Israel's blockade on Gaza and rapprochement between rival Palestinian factions.

A July 7 deadline set by Egypt for Islamist Hamas and the Fatah faction of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to ease a schism that has divided Gaza from the West Bank, as well as this week's third anniversary of Hamas's capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, has fueled speculation of a deal.

Responding to Israeli press reports citing European diplomats that Shalit was about to be sent to Egypt, Israeli officials and European diplomats in the region said on Friday they knew of no new concrete developments in negotiations.

Hamas officials have also played down earlier reports.

Nonetheless, diplomats said negotiations were in train.

The family of Shalit, who also has French citizenship, has stepped up pressure on new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reach a deal. The government has long baulked at Hamas's price for Shalit's release, notably the freeing of leading Hamas militants responsible for attacks on Israelis.

Netanyahu is also under pressure from the United States and its European allies to ease a blockade on Hamas-ruled Gaza that has prevented billions of dollars in foreign reconstruction aid from reaching the enclave since Israel's offensive in January.

Israel, which is also under U.S. pressure to renew peace talks with Abbas, has tied the blockade to the fate of Shalit.

An Israeli government official said Netanyahu wanted the international community to pressure Hamas, not Israel: "Hamas has held Gilad Shalit for some three years. He hasn't even been given one visit by a representative of the Red Cross.

"The international community should be pushing for his release and should be pushing for such a visit."

"PACKAGE DEALS"

Hamas, which seized control of Gaza two years ago in fighting with Fatah-led forces, is keen to bolster its support among the 1.5 million Gazans by improving supplies.

Aziz Dweik, the speaker of the Hamas-dominated Palestinian parliament elected in 2006, told Reuters on Thursday, two days after he was released himself from an Israeli prison: "The Egyptians are behind the package deal which is expected to speak about the truce, to speak about opening all the crossings to (the) Gaza Strip and to speak about Shalit."

"We would like (it) to be accomplished in the very few coming days because I left ... almost 11,000 prisoners in Israeli jails," Dweik added, speaking in English. During a European tour this week that included talks with French President Nicolas Sarkozy which touched on the Shalit case, Netanyahu said on Tuesday: "We are making efforts on various levels. We are now testing various possibilities."

One possibility, cited by an Israeli political source, was that a step-by-step deal could begin with Hamas moving Shalit to Egypt, where he would stay with access to his family. Israel, in turn, would begin to open Gaza's border crossings. The two sides would then hammer out a final agreement on Hamas prisoners.

The possible complexity of any deal is daunting, however:

- Israel wants Shalit back and an end to threats from Hamas, which has peppered southern Israel with rockets from Gaza;
- Hamas wants hundreds of its own prisoners released, both by Israel and by Abbas's Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, as well as promises from Israel not to renew attacks on Gaza;
- Abbas wants Fatah prisoners released in Gaza and an accord that will restore his authority in the Hamas-run enclave.

Quartet to urge Israel to freeze all settlement activity

Media Outlet: Reuters

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE55P3G920090626> ^[9]

TRIESTE, Italy (Reuters) - The Quartet of Middle East peace negotiators will urge Israel on Friday to freeze all settlement activity, including "natural growth," a European diplomat said.

The Quartet, which includes the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia, will make the call in a statement after its first formal meeting since U.S. President Barack Obama took office in January.

Israel gives Abbas forces freer hand in West Bank cities

Article Author(s): Adam Entous

Media Outlet: Reuters

Date: June 25, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE55O6QR20090625> ^[10]

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Israel agreed on Thursday to give Palestinian security forces a freer hand to operate in four West Bank cities and to limit its own military activities there in a U.S.-backed move to bolster President Mahmoud Abbas.

Palestinian officials said the changes were inadequate because the Israeli army still reserved the right to re-enter the cities of Qalqilya, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jericho to counter what it called any "urgent" threats by militants.

The announcement coincided with efforts by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to ease tensions with U.S. President Barack Obama over stalled peacemaking with the Palestinians.

Israel has rebuffed U.S. calls for a halt to Jewish settlement building in the occupied West Bank. On Monday, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak will meet Obama's Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, in Washington to try to narrow differences.

"As of today, Palestinian security forces will be able to operate freely in the cities," an Israeli military official said. Israeli troops would still be able to operate within those cities, battlegrounds during a Palestinian uprising that began in 2000, "in cases of urgent security need," he added.

A statement issued later by the Israeli army said that "responsibility for maintaining security in the region has not been transferred" to security forces loyal to Abbas, whose Western-backed government is based in Ramallah.

Officials said the changes agreed to by Israel would give Abbas' forces greater freedom of movement around the clock. Until now, Israel limited those movements, particularly at night.

But senior Western diplomats briefed by the Israeli government said the decision to ease restrictions would be re-evaluated after a week.

More than 1,600 security men loyal to Abbas have undergone U.S.-funded training since January 2008. They are derided as collaborators by Hamas Islamists who seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 after routing Abbas' forces there.

Israel has slowly come to back the U.S. training program as a test of Abbas' ability to rein in militants, as demanded in a 2003 peace "road map" for establishing a Palestinian state.

Abbas has ruled out resuming peace talks with Israel until it halts settlement activity, also required under the road map.

SECURITY RESPONSIBILITY

An Israeli security source said the army would "act as little as possible to allow the Palestinians to take

more initiative and responsibility over their own security."

Israeli forces would stay out of the four cities except "in circumstances of 'ticking bombs,' or a planned attack" against Israelis, the Israeli security source said.

The senior Palestinian security official countered, "If there is to be a change, they (Israeli troops) should stop the incursions, not enter under the pretext of 'ticking bombs.'"The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, called the move a public relations "sham." He said Israel should halt incursions without exception.

The changes set out by Israel fell far short of Palestinian demands it pull its forces back to positions they held before the outbreak of the uprising.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly welcomed the Israeli moves as "positive steps," saying they included removing some Israeli checkpoints to make it easier for Palestinians to get around but that more needed to be done.

The spokesman also said that Israel had "legitimate" security concerns that had to be respected.

Israel has been reducing its presence in parts of the West Bank, where anti-Israeli violence has declined. But the army still carries out routine patrols and occasional arrest raids.

Under U.S. pressure, Israel has taken down some West Bank checkpoints, including one at the entrance to Jericho. But hundreds more remain, restricting Palestinian travel and trade.

Israel says the changes were meant to bolster Abbas in his power struggle with Hamas, which won a 2006 Palestinian election but is shunned by Western powers for refusing to renounce violence and for rejecting Israel's right to exist.

Israel informed the Palestinians it would limit army operations in the four cities at a meeting of senior officers on Wednesday. A senior Western security source said other West Bank cities could be added later.

U.S. and Israeli security officials have voiced increasing confidence in Abbas' security forces, which carried out deadly raids against Hamas militants in Qalqilya earlier this month.

Hamas leader rejects "freak" Israel offer of state

Article Author(s): Khaled Yacoub Oweis

Media Outlet: Reuters

Date: June 25, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSLP54009520090625> ^[11]

DAMASCUS (Reuters) - Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal denounced on Thursday an Israeli offer of a demilitarized Palestinian state as a "big prison" and said only armed struggle could restore Palestinian rights.

In a speech this month, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu supported the U.S. goal of a Palestinian state but said it should be demilitarized and the Palestinians must accept Israel as a Jewish

nation.

"The state that Netanyahu talked about, with control on it by land, sea and air, is a freak entity and a big prison, not a country fit for a great people," Meshaal said in a speech in the Syrian capital to supporters of Hamas, which won Palestinian elections in 2006.

Meshaal said the notion of an exclusive Jewish nation was anathema to the Palestinians because it means giving up what he described as the right of six million Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland in what is now Israel.

"We warn against any Arab leniency on this issue. The calls by the leaders of the enemy for the Jewishness of Israel are racist, not different to Italian Fascism and Hitler's Nazism," said Meshaal, who lives in exile in Syria.

OBAMA SPEECH

His speech also aimed to reply to the June 4 speech by U.S. President Barack Obama to the Muslim world in which he re-affirmed the U.S. objective of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on land occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East War.

Obama also wants a halt to all Israeli settlement building, a point of disagreement between him and Netanyahu.

Meshaal said Hamas appreciated what he termed Obama's new language, which could be the start of an "unconditional dialogue" between Washington and the Palestinian Islamist group.

"Dealing with Hamas and Palestinian resistance movements must be based on respecting the will of the Palestinian people and its democratic choice, not through putting conditions, such as those of the quartet," he said.

He was referring to the demands of the United States, Russia the United Nations and the European Union for Hamas to renounce armed struggle, as well as accept past peace agreements.

Hamas, which took control of the Gaza strip in 2007 after routing forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, has repeatedly rejected these conditions.

Meshaal also repeated the Hamas line of calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders.

"The minimum we accept is a Palestinian state with (East) Jerusalem as its capital, full sovereignty, removal of settlements and the refugees' right of return," he said.

He said Hamas, which is mainly supported by Syria and Iran, sees no alternative but to continue armed struggle to liberate Palestinian land after decades of Israel flouting international resolutions to withdraw.

"There is no alternative," Meshaal said. "Peaceful resistance works for a civil rights struggle, not in front of an occupation armed to the teeth."

Aharon Barak: W. Bank is occupied territory

Article Author(s): Dan Izenberg

Media Outlet: The Jerusalem Post

Date: June 25, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1245924930253&pagename=JPost%2FJPArti...>

[12]

Former Supreme Court president Aharon Barak stated repeatedly during a keynote address on Thursday that the West Bank was occupied territory and that he hoped a political solution would be reached to solve the problems connected with the occupation.

He also indicated that the human rights situation among Palestinians in the West Bank was very grave and that Israeli Jews were not seriously addressing the problems of discrimination in Israel against Israeli Arabs.

"If you ask an Israeli, 'are you in favor of equality for Arabs,' they will say, 'yes, of course.' If you ask them are they in favor of throwing the [Arabs] into the sea, they say, 'yes, of course.' And it doesn't feel like any contradiction to them. I think that much, much more has to be done in this area."

Barak was speaking at the 25th anniversary celebration of "The US-Israel Civil Liberties Law Program," sponsored by The New Israel Fund and the Washington College of Law of the American University in Washington, DC. Each year, two attorneys are chosen to spend one year in the US, obtaining a Master's degree in civil rights law and interning with American public interest groups. In their second year, the fellows return to Israel and work full-time for a local public interest group.

Barak said that although the legislation of the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Freedom and the Basic Law: Freedom of Occupation did not directly affect the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza, the laws influenced his way of looking at the question of how Palestinians were treated by the military administration.

Until the "constitutional revolution," as he calls the two basic laws passed in 1992, Barak applied administrative law to petitions challenging official Israeli actions in the territories.

"The question before me was what was the scope of the power of the military authorities [in the territories.] To the extent that human rights were able to restrict their power, this was an outcome, a derivative, from the concentration of the power of the state."

Slowly, he said, as a result of the human rights legislation, his thinking began to change. "In my new, better understanding of the role of international law of human rights and humanitarian international law, slowly, slowly, the vantage point started to shift from talking about the power of the military authorities and more and more to the question of the human and civil rights of the people living there."

He said the shift in emphasis in the West Bank and Gaza was parallel to a similar shift in thinking regarding issues between the state and the civilian population in Israel.

"When you think about human rights in Israel, you should think, of course, about human rights in the occupied territories as well," Barak continued. "The situation there is... you know better than I do, and I do hope the solution will not come in a judgment from the Supreme Court but will be a political solution. I do hope it comes as soon as possible."

Barak used the term "occupied territories" consistently throughout his address, and once even corrected himself when he started by referring to the territories as the "West Bank." Hebrew University law professor

Michael Krayani, who participated in a panel discussion after Barak's speech, pointed out that in all his 28 years on the bench, Barak had always referred to the territories as "Judea and Samaria," except for in one or two rulings at the very beginning of his judicial career.

Krayani said that had Barak and other like-minded Supreme Court justices referred to the West Bank and Gaza as "occupied territory" in their rulings down through the years, the Israeli government might have felt constrained from pursuing a policy of Jewish settlement in these areas.

Regarding the Israeli Arab community, Barak said there was no contradiction between Israel as a Jewish state and Israel as a state for all its citizens. "I do see Israel as a Jewish state and a state whose values are Jewish and democratic. On the other hand, I am a great believer that this is the country of all its citizens. And I do think that the Arabs, like every other citizen, should have equality.

"We still have not worked out properly the inter-relationship between the Jewishness of the state and the fact that it is a state of all its citizens. There is a lot yet to be done, and I believe that it can be done."

Barak added that Israel had to find a way to live in peace with its Arab neighbors and the Israeli Arab population. "If we don't," he concluded, "we will not find a way to live in peace with ourselves."

Palestinian peace in our time?

Article Author(s): Avi Issacharoff

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: June 26, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1095892.html> ^[13]

It's been two years since Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip, and it seems as if the breach between Gaza and the West Bank - or between what has been dubbed "Fatahland" and "Hamastan" - has never been wider. More than 700 Hamas members are imprisoned in Palestinian Authority jails in the West Bank, whereas several hundred Fatah loyalists are kept in Hamas' detention facilities in Gaza. In June 2007, as Hamas launched its takeover of Gaza, clashes between the two organizations claimed the lives of 158 Palestinians, mostly Fatah members. Since then about 100 Gazans have been killed in intra-Palestinian clashes - again, mostly from Fatah. Last month's shoot-out between PA security forces and Hamas members in Qalqilyah was a watershed in the relations between the two groups in the West Bank.

Yet, there could be rapprochement. Egypt is planning to hold an event on July 7 to mark the achievement of Palestinian reconciliation. The event is to be attended by representatives of all the organizations, including Hamas political leader Khaled Meshal and PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Only a few months ago the Egyptians were despairing about the possibility of bringing the two sides together, but U.S. President Barack Obama's recent visit to Egypt rejuvenated their efforts.

In his speech at Cairo University, Obama clarified that his attitude toward Hamas differs from that of his predecessor. In Hamas, at least among the more moderate leaders, this was seen as an opportunity to break the diplomatic siege on the organization. The Egyptians understood that Washington expects Cairo to secure an internal Palestinian reconciliation as a good-will gesture to Obama, and to pave the way for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Advertisement

The day before Obama's speech, a leading Egyptian official told Haaretz that his government had decided to bring about a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation by July 7. If these efforts fail, Egypt's image will also suffer.

The prevailing assessment in Egyptian intelligence is that Hamas' political leadership is interested in reconciliation - and soon. It is the Islamic group's military wing, headed by Ahmed al-Jabari, and its officials in Damascus, that are the problem. This is why the Egyptians insist that Syria and Iran must pressure Hamas' external leadership to agree to Palestinian unity. Since the Iranians are currently preoccupied with their own problems, Syria is increasingly becoming a key player in the Palestinian arena.

Obama and his officials realize that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is dependent upon unity between the West Bank and Gaza - which is why they are aware of Syria's central role. This realization may well have paved the way for the White House's decision this week to return the American ambassador to Syria - a gesture intended to prompt Damascus to pressure Meshal and his ilk to agree to the Egyptian-proposed reconciliation with Fatah.

The price of order

Gaza has never experienced the kind of order that prevails there today. Hamas is imposing its control, and even the smallest organizations are afraid of firing Qassam rockets at Israel. The era of fauda, the chaos, imposed on Gazans by armed gangs and large clans, has ended.

For the first time in many years, drivers are obeying traffic rules and stoplights, and the coffee houses are staying open until late at night. The West Bank has undergone a similar process under the leadership of the PA security forces. Many Gazans believe that the current situation in the Strip is immeasurably better than it was under PA rule, when armed militias roamed the streets. The Dormush clan, for example, used to offer its services for hire - charging \$100 for four armed men per day. Hamas dealt with the large clans, including the Dormushes and members of the Hilas family, who were identified with Fatah - although during Hamas' takeover of the Strip they helped the organization fight Fatah activists identified with Mohammed Dahlan.

However, the order imposed by Hamas is also exacting a price. Though Gaza's beaches are packed with swimmers, there is no freedom of association, expression or protest. Fatah activists are arrested and persecuted. Hamas is enforcing its laws by means of a reign of terror. In the best-case scenario it is arresting and torturing regime opponents, and in the worst case, executing them. The fact that Hamas has become the "establishment," imposing law and order, has resulted in the rise of ultra-radical groups, of the Al-Qaida sort. These groups are now the only alternative to Hamas, which has lost something of its aura of "resistance" from the PA's heyday.

In an attempt to forget about the great economic distress, thousands of Gazans have become addicted to painkillers, the most popular drugs today in the Strip. Indeed, the catastrophic economic situation may be the main problem facing Hamas. Ahead of January's Operation Cast Lead, the organization had promised Gazans that the rocket fire at Israel would lead the latter to lift its siege on the Strip. But that did not happen.

To this day, the PA pays most salaries in the Gaza Strip, sending wages to several thousand government employees who served there when the PA was in control and now have been ordered to stay home from work. The prisoners whose release Hamas promised after Gilad Shalit's abduction are also still sitting in Israeli prisons.

Hamas would like to forget all about Operation Cast Lead. Although it claimed "victory" when the war

ended, it is now clear that Hamas failed to obtain any of its aims, and also has had to prevent other groups from firing rockets for fear of a harsh Israeli reprisal. However, the movement is not trying to keep these smaller groups from taking action along the border fence.

Despite Israel's economic siege, Hamas continues to operate numerous tunnels under the border with Egypt, in order to amend several shortages - cash, merchandise and fuel. Even cement is being smuggled through the tunnels. In addition, the organization is continuing to smuggle in short-range and long-range rockets to rehabilitate its military capability.

The "tunnel project" inside Gaza itself is also in full swing: Hamas is digging tunnels throughout the Strip to prepare for the next Israeli invasion; it is also considering using them to abduct soldiers and launch attacks Israeli forces.

Internal power struggles

Several thousand men make up Hamas' military wing, and 18,000 to 20,000 Gazans belong to its government security forces. The organization has also established a special force for suppressing riots, in the case of a popular uprising. Since its takeover of the Strip, Hamas' military wing has grown steadily stronger - as seen by the fact that three senior movement members identified with the Iz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Ahmad al-Jabari, Nizar Awadallah and Marwan Issa) were invited to Cairo for talks on Gilad Shalit's release. By contrast, only one member of the group's political leadership (Mahmoud al-Zahar) was asked to attend.

Several leaders of Hamas' military wing were recently elected to the organization's Shura Council, while moderates were shunted aside. Contrary to the position of the external leadership, the military wing spearheaded the Gaza takeover, the same military wing that is anything but keen to accept Egypt's proposals for conciliation and conceding control over the Strip. While the Brigades are in favor of reconciliation with Fatah, they will not accede unconditionally. Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, a member of the more pragmatic camp, is not considered to be the organization's main decision-maker, although he is definitely part of the leading political echelon.

Hamas' top decision-maker has been and remains Meshal, who controls its budget - and therefore also has an influence over the tension between Gaza and Damascus. Thus, the decision concerning reconciliation lies in the hands of those who are neither feeling nor seeing the Gazans' distress. Several times already the Egyptians mediating between Hamas and Fatah have been astonished to discover the real extent of the differences between top Hamas officials from abroad and their peers in Gaza. And so, two years after Hamas took over Gaza, its internal power struggles continue to impede Palestinian reconciliation. It is highly doubtful that these disagreements will be resolved by July 7.

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