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News Blurb: The New York Times reports that Israel may be willing to accept a temporary halt to settlement activity as part of a broader Mideast peace endeavor (1), as tension continues to build over the proposed freeze (7) (8). The Los Angeles Times features a backgrounder on Israeli settlements in the West Bank (3). The U.N. fact-finding commission begins its hearing on allegations of war crimes during the Gaza war (4). The International Red Cross issues a report saying that the 1.5 million residents of Gaza are "trapped in despair" in their current conditions, especially children (9). Israel approves construction of 50 new homes in an existing West Bank settlement to absorb the evacuees of the Migron outpost (13) (14) (17). Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak heads to Washington to meet with Mideast envoy George Mitchell in a bid to resolve the settlements dispute (15) (18).

Israel May Shift on Settlements Freeze Amid Broader Effort

Article Author(s): Ethan Bronner

Media Outlet: The New York Times

Date: June 28, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/world/middleeast/29mideast.html?ref=middleeast> ^[1]

Israel would be open to a complete freeze of settlement building in the West Bank for three to six months as part of a broad Middle East peace endeavor that included a Palestinian agreement to negotiate an end to the conflict and confidence-building steps by major Arab nations, senior Israeli officials said Sunday.

The officials spoke before a planned meeting in Washington on Tuesday between Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak, and George J. Mitchell, the Obama administration's Middle East envoy, and said this was the message Mr. Barak would take with him.

The freeze would not affect construction that was already under way, nor include East Jerusalem. But it would mean that during the specified time no construction of any kind could start even in the close-in settlement blocks that Israel expects to keep in any future two-state agreement with the Palestinians.

While such an offer falls short of President Obama's demand that Israel halt all settlement building now, it is the most forthcoming response that senior Israeli officials have given to date and suggests that American pressure is having some effect. Until now, Israeli officials have insisted that settlements cannot be asked to end "natural growth" or "normal life," meaning building for the children of those living there.

The officials who spoke of the prospect of a temporary freeze said the issue was explosive in Israel, so they were not prepared to have their names publicly associated with the idea at this stage. But they spoke with clear authority. They calculated that about 2,000 buildings were going up in West Bank settlements

now and said that they would be completed under their proposal, but nothing new would start. They also said that if broader peace efforts came to naught, the building would start up again.

Mr. Barak himself declined to address the question of a temporary freeze in a conversation on Sunday with The New York Times, saying only that settlements should be viewed as one issue in a larger framework needed to create a Middle East peace.

“For us, it is very important that the Palestinians commit to seeking an end to the conflict and a finality of any claims,” he said. “We should not isolate this issue of settlements and make it the most important one. It has to be discussed in the context of a larger peace discussion.”

He added, “Many Israelis fear that what Palestinians want is not two states but two stages,” meaning an end to Israel in phases. He also said that by focusing solely on settlement building and not on what the Arab countries should also be doing for peace, Israel felt that it was being driven to its knees and delivered to the other side rather than asked to join a shared effort.

Israel, he said, was eager for a regional agreement that would lead to a state for the Palestinians and security for Israel.

The issue of settlement building has plagued regional peace efforts and Israeli-American relations for decades, ever since the 1967 Middle East war ended with Israel holding vast swaths of land that had been won from its neighbors. In particular, taking the West Bank, previously held by Jordan, fired the collective imagination in Israel because so much of it — including the cities of Hebron, Nablus and Jericho — was part of the biblical Jewish homeland that Zionism sought to reclaim.

There are now nearly 300,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank in addition to 200,000 Israeli Jews living in East Jerusalem, also taken in that war. Since the Palestinians hope to build their state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, they accuse Israel of making that goal impossible through settlement building.

Israel says the real problem is Arab rejection of its existence in any borders at all and the rise of violent, radical Islam backed by Iran. When it removed soldiers from southern Lebanon in 2000 and soldiers and settlers from Gaza in 2005, it faced rocket fire from Hezbollah and Hamas.

The Obama administration believes that in order to build a solid regional coalition to confront Iranian ambitions, West Bank settlement building needs to stop as a sign of Israeli willingness to accept a Palestinian state.

Such a demand is part of the “road map” agreed to by the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, the so-called quartet, and signed by Israel. But the Israelis said they had unwritten agreements with the former Bush administration that defined the freeze more narrowly, as not building new settlements or expropriating more land. Last week the quartet issued its own call for a complete settlement freeze.

The issue is so problematic here partly because the three-month-old government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a largely right-wing coalition with parties that support more settlement building. But Mr. Netanyahu recently accepted the idea of two states and has said Israel would work hard on helping the Palestinians improve their lives in the West Bank.

Mr. Barak said on Sunday that Israel was already making progress on that. It has formed a ministerial committee headed by Mr. Netanyahu aimed at starting economic projects in the West Bank. It has also

given the Palestinian security forces greater freedom of action in the past couple of weeks.

Mr. Barak presented such steps as examples of concessions Israel had already made that deserved recognition from Washington and Arab leaders. Among the steps being discussed that Arab nations might take as confidence building measures for Israel are permitting Israeli travelers to transit through their airports, allowing Israeli airplanes to fly in their airspace and creating limited academic and tourist exchanges. Among Arab countries, only Egypt and Jordan have full diplomatic relations with Israel.

In the interview, Mr. Barak suggested that there could be a role for an international Middle East peace conference in the coming months at which all sides would agree to steps and concessions. He said that given Washington's desire to remove its troops from Iraq and find a way to deal with Iran, this was an auspicious moment for bold regional thinking that could make far-reaching changes, and Israel was eager to play its part.

Unlikely Ally for Residents of West Bank

Article Author(s): Ethan Bronner

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

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[2]

Ezra Nawi was in his element. Behind the wheel of his well-worn jeep one recent Saturday morning, working two cellphones in Arabic as he bounded through the terraced hills and hardscrabble villages near Hebron, he was greeted warmly by Palestinians near and far.

Watching him call for an ambulance for a resident and check on the progress of a Palestinian school being built without an Israeli permit, you might have thought him a clan chief. Then noticing the two Israeli Army jeeps trailing him, you might have pegged him as an Israeli occupation official handling Palestinian matters.

But Mr. Nawi is neither. It is perhaps best to think of him as the Robin Hood of the South Hebron hills, an Israeli Jew helping poor locals who love him, and thwarting settlers and soldiers who view him with contempt. Those army jeeps were not watching over him. They were stalking him.

Since the Israeli left lost so much popular appeal after the violent Palestinian uprising of 2000 and the Hamas electoral victory three years ago, its activists tend to be a rarefied bunch — professors of Latin or Sanskrit, and translators of medieval poetry. Mr. Nawi, however, is a plumber. And unlike the intellectuals of European origin with whom he spends most Saturdays, he is from an Iraqi Jewish family.

"My mother gave birth to me in Jerusalem when she was 14," said Mr. Nawi, who is 57 and one of five siblings. "So my grandmother raised me. And she spoke to me in Arabic."

His family has trouble understanding his priorities. His mother says she thinks he is wasting his time. And many Israelis, when told of his work, wonder why he is not helping his own. Mr. Nawi has an answer.

"I don't consider my work political," he said between phone calls as he drove. "I don't have a solution to this dispute. I just know that what is going on here is wrong. This is not about ideology. It is about

decency.?

For his activist colleagues, Mr. Nawi's instinctual connection to the Palestinians is valuable.

"Ezra knows Palestinians better than any of us," said Amiel Vardi, a professor who works closely with him. "This is not only because of the language, but because he gains their confidence the minute he starts talking with them. He has all sorts of intuitions as to what should be done, what are the internal relations? things we hardly ever notice."

The difficulties of Palestinian life in the West Bank have been well documented: Israeli military checkpoints, a rising separation barrier and Israeli settlers. But in this area, the problems are more acute. The Palestinians, many of them Bedouin, are exceptionally poor, and the land they bought decades ago is under threat by a group of unusually aggressive local settlers. The settlers have been filmed beating up Palestinians. Settlers have been killed by Palestinians. But Mr. Nawi said that the law inevitably sided with the Israelis, and that occupation meant there could be no equity.

"The settlers keep the Palestinian farmers from their land by harassing them, and then after several years they say the land has not been farmed so by law it is no longer theirs," Mr. Nawi said. "We are only here to stop that from happening."

That is not the view of the settlers.

"He is a troublemaker," asserted Yehoshua Mor-Yosef, a spokesman for Israeli settler communities in the area. "It's true that from time to time there is a problem of some settlers coming out of their settlements to cause problems. But people like Nawi don't want a solution. Their whole aim is to cause trouble."

True or not, Mr. Nawi is now in trouble. Having spent several short stints in jail for his activism over the years, he now faces the prospect of a long one. He is due to be sentenced Wednesday for assaulting an Israeli policeman two years ago during a confrontation over an attempt to demolish Palestinians' shacks on disputed land on the West Bank. The policeman said Mr. Nawi struck him during that encounter. Mr. Nawi denied it, but in March a judge convicted him.

What is left of the Israeli left is rallying around him, arguing that Mr. Nawi is a known pacifist who would not have raised his hand against anyone.

"Since I've known the man for decades and seen him in action in many extreme situations, I'm certain that the charge is untrue," David Shulman, a Hebrew University professor and peace activist, wrote in the newspaper Haaretz. Of Mr. Nawi, he added, "He is a man committed, in every fiber of his being, to nonviolent protest against the inequities of the occupation."

Mr. Nawi attributes his activism to two things: as a teenager, his family lived next door to the leader of Israel's Communist Party, Reuven Kaminer, who influenced him. And he is gay.

"Being gay has made me understand what it is like to be a despised minority," Mr. Nawi said.

Several years ago, he had a relationship with a Palestinian from the West Bank and ended up being convicted on charges of allowing his companion to live illegally in Israel. His companion was jailed for months.

Mr. Nawi said harassment against him had come in many forms. Settlers shout vicious antigay epithets. His plumbing business has been audited, and he was handed a huge tax bill that he said he did not deserve. He is certain that his phone calls are monitored. And those army jeeps are never far behind.

He is not optimistic about his coming sentencing, although he is planning an appeal. And he says the Israeli news media have lost interest in the work he and his fellow activists do. But he does not stop.

"I'm here to change reality," he said. "The only Israelis these people know are settlers and soldiers. Through me they know a different Israeli. And I'll keep coming until I know that the farmers here can work their fields."

A guide to Israeli settlements

Article Author(s): Gershom Gorenberg

Media Outlet: The Los Angeles Times

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Source Link(s): <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-gorenberg28-2009jun28,0,670...>

[3]

In Cairo this month, President Obama urged Israel to stop settlement construction in the occupied territories. "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements," he said. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his own policy speech soon after, ardently defended the communities and the people who live in them. "The settlers are neither the enemies of the people nor the enemies of peace. Rather, they are an integral part of our people."

So what's all the fuss? We present a guide for the perplexed.

For starters, what's a settlement?

As used today, the term usually refers to an Israeli community built in the territories that Israel conquered in the Six-Day War in June 1967. Israel removed its settlements from the Sinai after making peace with Egypt in 1979, and unilaterally evacuated its Gaza Strip settlements in 2005. So the dispute today deals with the Golan Heights and especially the West Bank. Some of the settlements are tiny, but many are large suburban towns such as Maale Adumim, east of Jerusalem, and Ariel, east of Tel Aviv. These bedroom communities have attracted Israelis, both secular and religious, looking for inexpensive homes. The fastest-growing are those intended exclusively for ultra-Orthodox Jews. With low incomes and large families, the ultra-Orthodox need cheap housing. Playing to that need, successive Israeli governments have drawn them to towns such as Modiin Illit, southeast of Tel Aviv, where more than 40,000 people now live. The great majority of settlers live in large towns, most of them close to the Green Line.

What's the Green Line?

It's the armistice line between Israel and its Arab neighbors, drawn in 1949 at the end of Israel's war of independence. It's also known as the pre-1967 border. After the Six-Day War, Israel extended Israeli law to East Jerusalem (and later, the Golan Heights), which in practical terms meant annexation. But the rest of the West Bank remained under military occupation, with Palestinian autonomous rule in some areas. No other country has recognized Israeli sovereignty in East Jerusalem or the Golan Heights. So for international purposes, the Green Line is the border between Israel and occupied territory. The most recent Israeli figures found about 290,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank, not counting East Jerusalem.

And what about East Jerusalem?

In the annexed areas, Israel has built large neighborhoods where nearly 200,000 Israelis now live. Israel considers those neighborhoods part of sovereign Israel. The U.S., like other countries, calls them settlements.

When did all this start?

The first settlement in the Golan Heights was quietly established by young Israelis from left-wing kibbutz movements in July 1967, with the quiet help of government officials and army officers. The first West Bank settlement, Kfar Etzion, was established by Orthodox Israelis in September 1967 with public fanfare and government backing.

What's an outpost?

The outposts are small, unofficial settlements, usually clumps of mobile homes on a hilltop, created after the government stopped approving new settlements in the mid-1990s. Though they lack legal authorization, they've received extensive help from state agencies -- as a scathing government-commissioned report documented. Under the U.S.-backed 2003 "road map" for peace, Israel is required to evacuate outposts built since 2001. So far, only a few tiny ones have been dismantled -- and settlers have subsequently rebuilt them.

So why have settlements been built?

They are intended to "establish facts" -- to ensure continued Israeli control of part or all of the occupied territory. For some settlement advocates, the main purpose is security -- to add territory to make Israel more defensible. For others, the key point is that the West Bank -- referred to as Judea and Samaria -- is part of the historic Jewish homeland. Israelis learn the Bible as their national history, and places in the West Bank such as Hebron, Bethlehem and Shiloh are the setting of much of that history. Religious settlers believe God promised the land to the Jews and that Israel's settlement of it is a fulfillment of that promise. In practice, every Israeli government since 1967 has promoted settlement -- helping to fund construction and providing financial incentives to settlers. Left-wing governments have focused on areas they considered important for security and where few Palestinians live. Right-wing governments have encouraged settlement throughout the West Bank.

Why is this a problem?

Since 1967, some Israelis have argued that keeping the West Bank creates an unbearable dilemma. If Israel maintains permanent rule over the Palestinians without giving them citizenship, it ceases to be a democracy. If it annexes the territory and grants them citizenship, it will no longer be a country with a Jewish majority -- contradicting the most basic goal of Zionism. Today, the only practical way out of this dilemma is a two-state solution, with the Palestinians receiving independence in the Gaza Strip and all or nearly all of the West Bank. To create a Palestinian state that is more than fragmented enclaves, most or all settlements must be evacuated. Continued construction only makes this more difficult.

Where has America been until now?

In principle, the U.S. has consistently opposed all settlements, including the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. However, most administrations have avoided confrontations over the issue, especially when peace negotiations were underway. In the meantime, settlements kept growing. Public diplomatic tussles during the Carter and George H.W. Bush administrations were exceptions.

Speaking of America, aren't most settlers from the U.S.?

Absolutely not. The misconception that settlements are heavily American may stem from foreign correspondents looking for English-speakers to interview when they visit.

Why the tension today?

Obama is insisting that Israel freeze further building in settlements, as called for in the road map. That position fits his goal of achieving a two-state solution. Netanyahu insists that building is needed to allow for "natural growth" of settlements. But settlements have been growing much more quickly than the rest of Israel. Decisions to build, as always, are political choices intended to "create facts." Obama doesn't want construction to preempt negotiations. Unlike most previous presidents, he is insisting that American opposition to settlements is more than mere words.

U.N. fact-finding commission faces skepticism in Gaza

Article Author(s): Edmund Sanders

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Source Link(s): <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gaza-un-hearing29-2009jun29,...> [4]

Reporting from The Gaza Strip -- A novel approach toward injecting international justice into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict got underway Sunday in this embattled enclave, but it left neither side particularly satisfied.

Borrowing from the South African reconciliation experience, a United Nations fact-finding commission opened what it said was the first-of-its-kind public hearing to gather witness testimony about alleged war crimes during Israel's 22-day assault on the Gaza Strip in winter.

But as it has with past inquiries, the Israeli government has refused to cooperate with the United Nations Human Rights Council fact-finding team, calling it hopelessly biased. A follow-up hearing, to gather testimony from Israeli victims of rocket attacks by the Islamic militant group Hamas, which controls Gaza, will be held in Europe because of Israeli officials' refusal to allow the commission into their country.

Around Gaza, skepticism and distrust appear nearly equally high. Local television showed the hearing live for only a few minutes; an auditorium set aside for public viewing of the proceedings was mostly empty except for a few journalists. Having endured the conflict firsthand, many Palestinians said they had little desire to relive it. Many also expressed doubts that the commission's final report would make a difference in their lives or result in any punishment.

"Every time there is a war, they send a commission," said Ahmed Yazji, 29, a Gaza City money changer sipping coffee Sunday at an outdoor cafe several blocks from the hearing hall. "We've seen so many inquiries come and go. No one cares anymore because nothing happens."

Gazans who did testify provided emotional accounts of Israel's assault.

Three surviving members of one family recalled losing seven relatives as they sought shelter in a mosque that was struck Jan. 3 by an Israeli missile.

"I saw [shrapnel] fragments falling like rain," said Sheik Moteeh Silawi. "Everyone was screaming. People went to the mosque for safety and we saw bloodshed."

His father broke down and wailed in the heavily guarded hearing room as he recounted how he learned of the deaths of so many children and grandchildren. "Where is justice?" Musa Silawi, 91, shouted. "Where is the law? Where is the world?"

Israeli officials have insisted that they did not deliberately target civilians and blamed Hamas militants for hiding among Gaza's civilian population while fighting Israeli troops.

The cynicism expressed by both sides makes clear the challenges that the commission's chairman, South African jurist Richard Goldstone, will face in gaining acceptance for his report, which is due in fall. The commission faced controversy from its inception because the original mandate focused exclusively on Israel's alleged abuses. Upon accepting the job, Goldstone insisted on expanding the scope to include allegations against Hamas.

Israeli officials, however, have dismissed the public hearings, which they described as unprecedented in the region and politically motivated.

"The intent is to smear Israel," said one senior official speaking on condition of anonymity. "But Goldstone is just a passing cloud."

A commission spokeswoman defended the U.N. mission's impartiality and said Goldstone pushed for the public hearings in Gaza, despite security concerns, to give victims an opportunity to voice their complaints and to show Palestinians the judicial process in action.

"Victims can sometimes become lost in the statistics and numbers, and that can have a dehumanizing effect," U.N. spokeswoman Doune Porter said. Goldstone "wanted to give victims a voice and have them tell their stories."

Gaza human rights activist Khalil abu Shammala agreed that the hearings would put a face on the war's devastation. He added that the process of gathering information was probably more important than the final report, which he predicted would be ignored by the U.N. Security Council and the international community.

"The final decision is not as important to us because in our experience the U.N. Security Council always politicizes it and sacrifices the rights of victims for the benefit of Israel," he said.

Legal experts agreed that the hearings, however dramatic and cathartic, were unlikely to result in formal prosecution, even if violations of international law are found. Goldstone himself acknowledged recently that locating a legal forum would be a challenge.

The U.N. secretary-general has not expressed an interest in delving more deeply into the allegations. The International Criminal Court is grappling with jurisdiction issues because Israel is not a signatory to the court. Gaza lacks an adequate court system to hear complaints. That might leave only some foreign courts, such as those in Spain, that sometimes open their doors to such cases.

"Short term, there will probably be no prosecution because there is no mechanism, but the findings might play into private lawsuits being filed by Palestinian" groups, said Bill Van Esveld, a Human Rights Watch researcher in Jerusalem.

He said an international inquiry is needed because Israel failed to adequately probe charges, including

some by its troops, that the army used excessive force and killed civilians indiscriminately.

An internal investigation by the Israeli armed forces found their soldiers maintained a "high professional and moral level," though it acknowledged that a small number of mishaps led to civilian deaths.

Palestinian groups say more than 1,400 people were killed, including 926 civilians. Israel puts the Palestinian death toll at 1,116, including 295 civilians. Thirteen Israelis were killed, including 10 soldiers, four by friendly fire.

Some legal experts contend that specific episodes involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, because of its convoluted history and high profile, should not be resolved through international justice mechanisms.

"It makes sense to gather information, but there is no real reason to proceed down the path of a tribunal," said Barbara Mulvaney, a former prosecutor in the Rwanda genocide tribunal. "It would just muddy up an already overly complex situation. It requires a much broader regional and political solution."

Netanyahu's Settlement Smoke Screens

Article Author(s): Gershom Gorenberg

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

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[5]

It has become a fixed feature in the Israeli media, almost like the weather forecast. Nearly every day come reports that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government is on the verge of a deal with President Obama to avoid a full freeze on construction in West Bank settlements. The sources are normally Israeli government officials, with an occasional American source speaking very far off the record.

What changes from one rumor to the next is the reason that the Obama administration has purportedly decided to let the concrete mixers keep churning: One day it's that Netanyahu has explained that he can't legally stop construction underway. The next day, he has persuaded Washington to accept "natural growth" of existing settlements or explained that his coalition will fall if he stops building. Together, these reasons are about as substantial as smoke, and if U.S. policymakers have done their homework, they know it.

Take the claim that the Israeli government doesn't have the legal power to stop construction once it has signed contracts with builders, or after buyers have put down money for homes. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak reportedly made that case to American envoy George Mitchell this month. But under Israeli Supreme Court precedents, the government's authority to set policy in territory under "belligerent occupation" (the court's terminology) trumps the interests of settlers and Israeli companies.

In 1992, the government of Yitzhak Rabin imposed a partial construction freeze in the West Bank. In two rulings, the Israeli Supreme Court rejected challenges to the freeze by developers and the municipal governments of settlements. The court eliminated any doubts left by those decisions with a far-reaching ruling in 2005, when it upheld the authority of the government and parliament to evacuate settlers from

their homes in the Gaza Strip.

Achieving goals such as "peace, security, [and] international recognition" justified harming settlers' property rights and civil rights as long as they received financial compensation, Israel's highest court held. Let's be logical. If, for reasons of state, the court allowed the government to remove settlers from homes where they had lived for years, it would allow the state to prevent Israelis from completing homes where they haven't yet chosen the kitchen tiles. The only legal question would be how much compensation developers and buyers would receive. Netanyahu's reported assertion that he's hamstrung comes down to a hope that no one in Washington checks Israeli legal history.

Another claim is that the major building projects are in "settlement blocs" that are sure to remain in Israeli hands after a peace agreement. The term "blocs" refers loosely to clusters of large communities, most close to the pre-1967 border -- the Ma'aleh Adumim region east of Jerusalem, for instance. But the precise area of the blocs has never been defined. More important, Israel and the Palestinians have yet to reach an agreement on future borders. Lack of certainty about the blocs' future and their size is exactly the reason that the Israeli government continues to promote the blocs' expansion. As always, the purpose of settlement is to create a large enough Israeli presence that evacuation will seem impossible.

The argument that allowance must be made for "natural growth" of settlements is equally specious. Supposedly, building is needed to accommodate growing families and the adult children of settlers. But the alternative is obvious: Settlers have the option of moving into Israel proper; so do their children. In reality, migration has consistently flowed the opposite way, with the government's help.

As for Netanyahu's coalition -- yes, it could crack if he stops settlement expansion and his endorsement of a Palestinian state shifts from lip service to a diplomatic strategy. But Netanyahu's hard-right coalition is his choice. His Likud Party won fewer votes in the last election than Tzipi Livni's centrist Kadima party. Coalition talks with Livni collapsed over Netanyahu's unwillingness to pursue a two-state solution.

Netanyahu could still change his mind. In a multi-party parliamentary democracy, reshuffling a coalition is politics as usual. Livni would also resist an open-ended settlement freeze. But since her goal is to pursue the diplomatic process, she'd have an easier time agreeing to a defined moratorium -- allowing time for talks to proceed. A new coalition would be no less democratically chosen and would be more capable of pursuing peace. Netanyahu resists such a change for the same reason that he wants to expand settlements. He remains an ideological hard-liner, committed to keeping the maximum amount of land under Israeli rule.

All pretexts aside, Netanyahu agrees with Obama on this much: Building settlements stands in the way of an Israeli pullback and an agreement based on two states. They disagree on whether that's good or bad.

Amid all the rumors, the real question is whether the Obama administration will blink first or stand firm on a freeze as an essential step toward making peace.

End the Spat With Israel

Article Author(s): Jackson Diehl

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

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[6]

The upheaval in Iran offers the Obama administration a host of fresh foreign policy opportunities. Not the least of them is a chance to creep away from the corner into which it has painted itself in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

President Obama began with a broad strategy of simultaneously pressing Israel, the Palestinians and Arab states to take concrete steps toward peace. By the time Iranians took to the streets, it had allowed that broad front to be narrowed to a single point: a standoff with the Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu over whether "natural growth" would be allowed in Jewish settlements outside Israel's 1967 borders.

Pressuring Israel made sense, at first. The administration correctly understood that Netanyahu, a right-winger who took office with the clear intention of indefinitely postponing any Israeli-Palestinian settlement, needed to feel some public heat from Washington to change his position -- and that the show of muscle would add credibility to the administration's demands that Arab leaders offer their own gestures. But, starting with a statement by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in May, the administration made the mistake of insisting that an Israeli settlement "freeze" -- a term the past three administrations agreed to define loosely -- must mean a total stop to all construction in the West Bank and even East Jerusalem.

This absolutist position is a loser for three reasons. First, it has allowed Palestinian and Arab leaders to withhold the steps they were asked for; they claim to be waiting for the settlement "freeze" even as they quietly savor a rare public battle between Israel and the United States. Second, the administration's objective -- whatever its merits -- is unobtainable. No Israeli government has ever agreed to an unconditional freeze, and no coalition could be assembled from the current parliament to impose one.

Finally, the extraction of a freeze from Netanyahu is, as a practical matter, unnecessary. While further settlement expansion needs to be curbed, both the Palestinian Authority and Arab governments have gone along with previous U.S.-Israeli deals by which construction was to be limited to inside the periphery of settlements near Israel -- since everyone knows those areas will be annexed to Israel in a final settlement. Before the 2007 Annapolis peace conference organized by the Bush administration, Saudi Arabia and other Arab participants agreed to what one former senior official called "the Google Earth test"; if the settlements did not visibly expand, that was good enough.

Netanyahu, whose poor relations with Washington contributed to his ouster from office during a previous stint as prime minister, has been relatively quick to come around. In recent weeks he has delivered a speech in which he agreed for the first time to Palestinian statehood. In the West Bank Israel is removing military roadblocks, turning four more towns over to Palestinian security forces and taking the first steps to remove settlements it deems illegal. Meanwhile, government envoys -- led by Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who will be in Washington today -- have been offering various compromise formulas.

Curiously, though, the administration -- led by the State Department -- keeps raising the stakes. Clinton went out of her way on June 17 to disavow any agreements between the second Bush administration and Israel over "natural growth" in some settlements. In a press briefing last Monday, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly responded to a question by saying the administration opposed new construction in all areas "across the [green] line" in Jerusalem -- a definition that would prohibit Israeli building in such areas as the Jewish Quarter of the Old City.

The result of such posturing is that the administration now faces a choice between a protracted confrontation with Israel -- an odd adventure given the pressing challenges from Iran and in Iraq, not to mention the disarray of the Palestinian camp -- or a compromise, which might make Obama look weak and

provide Arab states further cause to refuse cooperation. The White House, I'm told, still hopes Netanyahu will accept a construction moratorium, with a time limit and perhaps a waiver for some buildings under construction. But at this point some damage is probably unavoidable: If Barak and Middle East envoy George J. Mitchell agree on any formula short of that spelled out by Clinton and her spokesman, Arab media will trumpet it as an Obama cave-in.

The best course nevertheless lies in striking a quick deal with the left-leaning Barak this week under cover of the tumult in Tehran. The administration could then return to doing what it intended to do all along: press Palestinians as well as Israelis, friendly Arab governments and not-so-friendly Iranian clients such as Syria to take tangible steps toward a regional settlement. Such movement would be the perfect complement to the cause of change in Iran; how foolish it would be to squander it over a handful of Israeli apartment houses.

What a Freeze Can't Do

Article Author(s): David Ignatius

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

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[7]

Israel's new foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, seemed perplexed during his visit to Washington this month: At a time when America and Israel agreed on all the big issues -- from Iran and North Korea to Afghanistan and Pakistan -- how could the little issue of Israeli settlements on the West Bank get in the way?

When he met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Lieberman questioned the U.S. demand for a freeze on settlement construction, including the "natural growth" of existing settlements. "We can't suffocate ourselves: Babies are born, people get married. At minimum, we must provide for a normal way of life for these people," Lieberman told Clinton, according to a senior Israeli official.

Israeli protests like this usually have had the desired effect. Administrations called publicly for a halt in settlement construction, but they acquiesced in private to the realities of Israeli politics. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu must have assumed that he could play the same game, blunting the White House by appealing to Israel's supporters in Congress.

But this time, the settlements game has been different. The Obama administration has surprised the Israelis by its unyielding insistence on a freeze as a prelude to peace negotiations. And key members of Congress have backed the administration's position.

That doesn't mean any breakthroughs are imminent, however. The more the administration pressures Israel, the more concessions the Arabs seem to want.

The tough line on settlements starts with President Obama, who made clear his opposition from his first days in office. He is backed by Vice President Biden and by Clinton, both former senators and longtime supporters of Israel.

An influential hawk on the issue is Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff and a former member of the House Democratic leadership. Emanuel has special credibility as a strong defender of Israel's security. His father was born in Jerusalem and was a member of the militant underground organization known as the Irgun.

Emanuel's view is that settlements are not a security issue for Israel but a domestic political problem. According to a senior White House official, Emanuel has argued that if the Israelis insist on expanding settlements, "You're doing it on your own dime. We don't want our credibility to be compromised as you work out your domestic politics. We're not going to pay for that one."

What has surprised the Israelis, says the White House official, is that "for umpteen years, they've been trained to hear one thing from America on settlements but see us do another. It takes some adjustment."

The White House believes that if it comes to a showdown, Netanyahu will compromise. His coalition government, the administration reasons, is too weak to sustain an open break with its key ally, the United States. If Netanyahu defies the United States, his coalition will splinter. The administration is already talking with Ehud Barak, the Labor Party leader and defense minister, who might form a new government if Netanyahu falls.

It's a hardheaded strategy, but it has one big flaw: The Obama team is assuming that if it can pressure Israel into a real settlements freeze, the Arabs will respond with meaningful moves toward normalization of relations -- which will give Israel some tangible benefits for its concessions. But that hope appears to be misplaced.

"What will I do in exchange for a settlements freeze? Nothing," says a senior Arab diplomat. "We're not interested in confidence-building, or a step-by-step approach," he continues. Instead, the Arabs would like Obama to spell out the details of a final agreement, now. "Unless we define the endgame, this will be a road map to nowhere," the Arab diplomat argues.

A settlements halt would produce some limited Arab response. Trade or diplomatic contacts might be revived by countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman and others. But Saudi Arabia, the Arab kingpin, probably wouldn't offer major concessions until the negotiating process was further along.

The settlements issue illustrates why the Arab-Israeli problem drives people crazy. Even if you achieve a breakthrough, there's always another snag ahead. White House officials grumble about Israeli intransigence, but they're also worried about "squishy" Arab promises and demands for preconditions. "Don't keep faxing it in, saying I gave you a peace plan in 2002," complains the senior White House official.

Welcome to the Middle East, Mr. President. You said in your Cairo speech that resolving this problem would require patience. You got that part right, for sure.

Israel's settlements are on shaky ground

Article Author(s): Sarah Leah Whitson

Media Outlet: The Los Angeles Times

Date: June 28, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-whitson28-2009jun28,0,20065...>

The debate over Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories is often framed in terms of whether they should be "frozen" or allowed to grow "naturally." But that is akin to asking whether a thief should be allowed merely to keep his ill-gotten gains or steal some more. It misses the most fundamental point: Under international law, all settlements on occupied territory are unlawful. And there is only one remedy: Israel should dismantle them, relocate the settlers within its recognized 1967 borders and compensate Palestinians for the losses the settlements have caused.

Removing the settlements is mandated by the laws of the Geneva Convention, which state that military occupations are to be a temporary state of affairs and prohibit occupying powers from moving their populations into conquered territory. The intent is to foreclose an occupying power from later citing its population as "facts on the ground" to claim the territory, something Israel has done in East Jerusalem and appears to want to do with much of the West Bank.

The legal principles were reaffirmed in 2004 by the International Court of Justice, which cited a U.N. Security Council statement that the settlements were "a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention." The International Committee of the Red Cross and an overwhelming number of institutions concerned with the enforcement of international humanitarian law have concurred in that view.

The economic and social cost of Israeli settlements to the Palestinian population, stemming in part from Israel's need to protect them, are enormous. The 634 (at last count) roadblocks, barriers and checkpoints erected to control the movement of lawful residents of the territory make travel an ordeal. Sometimes even getting to work, school or the home of a relative is impossible for Palestinians. Every day, they must wait in line for hours to show their IDs, and some days they are randomly rerouted, told to go home or, worse, detained for questioning.

Similarly, the fact that Israel is building 87% of its projected 450-mile "security barrier" on Palestinian territory has less to do with protecting Israel from suicide bombers -- which could have been accomplished by erecting a wall on the Green Line -- than it does with putting 10% of West Bank territory, including most settlers, on the Israeli side. And while Israeli troops protect the settlers from armed Palestinian groups, there is little protection for Palestinians from the settlers' marauding militias and gangs, which have terrorized the local population, destroying their crops, uprooting their trees and throwing stones at their houses and schools.

Too little attention is given to the pervasive system of government-sponsored discrimination against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where Israel has constructed roads exclusively for settlers and established vastly unequal access to water, fuel, education, healthcare, transportation, infrastructure and virtually every other social service. Israeli authorities readily grant settlers building permits that they deny to Palestinians, whose "illegal" homes they often demolish at short notice. The glaring discrepancy in Israel's treatment of two populations living on the same land has taken a significant moral toll on Israel, as well as a political one, with wide coverage of humiliation and abuse at the hands of its security forces.

The common refrain of Israeli and even American politicians who recognize that the settlements must go is that it would be politically difficult to dismantle them, in part because it would stir the ire of the settlers and their supporters, an important voting bloc in Israel. Instead, politicians argue that settlements must be a part of future negotiations and a possible land swap.

But this only serves as further incentive to expand settlements and makes a political resolution even more difficult. It also condones in the interim Israel's continuing human rights abuses in the name of settler security, leaving respect for Palestinians' rights a second-tier consideration that must await the conclusion

of peace talks that have already gone on for decades.

Israel has a duty to protect its citizens, but not in a way that violates the rights of Palestinians. The lawful, rights-respecting way to protect the security of settlers is to move them back to Israel. That should be the starting point of any discussion on settlements.

Gaza residents 'live in despair'

Article Author(s): Aleem Maqbool

Media Outlet: BBC News

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8123487.stm ^[9]

In a report, it said that a main cause was the continuing Israeli blockade.

The report comes six months after the end of Israel's military offensive in Gaza in which at least 1,100 Palestinians died.

Israel said the offensive was aimed at curbing rocket attacks into southern Israel by Palestinian militants.

The Red Cross says that the people of Gaza are unable to rebuild their lives and are sliding ever deeper into despair.

There is not the cement or steel to reconstruct neighbourhoods hit by Israeli strikes.

Seriously ill patients are not receiving the treatment they need. The water supply is patchy, sanitation on the point of collapse.

The ICRC statement comes as a UN Human Rights Council inquiry into alleged war crimes in Gaza and southern Israel holds public hearings in Gaza City.

South African judge Richard Goldstone's inquiry is holding two days of hearings in Gaza and will take testimony in Geneva in July.

Israel has refused to allow the investigators onto its territory and has accused the mission of bias against it.

Worst affected

Poverty in Gaza is at what the Red Cross calls an "alarming" level.

"The poorest residents in particular have exhausted their coping mechanisms and often have to sell off their belongings to be able to buy enough to eat," said Antoine Grand, head of the ICRC's sub-delegation in Gaza.

"Worst affected are the children, who make up more than half of Gaza's population," he added.

The Red Cross says the crisis is directly linked to Israel's tight closure of the crossing points into Gaza after the Islamist Hamas movement took power there two years ago.

The Israeli prime minister's spokesman told the BBC that Hamas is primarily responsible for the hardship of Gaza's civilian population.

And he said the idea that, should building materials be allowed in, Hamas would not siphon them off for what he called its military machine was simply not credible.

Donors who have pledged \$4.5 billion for reconstruction and rehabilitation in Gaza following the 22-day offensive which left more than 50,000 homes, 800 industrial properties and 200 schools damaged or destroyed, as well as 39 mosques and two churches.

US-trained Palestinian force is keen for action

Article Author(s): Karin Laub

Media Outlet: The Associated Press

Date: June 28, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jrSS9anIzM-waM8ZUQzhDot5Z27AD9...> [10]

In the live-fire exercise, everything was carefully choreographed ? Palestinian commandos, faces blackened, stormed a hide-out in an abandoned building, "wounded" one gunman and "arrested" a second.

But is this corps, American-trained and steadily growing, ready for the real thing? President Barack Obama's hopes for a Middle East peace breakthrough may rest heavily on that question.

The force being shaped for the West Bank is supposed to underpin the Palestinian government of Western-backed President Mahmoud Abbas against violent challenges by Hamas, other extremists and criminal gangs, while convincing Israel that having a Palestinian state for a neighbor will pose no threat.

Israel says the force is improving but isn't yet ready to assume sole security control in West Bank towns. The Palestinians say their forces are doing a good job, but that Israel is hiding behind vague security arguments to avoid pulling back its own troops, while continuing to carry out its own raids in the West Bank.

The Associated Press, granted rare access to the recruits in the northern West Bank town of Jenin, heard complaints that they are restricted to islands of limited authority in the Israeli-controlled territory, can't make a move without Israel's permission, are outgunned by Hamas, and lack riot and protective gear because of Israeli import restrictions.

Distrust runs both ways. Palestinian suspicions are sharpened by continued Israeli settlement expansion in areas they want for their state. Israel's concerns are weighted by memories of a previous Palestinian security force, some of whose members ended up turning their guns against Israeli targets during the Palestinian uprising that broke out in 2000.

However on Thursday, Israel announced it was easing its grip to allow the forces to operate round the clock in four West Bank towns, but added that Israeli forces would continue to operate in the West Bank "to thwart terrorist operations."

At the same time, Hamas' dislike of the new force was evident in a statement from Khaled Mashaal, its exiled leader, appealing to Obama to remove Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, the U.S. security coordinator in the region, under whose auspices the force is being trained. Mashaal claimed Dayton was "building an oppressive authority over the heads of our people."

The new forces are being trained in neighboring Jordan. Since 2008, four battalions totaling 2,100 men have deployed in the West Bank, the most recent this month, and another three battalions are to be added, bringing the total to around 3,600.

They have had their first real test in recent weeks, twice clashing with Hamas gunmen in the town of Qalqiliya. Five Hamas fighters and four members of the security forces were killed.

The West Bank's various security forces already number some 24,000 Palestinians including police. These forces were troubled in the past by corruption, overlapping mandates, poor training and damaging Israeli raids, and in recent years there have been repeated attempts to reform them.

The new force is different, says Dayton.

"What we have created are new men," he told a Washington think tank last month. "For the first time, I think it's fair to say that the Palestinian security forces feel they are on a winning team."

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, a senior aide to Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, told the same forum that the new forces, most of them drawn straight from high school, are doing a good job. "It's not quite that they can assume full security responsibility, but we are on the right way," he said. "And for the first time, I see some sense of professional pride there that we've never seen in these forces."

Dayton calls them a "gendarmarie," a definition that would sidestep any argument with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who wants the future Palestinian state to be demilitarized.

Such a state is supposed to include the Gaza Strip, but that union has been cast into doubt since Abbas lost Gaza to a Hamas takeover two years ago. Hamas also has a strong West Bank presence, and Abbas has been cracking down, arresting hundreds of its activists, drying up their funding and shutting down their institutions.

In Jenin, members of the third U.S.-trained battalion seemed to have a clear sense of purpose, saying their mission was to help build a Palestinian state and fight "outlaws." None referred to Hamas by name.

Yet they expressed frustration about the lack of protective vests, helmets, rubber bullets and smoke bombs.

"We don't want promises. We want something tangible," said Mahmoud Khateeb, deputy commander of the third battalion that completed training in Jordan in January and deployed in Jenin and other northern towns ? Tulkarem, Qalqiliya and Nablus.

In the live-fire exercise, 15 of Khateeb's commandos, along with members of other security branches, surrounded an abandoned two-story building on a hill just outside Jenin, with the mission to overpower two "gunmen" inside.

Israel was notified since the drill involved live fire, and pilotless Israeli aircraft hovered above.

At their barracks in Jenin, the troops from the third battalion live at least 14 to a trailer packed with bunk beds. Ahmed Salahat, 20, rested on a bed after the drill. Asked how he felt about having Hamas for an enemy, said he felt the Islamic militants have no compunction about firing on fellow Palestinians.

The Qalqiliya shootouts were the first deadly confrontations in the two-year crackdown on Hamas, and they shook up the men. Salahat said he's now more concerned about his safety.

Col. Rade Asedeh, the Jenin district commander, said his troops are only permitted to carry pistols and

Russian-made Kalashnikov assault rifles, while Hamas fighters have American-made M16s, grenades, explosives and other weapons. Some of his men use M16s seized from Hamas.

Asedeh said protective vests, helmets and rubber bullets paid for by donor countries lie in storage in Egypt and Jordan, waiting for Israeli import permission. Also, 50 Russian-made armored personnel carriers, which he said were badly needed, have not been allowed in. The pistols and assault rifles come from members of the older Palestinian security agencies.

Dayton, whose team includes British, Canadian and Turkish officers, noted in his Washington speech that the U.S. only gives the force non-lethal equipment.

"We don't provide anything to the Palestinians unless it has been thoroughly coordinated with the state of Israel and they agree to it," he said.

"Sometimes this process drives me crazy ? I had a lot more hair when I started ? but nevertheless, we make it work."

The Israeli military said the vast majority of equipment requests are approved, security considerations permitting. It would not elaborate.

Since the Hamas takeover of Gaza, Abbas has been trying to assert more security control in West Bank towns, and Jenin has been held up as a success story. Once a militant stronghold, the town was now deemed safe enough for a visit last year by Condoleezza Rice, then U.S. secretary of state.

But Asedeh, the Jenin commander, said he still has to coordinate with Israel if his forces want to travel beyond the town's limits to any of its 86 surrounding villages. He also said Israeli troops routinely enter Jenin for arrest raids.

The purpose of these raids, said Saeb Erekat, a Palestinian negotiator, is "to undermine the credibility of our security forces and their ability to function, to avoid withdrawing" from Palestinian cities.

Dayton, however, said Israeli generals seem eager to see his force take over. He said they have been asking him "How many more of these new Palestinians can you generate, and how quickly? Because they are our way to leave the West Bank."

Michael Oren, the new Israeli ambassador to the U.S., said based on past experience, Israel has to move cautiously.

"So by re-creating a Palestinian police force ? training it along American methods, providing it with weaponry ? we are taking a risk," Oren said. "The issue is confidence-building ... we're proceeding very cautiously, but proceeding."

Report: Most West Bank wastewater untreated

Media Outlet: Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)

Date: June 28, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/06/28/1006183/report-most-west-bank-wastewater-...> [11]

The wastewater of 2 million of the 2.8 million people living in Jerusalem and the West Bank is not treated, according to a new report.

The human rights group B'Tselem on Sunday released its report "Foul Play: Neglect of Wastewater Treatment in the West Bank."

While the organization laid much of the blame on Israel, it said the Palestinians also were at fault.

The report said the failure to treat the Israeli and Palestinian wastewater could result in the permanent contamination of the mountain aquifer, a main source of water for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Only 81 of the 121 West Bank Jewish settlements are connected to wastewater treatment facilities, many of which are outdated and not able to handle the full load of sewage, according to the report.

The Palestinians suffer the most from the untreated sewage, which flows down from the settlements, mostly built on top of hills, to the Palestinian villages located in the valleys below, the report said. The villages also depend on springs and wells for their water, which become contaminated by the wastewater.

Some 95 percent of Palestinian wastewater is not treated, and the Palestinians have resisted attempts by Israel to join together to treat the wastewater, saying it would legitimize the settlement enterprise, according to the report.

B'Tselem called on Israel to treat all wastewater from the settlements in the same advanced way as within the Green Line, and demanded that Israel and the Palestinian Authority cooperate in cleaning up wastewater, even if it means using the same treatment plants.

Israel alone cannot block peace progress

Media Outlet: The National

Article Type: Opinion

Date: June 28, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090629/OPINION/706289900/1002> ^[12]

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, is attempting to drum up support for his peace plan.

He claimed that Europe had responded favourably to his conditions for a peaceable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, a refusal to resettle Palestinian refugees within Israel proper and that any future Palestinian state would be denied the right to an army or control over its borders and airspace.

According to Mr Netanyahu, with the world backing his plan, not the opposition's, it was time for his critics in the Knesset to 'act responsibly'. But his speech smacked of desperation. Mr Netanyahu avoided mentioning one important sticking point between Israel and the world while he was haranguing his opponents: the settlements.

Ehud Barak, the Israeli defence minister, arrives in Washington today. There is speculation that the trip is an attempt to offer a temporary 'freeze' in settlement construction rather than the indefinite one that Barack Obama is demanding.

Israeli media is reporting that Mr Barak will offer a three-month freeze on any new construction, including so-called natural growth, except for buildings near completion. In all probability, this will be rejected by Washington. The US needs this concession from Israel or it risks endangering its plan to achieve a breakthrough in the peace process.

Mr Obama's call for a settlement freeze received a boost from the Quartet on the Middle East (the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations). On Friday, the Quartet and the foreign ministers from the Group of 8 issued statements calling for Israel to abide by the US demands for a complete freeze in settlement construction.

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, reiterated this to Mr Netanyahu during a joint press conference last week. Yet the Israeli government still struggles to find wriggle room on this issue despite the growing consensus on the need to halt settlement construction, completely.

The problem is that Mr Netanyahu cannot agree to a settlement freeze without endangering his political future. Agreeing to these demands would alienate vital coalition partners, perhaps leading to the dissolution of his government.

Mr Netanyahu feels, perhaps rightly, that the US is hoping that his government will in fact fail, and that Kadima, led by Tzipi Livni, will take up the reins of power in Israel. That is why he is seeking a unified stance behind his conditions. He is trying to send a message to the US that even if he steps aside, Israel will never agree to the demands being made of it.

With the showdown on the settlements turning into a crisis for Mr Netanyahu, there may seem to be little chance that progress towards peace and Palestinian statehood will be made. While the Arab world has little control over what Israel can do, it can and should do much more to make it increasingly clear that Israel's intransigence is the biggest barrier to peace.

It may seem to make little sense to offer concessions to an Israeli government that seems determined to derail the peace process. But the more that the Arab world plays its part in bringing a peaceful resolution to the 60-year-old conflict, the more the US's leverage with Israel will grow, and the closer peace and Palestinian statehood will become.

Israel to build 50 West Bank homes for outpost evacuees

Article Author(s): Tomer Zarchin

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096432.html> ^[13]

Israel will build 50 new homes in an existing West Bank settlement as part of a wider plan to absorb residents slated to be evicted from the illegal outpost of Migron.

The complete plan calls for the construction of 1,450 homes in the settlement of Adam.

The State Prosecutor's Office informed the High Court on Friday that 190 housing units will be built in the settlement of Adam in the first stage, in accordance with the plan, which was approved by the Defense

Ministry in May.

However, only 50 of the units can be erected without further approval from the ministry. This number does not include public buildings and roads.

"The understandings to advance the construction were examined by the political echelon, Yesha Council of settlements representatives and settler leaders in Judea and Sameria," the state wrote, referring to the West Bank.

News of the plan emerged shortly before Defense Minister Ehud Barak set off for the United States Monday in a bid to end a quarrel with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration over Israel's refusal to completely halt West Bank settlement construction.

A media advisor to Barak denied the report of a plan to build 1,450 new homes.

"The Defense Ministry approved the construction of 50 housing units only in the community of Adam, which will serve the evacuees from the settlement of Migron," Army Radio quoted the advisor as writing.

"All other reports speaking of the construction of 1,450 housing units are erroneous, tendentious and incorrect."

State approves construction of 50 new housing units in Adam

Article Author(s): SHALHEVET ZOHAR

Media Outlet: The Jerusalem Post

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1245924954748&pagename=JPost%2FJPAr...>

[14]

Hours before Defense Minister Ehud Barak leaves for the United States, the Defense Ministry on Monday notified the High Court that in accordance with a 1996 government master plan for the construction of 1,450 housing units in a new neighborhood in the West Bank settlement of Adam, the ministry has at this stage approved only 190 units, of which 50 have received final approval.

These 50 units are intended to house the settlers expected to be evacuated from the unauthorized Migron outpost, near Ramallah.

"The understandings were approved by senior government officials, Yesha Council representatives, and West Bank settler leaders," the ministry wrote in the statement issued to the court.

The timing of the notification, hours before Barak leaves for the US, could complicate the defense minister's goal to reach an understanding on the issue of settlement construction with US Mideast envoy George Mitchell, whom he is expected to meet in New York later Monday.

Eitan Baroshi, the defense minister's assistant for settlement affairs, explained that relocating Migron settlers to Adam would be the most desirable solution for the future evacuees, and that it was never stated that the Migron residents would be removed to a locale within the Green Line.

Speaking on Israel Radio, Baroshi had stressed that if the court would approve the proposed 50-unit expansion, the ruling would bind the residents of Migron.

Baroshi also refuted claims that Barak was accelerating settlement construction while facetiously attempting to reach understandings with the Obama administration on the subject, quoting a report by the Central Bureau of Statistics that showed a 40-percent drop in new apartment unit starts in the West Bank compared to 2008.

The government will evacuate illegal outposts, Baroshi told Israel Radio, but it is better to do so in the context of an agreement.

Politicians from both the Right and Left criticized the Defense Ministry's plan.

"Exposing the approval of 1,450 housing units in Adam invalidates Barak's visit to the United States, and it would be better if he spared himself the disgrace," MK Ophir Paz-Pines (Labor) said in a statement.

The decision proves that "the Defense Ministry is not taking its job seriously, as it has not yet evacuated Migron and is already building in Adam for virtual evacuees from the very same Migron," the statement added.

Peace Now Secretary-General Yariv Oppenheimer saw the report as confirming that all 1,450 units had received final governmental approval.

"The Israeli bluffing system is setting new records," he said. "Instead of evacuating an illegal outpost of 40 housing units, Barak is awarding outlaws with an approval to build a future settlement of 1,450 housing units east of the [Green Line]. Barak is proving to settler leadership that violence and creating illegal outposts pay off."

MK Michael Ben-Ari (National Union) called on Migron residents to oppose the Defense Ministry's plan that they move into housing units in Adam.

When it comes to the government's intention to dismantle small settlements, compromises are out of the question, Ben-Ari said.

Minister Avishai Braverman, however, lauded the plan, saying that transferring residents of outposts into larger settlements would "improve Israel's opening position in negotiations" for a two-state solution.

Barak heads to U.S. in bid to end settlements row

Article Author(s): Akiva Eldar

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096426.html> ^[15]

Defense Minister Ehud Barak was set to head to the United States Monday in a bid to end a quarrel with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration over Israel's refusal to completely halt West Bank settlement construction.

Barak is expected to propose two potential compromises on the matter: Either a temporary complete settlement freeze, or the limiting of building in settlement blocs to high-rise construction only.

The defense minister, who is also the chairman of the center-left Labor party, will tell Obama's special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, that Israel cannot completely halt settlement construction.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, for his part, reiterated Monday that negotiations wouldn't resume while settlement expansion continues.

Despite Israel's official stance, the Israel Defense Forces has banned the settlement of Modi'in Ilit from building hundreds of new homes.

The decision by the GOC Central Command, Major General Gadi Shamni, which was approved by Barak, pertains to two new neighborhoods in the ultra-Orthodox settlement.

Shamni issued the ban last month, in the wake of a High Court ruling that ordered the relocation of the separation fence around the Palestinian village of Bil'in, near Modi'in Ilit.

The construction freeze is necessary for "maintaining security and public order in the area and moving ahead with the separation fence," Shamni wrote.

As a direct result, the construction of some 40 high-rise buildings will be halted, although they are though in advanced stages. Tenders for hundreds of housing units that have already been approved will not be carried out, even though some units have already been sold.

According to a precedent set by the Rabin government in 1992, which imposed a complete construction freeze in the settlements, the state will compensate the contractors for the losses they will incur.

Settler leader condemns Barak plan to offer temporary halt

The Yesha Council of settlements blasted on Monday reports that Barak was going to offer the U.S. a complete halt to construction for three months.

"These tactical tricks will in the end lead us to a strategic defeat," Yesha Council Chairman Danny Dayan told Army Radio.

"The time has come for the government to tell the truth - that it was elected because it believes that a Palestinian state is an existential threat to the State of Israel, that Jews have a right to settle any place in the Land of Israel and to build, not only for natural growth."

The High Court has backed the government's right to halt settlement construction, citing the its prerogative to set priorities for budget allocations.

"The national priority, including diplomatic and economic decisions, is subject, naturally, to the policy stipulated by the elected government," the court said.

Peace Now Secretary General Yariv Oppenheimer, meanwhile, urged Barak on Monday to impose a total construction freeze in the settlements, at any cost.

"It is very unfortunate that of all people, the chairman of the Labor party is advocating Yesha Council and urges the United States to allow settlement expansion," Oppenheimer told Army Radio.

"I would expect him to follow the road paved by Yitzhak Rabin and his [Labor] government and impose a complete ban, even on projects whose construction is currently underway."

After U.S. pressure, Barkat to halt 70% of East Jerusalem demolitions

Article Author(s): Nir Hasson

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096333.html> ^[16]

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat is set to announce a plan to freeze demolition orders on around 70 percent of unauthorized construction in the east of the city, Haaretz has learned. The municipality would also negotiate compensation terms with families evicted from the remaining 30 percent.

The plan represents a departure from earlier statements, in which Barkat spoke out against illegal construction by Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

According to various estimates, Jerusalem has some 20,000 unauthorized buildings, home to around 180,000 people. The demolition of each house requires considerable legal efforts and a heavy police presence, amid fears that protests by residents and housing activists can escalate into riots. In recent years, the municipality did not have the time or resources to demolish more than 100 houses a year.

"Since the mayor took office, the municipality has been working on housing planning in the east of the city, which includes increasing construction opportunities in some areas, expanding housing in others and stopping illegal construction in areas where no construction is allowed," the mayor's office said in a statement.

"The reality on the ground is being taken into consideration in the planning process when possible. City Hall will present the plans when the time is right."

Upon taking office in November, Barkat spoke out several times against unauthorized construction, which soon provoked a clash between him and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In March, Barkat told reporters that Clinton's statements against house demolitions in East Jerusalem were "air" and that avoiding demolitions could "send the wrong message out to lawbreakers."

He was quoted by The Associated Press as saying he rejected "the claims we're throwing people out of their homes. If you're building a house without the appropriate permits you need to be prepared to suffer the consequences." Sources close to Barkat said they were "astonished" at the forcefulness of the American reaction to what they perceived to be a purely municipal matter.

The deputy mayor for East Jerusalem affairs, Yakir Segev, who is preparing the plan with Barkat, said it was the permits policy that pushed residents to build illegally, as only 18 permits were issued in 2008.

"To get a construction permit in East Jerusalem you have to be more than a saint," said Segev. On the other hand, he said the municipality simply did not have the means to enforce all the demolition orders, and that there was no formal way to resolve the crisis.

Gray houses

Sources at City Hall told Haaretz that these two factors prompted the municipality to begin working on a new solution. The program was inspired by the Goldberg Committee's report, which recommended the legalization of certain unauthorized Bedouin villages in the Negev.

In the Jerusalem plan, retroactive construction permits will not be handed out, but homes will be listed as "gray houses" - they will stay illegal but all legal actions against them will cease. Their new status will allow City Hall to collect municipal taxes, which will be invested in a separate municipal company to improve East Jerusalem, while the residents will be able to legally sell their houses if they wish.

Owners of houses that do not receive formal status will have the chance to take part in negotiations on voluntary eviction with compensation. Barkat is currently seeking a project manager for the program. Sources in the municipality said the role had been offered to former Meretz MK Ran Cohen, but Cohen declined.

Palestinians: Migron decision destroys chances for peace

Article Author(s): Ali Waked

Media Outlet: Ynetnews

Date: June 29, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3738636,00.html> ^[17]

The Palestinian Authority is livid with Israel's decision to build 50 new housing units in the West Bank settlement of Adam. The new units are intended to house the current residents of the illegal outpost of Migron, who will need to be relocated when the outpost is evacuated.

"This decision destroys the political process," Palestinian Minister for Jerusalem Affairs, Abd al-Qadir, told Ynet on Monday after the move was announced. Al-Qadir said this proves Israel is ignoring US pressure to cease all construction in the settlements. Israel maintains that 'natural growth,' meaning building within the boundaries of existing settlements to allow for population growth, was sanctioned by Washington as part of the Road Map.

Al-Qadir however, said the plan "destroys any chance for real peace. In light of this policy, there is no chance for Abu-Mazen (Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas) and (Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu to sit at the negotiations table. The Palestinian leadership has decided that there will be no negotiations while building in the settlements continues."

The decision, he says, "proves that Israel doesn't give a damn about the American pressure."

Al-Qadir slammed the natural growth claim as "one big lie. No natural growth explains this much building. This is new construction and the Israelis are making clear that they are not interested in negotiations." The State informed the High Court of Justice earlier Monday that the Defense Ministry has granted permits for the construction of 50 housing units in Adam.

The ministry's permit allocation, however, contradicts its previous consent to build 1,450 housing units in the area. The State claimed that the number of permits issued now corresponds with the number of settlers

in Migron.

Yesha Council Chairman Danny Dayan: "The State's brief to the High Court reflects the understandings reached with the Defense Ministry and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government. We stand by our commitment and the State should do the same."

Final preparations head of Barak-Mitchell meeting

Article Author(s): Roni Sofer

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"The settlements will not be an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians." That is the message Defense Minister Ehud Barak will be carrying with him on his upcoming trip to meet with special US envoy George Mitchell. Barak is being dispatched in an attempt to dissipate the tensions between the White House and Jerusalem, and to allow the renewal of negotiations with the Palestinians.

Until now Israel has not given any sign to suggest it intends to acquiesce to the international demand that all construction in the West Bank be frozen, including within existing settlements.

Six cabinet ministers will meet on Monday morning to discuss the US and European demands to freeze the settlements, just a few short hours before Barak heads to meet Mitchell. The six ministers ? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Minister Benny Begin, Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Ya'alon, and Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor ? will meet in Netanyahu's office.

The government is leaning towards saying any move to freeze construction can only be part of renewed dialogue with the Palestinians.

"This issue has yet to be fully discussed," the office of one minister slated to take part in Monday's meeting said. "It's clear to us that this is the American demand, and we will have to provide answers, but the process of examining the matter has not been completed yet. And aside from that, we must make sure that any gesture is not a unilateral Israeli gesture, which will be followed by further demands. The Israeli government will examine (the freeze), and of course this would be return for Palestinian gestures."

Barak is expected to tell Mitchell that Israel believes that freezing the settlements, deciding which settlement blocs will be kept by Israel as part of a final deal, and where the border will run ? must all be part of detailed negotiations with Ramallah. The defense minister will tell Mitchell that Israel has no intentions of building new settlements, or expanding the existing ones beyond their current boundaries.

Barak will also emphasize other gestures Israel has recently made to show its intentions are serious, such as the removal of 140 roadblocks and the opening of numerous checkpoints from peripheral villages to main roadways in the West Bank ? making it possible to drive from Jenin to Ramallah in an hour and half, and without passing through any obstructions. The US administration has already voiced its appreciation of the measures.

Barak will also discuss the transfer of security oversight to the Palestinian Authority in four West Bank cities ? Ramallah, Jenin, Qalqiliya, and Jericho, and improvements to water and road infrastructure.

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