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News Blurb: Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak met with Special Mideast envoy George Mitchell in New York yesterday (1) (16), as tension continues over efforts to secure an Israeli settlement freeze (6) (7) (12) (17) (18). As violence in the West Bank subsides, the Occupied Territories experience a marked economic upswing (2). The Christian Science Monitor looks at how the Israeli naval blockade is impacting Gaza (3), as the IDF intercepts another ad hoc aid ship (5). Cairo extends the deadline for an agreement in national accord talks between Hamas and Fatah (9). The first movie theater in twenty years opens in the West Bank town of Nablus (10). The Palestinian Authority accuses Israel of planning to expropriate an additional 2% of the West Bank (13).

Barak, U.S. Envoy Discuss Settlements

Article Author(s): Glenn Kessler
Media Outlet: The Washington Post
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/30/AR2009063004136.... [1]

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak huddled for four hours yesterday with former senator George J. Mitchell, the Obama administration's special envoy for Middle East peace, seeking to resolve an impasse between their two governments over the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

President Obama has demanded that Israel fulfill a commitment in the 2003 "road map" peace plan for a full settlement freeze, including a halt to expansion to accommodate "natural growth." The Israeli government has responded with a series of counterproposals, including a temporary freeze with caveats, none of which the administration has accepted.

"We have not changed our position at all," a senior administration official said yesterday after the Barak-Mitchell meeting. "Nor has the president authorized any negotiating room."

An Israeli official who accompanied Barak to the meeting in New York characterized the talks as positive. He said a meeting between Mitchell and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, which was canceled last week, will probably take place this month.

Barak, the official said, emphasized to Mitchell the efforts he had taken in recent weeks to ease West Bank roadblocks and move against unauthorized settlement outposts, as well as plans for economic development and a regional peace agreement. "In this context, settlements are an issue, an important issue, but not an isolated issue," the official said.

U.S. officials view Israeli action on a settlement freeze as a way to break the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate, leading to confidence-building efforts by Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbors.

There are more than 120 settlements in the occupied West Bank that are legal under Israeli law but not internationally. The Fourth Geneva Convention, which Israel ratified in 1951, forbids an occupying power to transfer "parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies," but Israel disputes that this provision applies to settlements. Israel seized the West Bank and other territories in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

As Violence Subsides, Concrete Pours in West Bank

Article Author(s): Luis Ramirez
Media Outlet: Voice of America
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-06-30-voa41.cfm [2]

Israel has said it wants to boost the economy of the Palestinian territories as a way to bring peace. The Israeli leadership has not implemented any specific plan to improve economic conditions, yet the territories are experiencing a marked economic upturn as a halt in violence leads to increased trade and investment.

West Bank's economy

A woman in Islamic veil, speaking in Arabic, has a gleaming smile as she explains she is having trouble deciding on which dish set to buy. She browses through a glitzy showroom boasting European and American brands in a scene that might appear to be a shopping mall in Dubai, Qatar, or New York. In fact, it is Jenin, in the West Bank.

The town until recently was known as a bastion of suicide bombers. But now, with this brand new million-dollar department store, and a shopping mall in the blueprints, Jenin is becoming a haven for shoppers for women like Afaf Rahal, a Palestinian schoolteacher.

She says when she used to go to Amman and other places, she would hope that Palestinians would one day build a department store like this in the West Bank. She says she thanks God her expectations have been exceeded.

The Herbawi department store in Jenin, which was built with Arab investment, is part of what analysts say is a boom that is occurring in the West Bank despite the global slowdown.

They say the reason is security conditions have improved, allowing the wheels of commerce to turn.

Israeli-Palestinian trade improving

Ofir Gendelman heads the Israeli-Palestinian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Tel Aviv - a new organization set up as trade grows between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"It is way quieter now in the West Bank than the way it used to be even six months, or 12 months ago," said Gendelman. "It is totally quiet. No terrorist attacks, nothing. The Palestinian security services are doing what they can to prevent attacks and, of course, the Israeli army is doing what it has to do. At the

end of the day, when there is quiet, when there is security, the economy will flourish and this is what we see."

Construction projects can be seen just about everywhere. The town of Ramallah is preparing to open a newly-built five-star hotel, the result of European investment.

Improved security has led the Israeli army in the past year to remove more than 140 checkpoints, allowing for the freer flow of people and goods in the West Bank.

The hope on both sides is that trade, which reached $4 billion last year, will continue to grow, generating jobs and prosperity.

Can economic prosperity bring peace?

But there is a long way to go before trust is established. Palestinians say other checkpoints continue to exist, blocking access to jobs and business opportunities for many. Many Palestinians complain they cannot access the markets of Israel's $162-billion economy.

Other obstacles include persistent political attitudes. Many Palestinians view increased trade with the Israelis as collaboration with the enemy. No Palestinian chamber of commerce has been established to foster trade with Israel.

Few Palestinians and Israelis believe that economic prosperity alone will bring peace. They say previous Israeli efforts to boost the Palestinian economy have failed. Analysts say the bloodiest Palestinian uprisings of the late 1980's and in 2000 were preceded by periods of economic growth.

But some, including Ofir Gendelman, see reason for hope in the current upswing.

"It is easier to negotiate with someone who has a normal life, someone who is not desperate, someone who does not feel disenfranchised," added Gendelman. "I think that the betterment of the economic situation in the West Bank has definitely improved the chances to reach a peace deal."

At the shiny new department store in Jenin, Afaf Rahal glows as she browses American and European porcelain dinnerware. She says finding dishes like these here in Jenin is, for her, like a dream.

She says she has seen plates like these in Amman, but was always afraid of carrying them across the border. Now, when she sees them, she says it is like finding a treasure.

For Afaf Rahal this new department store is a sign of hope that life is becoming normal, even in a place like Jenin.

How Israel's naval blockade denies Gazans food, aid

Article Author(s): Mel Frykberg
Media Outlet: The Christian Science Monitor
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0701/p06s02-wome.html [3]

Bringing fresh attention to its blockade of the Gaza Strip, Israel on Tuesday turned back a boat attempting

to deliver three tons of medical supplies to Gazans.

After a radio message asking the small ferry to turn back was ignored, the Israeli Navy boarded the boat and redirected the vessel to the Israeli port of Ashdod. Reuters quoted a police source as saying that the activists aboard, members of the US-based Free Gaza movement, would "likely be deported."

"Yesterday evening the Israeli Navy contacted the boat while at sea clarifying that it would not be permitted to enter Gaza coastal waters because of security risks in the area, and the existing naval blockade," the Israeli military said in a statement, adding that humanitarian aid would be sent to Gaza "subject to authorization."

The naval blockade ? part of a wider Israeli effort to seal off the tiny coastal strip controlled by the Islamist militant group Hamas ? not only prevents such shipments, it is also devastating a key Gazan industry and source of food: fishing.

Citing security concerns and fears of arms smuggling, Israel has progressively tightened the blockade over the past 15 years. Once a thriving enterprise, Gaza's fishing industry is now on the verge of collapse. Fishermen are cut off from the heavily populated shoals, and have seen total revenue drop by half in less than a decade.

"We are witnessing a huge crisis where the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen, associated laborers, and their dependents have been decimated by Israel's blockade and closure," says Erminio Sacco of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Following the Oslo peace accords, signed in 1994 between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel permitted the fishermen to go 20 nautical miles (NM) out to sea.

This was restricted to 12 NM in 2002, after the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000.

This area was further limited to the current 3 NM when the Islamic movement Hamas wrested control of Gaza after an intense fight with its rival Fatah led to a collapse of a unity government headed by Western-backed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Those fishermen who go further out risk being arrested, shot, and killed, or having their boats destroyed or confiscated. However, human rights organizations have reported that fishermen have been attacked even within the 3-NM zone.

Click here to read about fisherman Mohammed Hassuna, who says he and his crew were recently surrounded by Israeli Navy boats, shot at, forced to strip, and swim in frigid water to the Navy gunboat, where they were handcuffed, blindfolded, and their feet chained.

Catch dropped by two-thirds since 2007

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israel's restrictions undermined the sardine season, which started in March and peaked in mid-April.

The bulk of sardines are located beyond six NM, with the UN estimating that a distance of 12-15 NM off Gaza is the minimum required to access the larger shoals of fish for maximum economic benefit. Shoals closer to shore have been depleted and unable to replenish themselves.

"During March 2007, 248 metric tons of fish were caught. In March 2008 this figure dropped to 121 tons and in March this year, the catch was only 89 tons," says Mr. Sacco.

A total annual catch of 2,700 tons was caught in 2008, down from nearly 4,000 tons in 1999, according to Gaza's General Syndicate of Marine Fishers.

OCHA states that at the end of the 1990s, Gaza's fishing industry was worth about $10 million annually. This represented approximately 4 percent of the Palestinian economy.

Nezar Ayyash, from Gaza's fishing syndicate, which has 3,500 registered fishermen, says this figure was halved between 2001 and 2006.

"It has become too expensive for many fishermen to take the bigger boats out to sea, so only some smaller boats venture out," says Sacco.

The cost of one fishing trip can vary between $125 and $625, depending on the size of the vessel, nets, and crew; many fishermen cannot cover these costs.

Fishing employed 45,000 Gazans

About 45,000 Gazans once worked in fishing and its associated industries, including repairs, onshore support, or as merchants.

With Gazans having an average family size of seven, the fishing industry used to help support many times more of Gaza's 1.4 million residents. It also supplemented a diet critically short of animal protein.

Gaza faces chronic unemployment, poverty, and malnutrition in part as a result of Israel's blockade, which now allows only food and medicine ? but not as much as aid workers say is necessary to sustain the population. Everything from pasta to catheters have been turned back, frustrating aid workers who have been unable to obtain a list of permitted items. A ban on steel and cement, which Israel says can be used to fortify tunnels along the Gaza border that are used for smuggling, has prevented many Gazans from rebuilding after the war, with some resorting to mud bricks for their homes.

One Gaza fisherman's tale of tribulation

Article Author(s): Mel Frykberg
Media Outlet: The Christian Science Monitor
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0701/p06s01-wome.html [4]

Israel's naval blockade of the waters off Gaza ? part of a wider Israeli effort to seal off the tiny coastal strip controlled by the Islamist militant group Hamas ? is devastating a key Gazan industry and source of food: fishing.

Citing security concerns and fears of arms smuggling, Israel has progressively tightened the blockade over the past 15 years to a zone that today extends only three nautical miles (NM) from shore. Once a thriving enterprise, Gaza?s fishing industry is now on the verge of collapse. Fishermen are cut off from the heavily populated shoals, and have seen total catch and total revenue drop by rougly half in less than a decade.

Mohammed Hassuna of the southern Gaza city of Rafah was recently arrested by the Israeli Navy even though he says he was within the 3-NM zone. Most boats are fitted with GPS to ensure they stay within the

zone.

"We were suddenly surrounded by gunboats and naval boats. They started shooting at us and around us. I was very scared," says Mr. Hassuna.

Hassuna says that and his crew were forced to strip down to their underwear and swim in frigid water to the navy gunboat where they were handcuffed, blindfolded, and their feet chained.

"They took us back to Ashdod port and we were kept like this for the entire day and not allowed toilet facilities or given any food," says Hassuna.

Eventually Hassuna, a father of five, and his crew were released but his boat had not been returned a week later when interviewed by the Monitor.

"I don't know how I will support my family now," says Hassuna. Other fishermen in a similar predicament have had to take legal action to get their boats back but most can't afford this.

Israeli rights group B'Tselem released a report about the continual shooting at, abuse of, and humiliation of Palestinian fishermen and challenged the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) over the issue.

The IDF responded that their actions were in the name of security only. But human rights organizations argue that Israel is collectively punishing Gaza's civilian population as a means of pressuring its Hamas leadership.

"A balance between security and the humanitarian situation has to be established," says Mike Bailey of Oxfam, which helps Gazan fishermen and farmers with short-term employment relief.

Israelis intercept Gaza aid ship

Media Outlet: BBC News
Date: June 30, 2009
Source Link(s): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127145.stm [5]

Israeli forces have boarded a ship trying to carry aid and pro-Palestinian activists to the Gaza Strip in defiance of Israel's blockade of the territory.

The 20 passengers include former US congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and Nobel Prize winner Mairead Maguire.

The activists also include some Britons, campaigners said.

Ms McKinney described it as "an outrageous violation of international law", as the boat was on a humanitarian mission and was not in Israeli waters.

The Israeli military said the boat was trying to enter Gaza illegally.

The US-based Free Gaza Movement has breached the blockade five times since August 2008.

Two other attempts by the activist group were stopped by Israeli warships during Israel's three-week

military offensive in Gaza in December and January.

Israel keeps a tight hold on Gaza, which is ruled by the militant Palestinian group Hamas.

The Israeli military said the passengers and crew of the Greek-registered ship Arion would be handed over to immigration authorities in Ashdod, and its humanitarian aid cargo would be taken to Gaza by road after a security check.

"An Israeli navy force intercepted, boarded and took control of the cargo boat Arion... as it was illegally attempting to enter the Gaza Strip," a military spokesman said.

Reconstruction

The British Foreign Office said on Tuesday it was aware of the situation and was trying to clarify the facts.

"We would be concerned if the stories of the Israeli Navy boarding the boat in international waters were true," a spokesman said.

"We have made it clear to Israel that we are very concerned for the safety of British nationals."

The mission is the latest by the Free Gaza Movement, which has renamed the ferry Spirit of Humanity.

"This is an outrageous violation of international law against us. Our boat was not in Israeli waters, and we were on a human rights mission to the Gaza Strip," said Ms McKinney in a statement.

"President [Barack] Obama just told Israel to let in humanitarian and reconstruction supplies, and that's exactly what we tried to do. We're asking the international community to demand our release so we can resume our journey."

On Monday, a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross described the 1.5 million Palestinians living in Gaza as people "trapped in despair", unable to rebuild their lives after Israel's offensive.

Donors 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.

How hard will Obama press Israel on settlements?

Article Author(s): Cliff Churgin
Media Outlet: McClatchy News
Article Type: Opinion
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.mcclatchydc.com/world/story/71011.html [6]

The unresolved dispute between the United States and Israel over Israel's refusal to halt building Jewish homes in the predominantly Palestinian West Bank has created a pivotal dilemma for President Barack Obama: How hard should he push one of America's most important allies in the Middle East?

So far, Obama has limited his pressure to calculated public comments, calling Israeli settlement construction illegitimate and a roadblock to a lasting peace agreement with the Palestinians that would include a Palestinian state.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak is scheduled to meet Obama aides Tuesday in the U.S. in the latest bid to find a compromise.

In the face of American demands that Israel halt all settlement building in line with the 2003 "road map" for Middle East peace, Israeli leaders are floating the idea of accepting a three- to six-month freeze on new construction in all settlements.

However, they'd continue to build thousands of West Bank homes that already are under construction. On Monday, Israel unveiled plans to build 50 new homes at a West Bank settlement to house settlers relocated from a West Bank outpost called Migron.

The State Department on Monday wouldn't rule out a compromise but reiterated the U.S. view of Israel's obligations. "A freeze on all activity relating to settlements, including natural growth, is what it says in the road map," spokesman Ian Kelly said.

Obama's dilemma is further complicated by Arab nations' insistence on a more-than-cosmetic settlement freeze before they make confidence-building gestures toward Israel that might help restart peace talks.

If a deal can't be worked out, analysts say, Obama has several ways to ratchet up pressure on Israel.

Short of freezing loan guarantees for Israel, the United States could try to enlist broader American Jewish support for halting settlement building or embrace European efforts to penalize Israeli exports made in West Bank settlements.

The United States for many years has imposed formal financial penalties on Israel for its settlement construction. The penalties have had little practical effect, but the process does give Obama a precedent for imposing economic sanctions.

"They can make the whole settlement project expensive in terms of embarrassment and money," said Roni Bart, a research fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies.

Most discussions of American pressure focus on freezing U.S. loan guarantees, an issue that President George H.W. Bush first raised in 1991.

After the Persian Gulf War, hard-line Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir asked Bush for $10 billion in loan guarantees to help the country absorb an expected wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

The Bush administration balked, insisting that Israel freeze settlement building.

That friction, Bart said, contributed to Shamir's downfall. This should serve as a cautionary tale for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who so far has rebuffed American pressure to freeze settlements.

"The sense that Obama is not a friendly president is not good for an Israeli prime minister," said Gershom Gorenberg, the author of "The Accidental Empire," a book on the birth of Israel's settlement movement. "It's not a secret how dependent Israel is on the U.S."

However, the struggle also cost the first President Bush substantial political capital and brought strident criticism from Israel's supporters on Capitol Hill. Some Republicans think that the issue helped cost him re-

election in 1992.

The post-Gulf War dispute was resolved when left-leaning Labor Party leader Yitzhak Rabin became prime minister and the new government agreed to a compromise.

Rabin, whom an extremist Israeli settlement supporter assassinated three years later, agreed to an American plan to deduct the amount that Israel spent on settlements from the U.S. loan guarantees.

While these guarantees didn't involve granting Israel money, they allowed the country to borrow money at lower rates because the U.S. government was backing the loans.

When Israel faced another economic crisis in 2003 due to the bursting of the high-tech bubble and the second Palestinian uprising, it again turned to the U.S. for loan guarantees, this time for $9 billion. The request was granted under the same conditions.

Because Israel never used the full amount of these loan guarantees, however, it never faced any financial backlash as a result of the agreement, making the penalties meaningless.

"The United States was showing the world that it was punishing Israel for settlements, and Israel was getting 90 percent of the guarantees it needed and going on with settlements and everybody was happy," Bart said.

According to unofficial figures from the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, the United States has deducted more than $1 billion from $6.6 billion in loan guarantees made available to Israel.

At present, the United States is weighing another $1 billion in deductions for settlement construction. Because Israel has used only $4.4 billion in existing loan guarantees, however, the financial penalties are likely to have no practical effect.

There are also steps the U.S. could take on the diplomatic front.

European countries already regard products produced in the West Bank as not being made in Israel and therefore not eligible for customs exemptions.

The European Union has been weighing tougher steps to ensure that Israeli companies aren't able to skirt the laws and receive preferential treatment for goods from Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

With American encouragement, the Europeans even could exclude settlers from visa exemptions. The U.S., which has a free trade agreement with Israel, could consider similar restrictions.

The U.S. also provides Israel with diplomatic cover in the United Nations, vetoing resolutions that it thinks are unfair or harmful to Israel, and the State Department said Monday that it would continue providing this cover.

Gorenberg said it was unlikely that the U.S. would cut military aid for Israel.

"The Americans have, since 1967, had this tension of whether or not to use arms supplies as pressure, because it's strong pressure and because they have seen it as positive that Israel can defend itself so the U.S. won't have to," he said.

In the past, American administrations that enter into policy conflicts with Israel would confront opposition from Congress, but so far there hasn't been much pushback to Obama's policies.

"Obama picked the best issue to pressure Israel. Of all the contentious issues, Israeli settlement is the issue where Israel enjoys the least support," Bart said.

Israel downplays settlement rift

Media Outlet: BBC World News
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127980.stm [7]

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has denied any impasse with the US over Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank as talks ended without agreement.

Mr Barak met US envoy George Mitchell as the two allies are struggling to end a rare public rift over the issue.

The US wants Israel to stop all settlement activity in the occupied territory, but Israel wants to continue what it calls "natural growth".

The Palestinians refuse to restart talks without a settlement freeze.

"I don't think we are stuck," Mr Barak said after the meeting with Mr Mitchell on Tuesday.

He said the talks were "positive" although there were still differences, and later told Israeli radio the two sides were close to reaching a compromise.

Asked whether Israel would offer a temporary halt to settlement activity, of three to six months, Mr Barak said it was "a little bit too early to predict".

He said Mr Mitchell would meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu within the next three weeks.

A meeting scheduled last week between the two was cancelled, in what has been interpreted as a sign of Israeli-US tension.

Access and movement

A joint statement from Mr Mitchell and Mr Barak said they had discussed "the full range of issues related to Middle East peace".

These included "measures on security and incitement by the Palestinians; steps by Arab states toward normalisation with Israel; and, from Israel, actions on access and movement in the West Bank and on settlement activity", the statement said.

Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which Palestinians want for a future state, are seen as a major obstacle to peace. The Jewish population in these territories, occupied in the 1967 war, is thought to top 500,000.

On Monday, it emerged that Israel has approved the construction of 50 new residential units in Adam settlement, to house settlers evicted from an unofficial outpost.

The settlements are illegal under international law, although Israel disputes this.

Israel committed to freeze settlement activity under the 2003 "road map" peace plan.

No change in Jerusalem, yet

Article Author(s): Mick Dumper
Media Outlet: The Guardian
Article Type: Analysis
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/01/jerusalem-israel-palestine-s... [8]

Something is moving in the Middle East but it has not yet arrived in Jerusalem. A new chess game has started in the region: the US ambassador is returning to Damascus, the Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal, made a speech welcoming the new tone set by Barack Obama in his speech in Cairo, there are leaks of an imminent deal between the Israelis, Egyptians and Hamas over a prisoner exchange and pressure is being brought to bear on Fatah and Hamas to reconcile so that credible negotiations for a Palestinian state can begin.

These opening moves have prompted a tentative dusting-down of the various proposals for a peace agreement and a resurrection of some of the informal Palestinian-Israeli dialogues. No one quite dares to hope that a credible peace process may soon be under way, having become so used to US presidents blinking first in any standoff with the Israeli government. Nevertheless, expectation of a concerted and credible policy initiative from the US have never been higher among advisers and commentators. A lobbyist who recently returned from Washington remarked "there's a complete change in focus ? and more importantly there is not a chink of light between Obama, [Hillary] Clinton, [George] Mitchell and the other US agencies involved with the Middle East".

Yet these hopeful signs are not reflected on the ground in the city of Jerusalem. Rather, some talk of a growing crisis. "An explosion may be imminent," a municipal council member told me. It is easy to see what he meant. The rupture to employment, family life, community cohesion and access to services and cultural amenities caused by the huge separation wall running through the eastern edge of Jerusalem has been enormous. Demolitions of Palestinian houses in East Jerusalem, which continue to sow bitterness and anger; the increased cancelling of East Jerusalem ID cards, which deprives people of residency in the city, access to services and National Insurance benefits; the systematic erosion of Palestinian territory through zoning plans; and the land acquisitions of the Israeli settlers all combine to produce a highly volatile situation.

Adding to this sense of deterioration on the ground is the leadership vacuum in the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem. The Israelis have successfully pursued a policy of excluding the Palestinian Authority, of restricting the cultural and service delivery activities run by Palestinians, and of decapitating the Hamas movement through incarceration. Furthermore, the traditional elite associated with the Haram al-Sharif is paralysed through the tight monitoring of employees by its Jordanian paymasters. The result is a fragmented and incoherent response to the inroads being made into the Palestinian parts of the city by Israel.

Into this vacuum has entered the charismatic Sheikh Raed Salah, one of the leaders of the Palestinians in

Israel. Rallying the resistance to house demolitions and to the perceived defilement of Islamic cultural monuments, Salah has demonstrated his ability to mobilise the Palestinian street. His campaign to defend the Haram al-Sharif from settler encroachments with the slogan "al-Aqsa is in danger" and the organised bussing in of protesters every day of the week has resonated internationally. To the consternation of the Palestinian Authority and the East Jerusalem elite he has been nicknamed "the sheikh of al-Aqsa" and "the mayor of Jerusalem". Whether this presence can be successfully transmuted into impact on Israeli policy is yet to be seen, but there is no doubt that foundations of a platform are being laid.

So why is there this dissonance between the mood in the region and the grim polarities in Jerusalem? One reason is time-lag. The positive knock-on effects of Obama's Cairo speech have not had time to percolate down to the street. Nevertheless, a number of patterns are emerging. One way of interpreting Israeli actions in the city is to see them as moves immediately prior to a ceasefire. Favourable positions are being sought quickly in case they become the new status quo. Another possibility is that Israel has taken a strategic decision to consolidate its hold over Jewish areas in the east of the city ? the settlements and the central areas of what has been called the Holy Basin, which contains the Old City and most of the holy sites. The focusing of investment into these areas and the neglect of others can easily be seen by a visit to the eastern periphery. Technically inside the municipal boundaries of the city, areas such as Kufr Aqab and Shu'afat refugee camp have been placed on the West Bank side of the separation wall and have all but been abandoned by the municipality. Apart from a few cosmetic services, they have been abandoned to high unemployment, congested housing and physical isolation from the city.

On the Palestinian side, there seems to be a "wait and see" approach. There is little desire to expend resources or political capital on new initiatives until it is clear that Obama will not back down over the settlement freeze issue. Having prematurely revealed that they are prepared to accept Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall and Jewish quarter in the Old City (borders yet to be decided), the Palestinians are unwilling to engage in anything less than final status discussions. They are through with interim phases. Alongside this greater clarity one can also feel a hardening of their position on the city. While an Israeli recognition of Palestinian sovereignty east of the 1949 armistice line will open the doors to the consideration of special arrangements for the holy sites and the Old City, it is also clear that the Palestinians will refuse to go down in history as those Muslims and those Arabs who sold out on Jerusalem. On Jerusalem, the conclusion is: no deal is better than a bad deal.

Fatah, Hamas to miss unity deadline set by Cairo

Article Author(s): Nidal Al-Mughrabi
Media Outlet: Reuters
Date: June 30, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSLU896214 [9]

Hamas Islamists and the rival Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas have been given three more weeks to seek a reconciliation deal after it became clear they would miss a July 7 deadline set by Egypt.

Palestinian officials said on Tuesday that Cairo had now given the factions until July 28 to agree to resolve their political divisions and end bickering marked by clashes and security crackdowns in Gaza and the West Bank.

The sides will leave Egypt and return for a final negotiating round on July 25.

"It was decided to give the two sides an additional chance and time to make progress on the ground, especially on the issue of political detainees, and make a real breakthrough that would help achieve national reconciliation," Hamas official Ezzat el-Rishiq, who is in Cairo, told Reuters.

Arrests and counter arrests by forces loyal to the two groups have hampered efforts to restore political unity and boost prospects for a resumption of peace-making with Israel.

Rishiq said if the two factions met the new deadline, leaders of all Palestinian groups would be invited by Cairo to sign a reconciliation deal at a ceremony on July 28.

A deal would aim to gradually end divisions by setting up a joint committee to handle the reconstruction of Gaza, largely destroyed in an Israeli offensive in December. It would also prepare for presidential and parliamentary elections in Gaza and the West Bank, and reform Palestinian security services.

ARRESTS AND COUNTERARRESTS

Hamas and Fatah delegations held talks on Monday with Egyptian intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman, who has led Egypt's efforts to heal the Palestinian rift. Suleiman told the factions their failure to reunite was "harmful to the entire Palestinian cause", a Palestinian official said.

Hamas had previously warned a deal would not be possible unless Fatah stopped arresting its members in the West Bank and released a significant number of the 920 Hamas supporters held by Fatah. It has dismissed previous releases as being cosmetic and usually followed by fresh arrests.

Fatah has said Hamas is holding nearly 300 of its men in jails in the Gaza Strip, which is run by the Islamist group.

"We told Fatah we were ready to end the issue of political detainees in 24 hours. We hope they would have the same spirit," Rishiq said.

Zakaria al-Agha, a senior Fatah negotiator, said missing the July 7 deadline would be "bad news to the Palestinian people and was disappointing".

"We had hoped the differences would be resolved, and the Egyptian brothers tried but they did not succeed and, therefore, the deadline was postponed," Agha said. He hoped the two groups would reach a deal by July 28 "if they showed honest intentions and put the national interest ahead of everything else".

If they fail, unity efforts could freeze until after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan due to begin in August, an official close to the talks said.

Adding to tensions, security services loyal to Abbas in the West Bank said on Monday they had arrested 10 Hamas activists who had planned attacks, a charge Hamas denied. An Abbas aide said the arrests showed Hamas had no intent to reach a deal.

Hamas's Rishiq accused Fatah of making "fabrications" to pursue a crackdown against his group in the West Bank, casting doubt over the likelihood of a deal by the new deadline.

Big screen returns to West Bank town

Article Author(s): Omar Karmi
Media Outlet: The National
Date: June 30, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090701/FOREIGN/706309808/1140 [10]

Mustafa Odeh, 75, remembers well when there last was a cinema in Nablus.

?Those were different days,? he said in front of his tiny plumbing repair shop in the centre of the city. ?There were no satellite dishes, not many TVs, no 300 different channels. The cinema was good then.?

And it would still be today, or so believe two local businessmen who last week opened a brand new commercial screen in the centre of the city just around the corner from Mr Odeh?s shop.

And while Mr Odeh was sceptical that the newly opened screen could compete with satellite TV, there is genuine excitement in Nablus that for the first time in nearly 20 years locals can again lose themselves in front of the big screen.

An investment of US$2 million (Dh7.34m) is a ?calculated risk? said Bashir Shakaa, one of the two businessmen behind Cinema City.

?For too long now, Nablus has been missing decent places for entertainment,? Mr Shakaa said. ?There are very few facilities and people need an escape or release from the daily pressures. The cinema is the perfect place, a place for families and friends.?

Nablus was one of the hardest hit West Bank cities in the last intifada.

The scene of many clashes between Palestinian factions and Israeli soldiers, it closed often for long spells and the city of 130,000 people still witnesses the odd Israeli army incursion.

But in recent weeks, the restriction on movement around the West Bank have loosened. Two checkpoints to the north of the city have been entirely lifted, allowing unrestricted access again for the many villages in the Nablus governorate.

The main Huwarra checkpoint, meanwhile, now sees traffic flow more freely.

Cars with yellow Israeli licence plates are even granted free access on Saturdays, the main market day, allowing Palestinians from Jerusalem or with Israeli citizenship the opportunity to once again enjoy the city?s famous knafe, a traditional cheese-filled pastry, and buy the local olive soap.

For a traditional commercial and industrial centre, the situation is still far from normal.

Although there is a tangible lessening of tensions as witnessed in the willingness of local investors like Mr Shakaa and his partner, Marwan Masri, to begin risking their money, the commercial centre in which Cinema City is located shows just how unstable the situation still is.

The commercial centre was built by the Nablus municipality and completed last year after which it was leased to a private consortium. The first two floors of the seven-storey building are given over to what is supposed to be a shopping centre.

There are some shops on the lower ground floor, but the floor above is still completely empty save for Cinema City.

?It?s a tough [economic] climate, even with the stability we have right now,? said Farouq Masri, Marwan?s son who is helping to manage the cinema.

?It?s very hard for investors to spend their money because the political climate remains completely unpredictable.?

That is also the main reason that no one opened a cinema before then, Mr Shakaa said. ?It?s hard to run a business that relies on people going out when there are nightly curfews and violence in the street.

?That?s also why it?s nice to see this happening. It?s nice to see people coming out of a movie and talking about it, smiling, having escaped for a while.?

Both Mr Shakaa and Mr Masri said they had not encountered any resistance in terms of social pressure. Nablus is a conservative city, where Hamas won the majority of municipal seats in the last local elections. But, apart from ?those who will always protest?, according to Mr Masri, there has been no difficulties in that direction and the first week witnessed a large cross-section of Nabulsies in the theatre. ?We?ve had everything from young couples to whole families. We are aiming as wide as possible. This, in the end, is a commercial undertaking.?

Cinema City?s first show was an Egyptian family comedy, Ramadan Mabrouk Abu Al-Aalamen Hamoda, to entice as many customers as possible.

Both Mr Masri and Mr Shakaa said they would eventually also show Hollywood blockbusters even though distribution deals are more expensive.

Further down the line, they said, they hoped to open more branches across the Palestinian territories, where, beyond the odd art house and internationally funded screens in Ramallah, there are no privately run commercial cinemas.

Mr Shakaa said he also hoped to entice foreign countries to sponsor film festivals at the screen, to promote their own movies.

A cinema-buff himself and fan of the films of Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, he conceded, however, that he would probably not see special screenings of his own favourites for a while.

?We are getting to know our audience. But I don?t think there are many takers for Kurosawa. That has to guide us.

?Eventually we need to make a profit.?

At the very least, Cinema City has made a promising start. Evening shows have played to a packed 172-seat auditorium. Afternoon shows and early shows have yet to gather the same enthusiasm, but Mr Shakaa and Mr Masri are confident it will come.

If nothing else, it will come from children. Qusay Areed, 12, has never been to a cinema before. Shopping with his parents nearby, Qusay said he was looking forward to seeing his first movie on the big screen.

According to his mother, Umm Ali, he was being understated.

?Ever since the cinema opened, all our children have been pestering us to go. We are looking forward to it. It should be a fun day out. Something different, at least.?

Editorial: Odious personality

Media Outlet: Arab News
Article Type: Editorial
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7&section=0&article=124182&d=1&m=7&y=2009 [11]

A couple of months ago, Israel?s controversial, very right-wing foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, was in London for talks with the British government as part of a four-nation European trip. It was his first visit abroad as foreign minister and it would have been interesting to have been a fly on the wall when he met British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, if only to have seen the body language. All the reports point to a cold get-together. Miliband who, only a couple of days earlier in Washington, had been effusive in his praise of President Barack Obama?s Middle East peace plans, calling them a once-in-a-generation opportunity to end the intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is said to have been unhappy at having to meet Lieberman, who had virtually invited himself to London. The fact that there was almost no press coverage of the visit certainly implies that. It was the same during his visits to Paris, Rome and Berlin. No photo calls, no joint press conferences. None of the foreign ministers wanted to be seen near Lieberman. We cannot blame them.

It seems moreover, that he will not be going back to France in a hurry. The French do not want him back. The Israeli media are full of reports that when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in Paris last week for talks, President Nicolas Sarkozy advised him to get rid of Lieberman and replace him with former foreign minister and now opposition leader Tzipi Livni. Sarkozy allegedly went so far as to say that he would never meet Lieberman. To Netanyahu?s comment that in private, Lieberman is very nice and very different, Sarkozy?s response that right-wing French leader Jean-Marie Le Pen was also quite charming in private was a fair comment, and the fact that he then felt constrained to withdraw the comparison when Netanyahu protested does not undermine the fundamental truth of what he said. The two are very similar; both are neo-fascists. There is a history of vile politicians being ?nice? in private. Hitler was said to be charming in private. Saddam Hussein may have been nice in private as well, although given that he was prone to murdering members of his own family, that may be taking the comparison too far.

Needless to say, Lieberman?s supporters are strutting around with unconvincing moral indignation, calling this an unacceptable intrusion into Israel?s internal affairs. That is rich coming from a state that is never backward in commenting on foreign politicians? merits and their suitability for the jobs they hold; their record of openly interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, not least the US, is monumental. In any event, Sarkozy?s reported comments were in private and it is perfectly normal for international figures to discuss such matters privately. It would be strange if they did not.

However, while we fully understand Sarkozy?s distaste, we do not agree with him. We do not think that Netanyahu should get rid of his odious foreign minister. Lieberman is the real, ugly malevolent face of an ugly and malevolent government. The more the rest of the world sees him, the more it will be brought face to face with that fact. It may well be uncomfortable for Sarkozy and others who have to meet such repellent

characters, but to suggest that an oppressive and arrogant regime should conduct its dealings with the rest of the world through a more politically acceptable mouthpiece sounds like a call to hypocrisy.

Israel, U.S. inch toward deal on settlements

Article Author(s): Barak Ravid
Media Outlet: Haaretz
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096775.html [12]

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. special Mideast envoy George Mitchell will meet in two weeks to reach a final agreement on settlement construction in the West Bank.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak and George Mitchell agreed during their talks in New York this week that Israel must take action toward easing access for Palestinians in the territory and halting settlement activity.

Their four-hour discussion brought Israel and the United States closer to ending its dispute over settlement construction, a source close to Barak said.

Mitchell did not explicitly tell Barak that Israel must impose a complete freeze on settlements - as the U.S. has been demanding - but rather emphasized that Jerusalem must take "action" on the matter, according to a Defense Ministry statement following the talks.

Asked whether Israel would declare a temporary settlement
building freeze, Barak told reporters following the meeting: "I think that it's a little bit too early to predict.

"We are considering every positive contribution Israel can make towards the taking off of a significant important peace effort," he said.

While significant progress was made in the talks, said the source close to Barak, differences remain over a number of subjects.

"There is still disagreement, but the direction is positive and there is a good dialogue," a source close to the defense minister said.

Barak and Mitchell discussed a spectrum of peace and security-related issues, according to the Defense Ministry. Part of their talks were dedicated to the contributions Israel, Palestinians, Arab states and the international community must make in order to advance the peace progress.

The two agreed that measures must be taken to "create a climate conducive to peace," said the Defense Ministry, including steps by Arab states to normalize relations with Israel and actions by Israel itself to lighten the tensions in the West Bank.

"The discussions were constructive and will continue soon," said the Defense Ministry statement.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's refusal to accede to Obama's demand for a complete halt to West Bank settlement construction has sparked tensions between Israel and the United States.

Barak traveled to the U.S. in an effort to reach a compromise formula on the matter. His advisers

participated in the first two hours of the meeting, as did Netanyahu's emissary, Attorney Yitzhak Molcho; Barak and Mitchell held a tete-a-tete for the remainder of the time.

The meeting took place in light of a recent disagreement among the "forum of six" ministers over this issue.

A political source in Jerusalem said Monday that a "temporary freeze" of construction in the settlements was met with objections by three of the six senior ministers in the forum.

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A political source in Jerusalem said Monday that a "temporary freeze" of construction in the settlements was met with objections by three of the six senior ministers in the forum.

PA: Israel planning to expropriate another 2% of West Bank land

Article Author(s): Avi Issacharoff
Media Outlet: Haaretz
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096955.html [13]

The Palestinian Authority this week accused Israel of planning to declare another 2 percent of the West Bank state land, thus effectively expropriating it.

But the defense establishment rejected this claim, saying the land in question had been under the Dead Sea until the shrinkage of that body of water uncovered it and the goal of the declaration is to prevent the land from being taken over by private or commercial entities.

It is not clear which claim is correct.

The storm erupted after 12 Arabic-language advertisements were published in the East Jerusalem paper Al-Quds last Friday by the land registry office in the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim. The ads stated that the Custodian of State Property had asked the registry to register additional lands as state lands, and requested anyone who claimed ownership of these lands to present their claims to the Civil Administration in the West Bank within 45 days.

Each advertisement dealt with a different plot of land, detailing its borders and giving map references. Altogether, the land in question totals some 138,500 dunams (about 34,600 acres).

The ads aroused furious reactions in the PA, which described the move as annexation.

"We denounce this," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said yesterday. "This attests to what is happening on the ground in practice: more land expropriations."

"How," he added, "can Defense Minister Ehud Barak vow that Israel has no intention of expropriating land when Israel openly states its intent to declare lands amounting to almost 2 percent of the West Bank as state lands?"

Erekat said he has brought the Israeli decision to the attention of the United States, the European Union,

Russia and other countries.

While the purpose of the move is not yet completely clear, Erekat continued, "It will presumably, as always, begin with the expansion of a military base and then [end with the expansion of] some settlement or another. That is what they've done since 1967."

Israeli defense sources rejected these claims. They said all the land in question abuts the Dead Sea and was once covered by it, but has been exposed by the sea's steady shrinkage over the years.

Israel wants these areas declared state land in order to prevent private or commercial bodies from taking them over, the sources said.

Bibi Needs Tzipi

Article Author(s): Aluf Benn
Media Outlet: Haaretz
Article Type: Opinion
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096969.html [14]

The dispute with the United States over the settlement freeze is a futile controversy serving only one purpose: to bolster the status of the administration of President Barack Obama as an honest broker in the eyes of the Palestinians and the Arab states, in contrast to that of his predecessor, which was seen in Ramallah, Cairo and Riyadh as serving Israel. Obama wants to show that he can bend Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. That is not necessarily bad for Netanyahu. Every minute spent on unnecessary discussions on the future of unfinished buildings and empty apartments in the settlements defers the tough decisions that he still must face, and it leaves his coalition stable.

In fact, even if construction in the settlements is frozen forever and not a single dog kennel or sheet of drywall is put up, the reality of the peace process will not change. Peace will not break out. Israel will not free itself of the occupation and its opponents around the world will continue to accuse it of apartheid and oppression of the Palestinians. There is a limit to what can be received in compensation for what one is not doing.

The real debate will come in the next phase, when Obama presents his Middle East peace plan, or when Netanyahu surprises him with an end run and an initiative of his own, thereby avoiding an imposed agreement. Proposing their own plans is what Menahem Begin did in connection with the peace process with Egypt and what Ariel Sharon did with the Gaza disengagement. They preferred to pay a smaller price up front, but they controlled developments in the peace process and were not asked to make even greater concessions.

Until now Netanyahu preferred to be seen as giving into Obama's pressure and compromising on Likud principles for the sake of relations with America. If he maintains this passive approach he will be faced with a demand for a complete withdrawal from the territories, which he will find difficult. His responsiveness to Obama on the issue of a Palestinian state shows that Netanyahu is not Yitzhak Shamir. He doesn't have the emotional strength to go head to head with the Americans, nor does he have the same ideological commitment to the Greater Land of Israel.

Even if Netanyahu doesn't believe in peace and compromise with the Arabs, he wants Israel to be accepted in the international community and understands the importance of relations with the United States. For better or worse he is nearing a decision like those made by Begin and Sharon.

Netanyahu might think he would do well to propose evacuating isolated settlements, to return settlers from the West Bank without withdrawing the army or to conduct expedited negotiations with Syria (as he attempted in 1998 to avoid U.S. pressure for an additional West Bank withdrawal). And maybe he will come up with something original and interesting that no one has thought of.

The common denominator of all these ideas is that they cannot be implemented with Netanyahu's current coalition. To go beyond talk of a settlement freeze to a real peace process, Netanyahu will need Kadima's Tzipi Livni by his side. Shas, Yisrael Beiteinu and Habayit Hayehudi will not allow him to cede even a millimeter. Kadima constitutes his strategic reserves, and without it he will be doomed to wander the world like a leper, absorbing public blows from Obama and the Europeans and concluding yet another term without leaving a legacy.

That's why Netanyahu must keep Kadima strong in the opposition. Without the party he will become a pawn in the hands of Yisrael Beiteinu's Avigdor Lieberman and Shas' Eli Yishai. Only the prospect of an alternative to the current coalition will allow him to continue moving forward.

In attempting to fracture Kadima through the "Mofaz bill," which would enable seven or more Knesset members to form their own party, Netanyahu is acting against his own interests. If he adds a few more MKs to Likud he would only be buying himself more "rebels," who would act against every initiative and move in the peace process. Anyone returning to Likud from Kadima would have to demonstrate allegiance to the party's old values and take right-wing positions. One can understand the temptation to destroy the rival party, but if Kadima splits apart Netanyahu will be trapped in a coalition with his "natural partners" from the far right and be faced with a bitter, ongoing confrontation with Washington.

Netanyahu must preserve his strategic reserves instead of looking for token gains. In his previous term as prime minister he fell from power because he stuck with the extreme right and didn't cultivate an alternative coalition, and then the right abandoned him over the Wye River accord. It would be a shame if that happened to him again after working so hard to get back into office.

Court: Revise charges against soldier who shot at Palestinian

Article Author(s): Aviad Glickman
Media Outlet: Ynetnews
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3739814,00.html [15]

The trial of Lieutenant-Colonel Omri Borberg, and his subordinate L., charged of disorderly conduct over their involvement in shooting at a bound Palestinian, Ashraf Abu-Rahma, was called off by the Supreme Court on Wednesday, after the judges accepted a petition by human rights organizations that argued that the charges were extremely insufficient.

The ruling was unanimous, and the judges ordered the Military Advocate General reexamine the case and reconsider the charges to be brought against the two.

Justice Ayala Procaccia ruled in the verdict that injuring a detainee while they are bound, blindfolded and helpless, is a brutal and serious offence that calls for a fitting penalty in the criminal realm.

Upholding human rights and maintaining human dignity, even among the enemy, are engraved in the State of Israel's character as a Jewish democratic state, and in the IDF's legacy, she said.

Justice Elyakim Rubinstein wrote that despite the difficult internal conflict brought about by this case, he agreed with Judge Procaccia that the plausibility of the Military Advocate General's decision should be examined with the State of Israel's values as a Jewish democratic state.

The judge stressed that even if the suspects get a criminal record, this should not take away from their rights and their past contributions.

The Military Advocate General expressed surprise at the ruling and said in response: "We did not expect such a decision. This is a touch blow to the Advocate General. There is no doubt that this compels all of us do to some serious thinking."

In response to the ruling, Abu-Rahma told Ynet, "I only hope that justice will be served. I don't really believe that t will. In the end, they judge what they want to judge and not according to what really happened."

The B'Tselem organization that documented the incident welcomed the ruling.

Advocate Yael Stein, head of B'Tselem's research director, said, "Today the High Court drew a very clear line for the Military Advocate General and made it clear that when soldiers and officers harm Palestinians, they will have to be held accountable.

"The High Court said that it is the prosecution's duty to give a clear message, that the Palestinians' honor and bodies much be protected, and whoever fails to do so will have to pay."

'Borberg only meant to scare Abu-Rahma'

In response, Borberg's lawyers Shlomo Tzipori and Udi Ben-Eliezer said, "At no point during the incident did the Lieutenant-Colonel ask that any kind of shooting at the detainee take place. He did not give out any order for such a shooting, did not watch the shooting, and certainly did not think that the soldier misunderstood his intentions.

"These findings are anchored in the evidence that was collected in the investigation. The petition and the hearing that following the inquiry in the High Court of Justice do not change the factual evidence, and therefore, we believe that the honorable court erred in accepting the petition.

"We look forward to the start of the legal proceedings and are certain that we will prove beyond all doubt that at most, there was a misunderstanding between the Lieutenant-Colonel and the soldier, and that the Lieutenant-Colonel's actions certainly did not constitute any moral or ethical failures."

In August, Abu-Rahma, the bound Palestinian who was shot at by the IDF soldier in Naalin, filed a petition against the Military Advocate General Brigadier-General Avichai Mandelblit, and demanded he argue why the indictment filed against the suspects had not been amended so that the charges reflect the criminal offences allegedly carried out. The Lieutenant-Colonel was charged with disorderly conduct.

The military said the Lieutenant-Colonel, who held the Palestinian as the soldier shot rubber bullets at him, only meant to scare the detainee, and that the decision to prosecute him for disorderly conduct was made based on the evidence.

Borberg's lawyers submitted the testimonies of Northern Command chief, Major-General Gadi Eisenkot and Gadi Eisenkot and Major-General Avi Mizrahi, who stated that the lieutenant-colonel's punishment was sufficient.

In a hearing held in September, the High Court ordered that Military Advocate General to reconsider the decision to prosecute Borberg for disorderly conduct alone. It was ultimately decided not to aggravate the charges, since "this offence reflects the two's conduct in the best way, in light of the fact that they had no real intention of shooting".

Barak, Mitchell remain disputed on settlements

Article Author(s): Yitzhak Benhorin
Media Outlet: Ynetnews
Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3739614,00.html [16]

Defense Minister Ehud Barak and US special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell failed to reach an agreement regarding the Israeli construction in the settlements during their meeting in Washington Monday.

Mitchell is scheduled to meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netnayahu in about two weeks.

A joint statement published following the meeting said that Barak and Mitchell "discussed the full range of issues related to Middle East peace and security and the contributions Israelis, Palestinians, their neighbors and the international community should make to this effort.

"Specifically, their discussions covered a wide range of measures needed to create a climate conducive to peace. These included measures on security and incitement by the Palestinians, steps by Arab states toward normalization with Israel; and, from Israel, actions on access and movement in the West Bank and on settlement activity. The discussions were constructive and will continue soon."

The two discussed ways to jumpstart the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinains. Barak made it clear that Israel is willing to pay a price for renewing the talks, but that the Arab world needs to contribute to the efforts as well. "We are weighing any positive contribution we can make to promote the peace efforts, while taking into consideration our security interests," he said.

No agreement was reached on freezing settlement construction. The US is demanding that Israel put an immediate moratorium on all building in the settlement blocs. However, the Obama administration is interested in decreasing the conflict that has flared between the US and Israel over the issue out of an understanding that such a state of affairs does not serve their interests in the Middle East.

Mitchell will arrive for another round of meetings in about two weeks. Until then, the Americans are expecting a number of goodwill gestures from Israel, such as easing restrictions on West Bank Palestinians.

Barak's entourage received the impression that the Americans understand that any demand for freezing settlement building must not be separate from an inclusive, regional peace process. Therefore, the US will also be looking for goodwill gestures from the Arab states.

Barak: US, Israel close on settlements

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Date: July 1, 2009
Source Link(s): http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1246296544905&pagename=JPost%2FJPArti... [17]

Before heading back to Israel from New York following his meeting with US Mideast envoy George Mitchell, Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Wednesday morning that Israel was close to an understanding with the US on settlements, which he stressed were part of a regional comprehensive peace effort.

"We focused mainly on the need for a comprehensive regional agreement," he told Israel Radio. "That includes other Arab states which have something to give to Israel, not just to take"

He stressed that the comprehensive effort would also include strengthening Palestinian institutions, and that the the settlement issue, while being "very important," had to be "taken into proportion."

Regarding natural settlement growth, Barak stressed that no one in the US actually believed that "we can stop pregnancies or not build kindergartens where required."

The defense minister said that although the US had called for a cessation of all settlement activity, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was not that far from the American position, noting that the prime minister had already stated that "no new settlements will be built, there will be no more settlement projects or expropriation of new land."

He emphasized that settlement construction approved recently, for example in Modi'in Illit, was for haredi families who cannot afford homes inside the Green Line.

Barak also spoke of the remarks attributed to French President Nicolas Sarkozy earlier this week in which he reportedly called on Netanyahu to oust Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and replace him with Kadima head Tzipi Livni.

"The makeup of the Israel political arena is an issue for us to discuss internally," he said. "There is no way someone outside can try to explain to us what to do."

He said there was "absolutely no reason" to think Lieberman was causing Israel damage in the international area, adding that on all state visits he had expressed himself "responsively and with good judgment."

However, Barak said he had taken something positive from the report: Sarkozy's call on Kadima to join a unity government.

A statement issued moments before the defense minister's interview with Israel Radio said that Barak and Mitchell "discussed the full range of issues related to Middle East peace and security and the contributions Israelis, Palestinians, their neighbors and the international community should make to this effort."

The statement went on to say that their discussions covered a wide range of measures needed to create a climate conducive to peace.

"These included measures on security and incitement by the Palestinians; steps by Arab states toward normalization with Israel; and, from Israel, actions on access and movement in the West Bank and on settlement activity," it said. "The discussions were constructive and will continue soon."

'No commitment to settlement freeze'

Article Author(s): Herb Keinon
Article Author(s): Hilary Leila Krieger
Media Outlet: The Jerusalem Post
Date: July 1, 2009

Israel is considering what it can do to enable a full-fledged Mideast peace process and Palestinian-Israeli negotiations to take off, Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Tuesday after talks with US Mideast envoy George Mitchell in New York.

But after the four-hour meeting, Barak would not commit to a temporary settlement freeze.

Asked whether Israel would agree to a freeze of perhaps three to six months, Barak replied: "I think it's a little bit too early to predict."

"We are considering every positive contribution Israel can make towards the taking off of a significant, important peace effort," Barak told reporters after the meeting at a New York hotel.

He said it was important to look at "the wider picture and to deal with each and every issue including the settlements."

"We think this wider framework ... is needed in order to enable (a) full-fledged regional peace process and a promising Palestinian-Israeli track as well as other tracks taking off successfully in a positive way," Barak said.

He said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would meet Mitchell in the next one, two or three weeks.

Looking ahead to the Netanyahu-Mitchell meeting, Barak said, "I believe it will contribute to further moving forward of the prospects of a regional peace and Israeli-Palestinian peace led by the United States."

Mitchell appeared for a photo opportunity with Barak before the talks began but did not make any comments.

"I don't think we are stuck now," Barak said after the meeting.

He called his talks with the US envoy "positive and in a good atmosphere, even though there are still differences."

They covered a wide range of issues including the strategic situation in the Middle East, prospects for a US-led regional peace initiative "which we in Israel support full-heartedly," and potential negotiations with the Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese, Barak said.

Earlier, a source close to Barak had said that although the defense minister emerged from the meeting without any agreement on settlement construction, he was optimistic the two sides could "zoom out" of the

settlement issue and focus on the wider regional diplomatic initiative.

The source said Barak went into the talks hoping to place the whole settlement issue in its proper perspective.

"Let's say that all settlement construction stops immediately," one source said. "Then have you solved the issue of Gaza, have you dealt with the issue of an agreement representing the end of the conflict and all claims against Israel?"

The source said it was obvious Israel was not embarking on any major new construction projects on Palestinian land in the territories, and that settlement construction issues could be worked out in the framework of negotiations with the Palestinians.

As to whether the US accepted Barak's argument about the need to de-emphasize the settlement construction issue and focus on the larger diplomatic process, the sources close to Barak said no one should expect Washington to come out with a statement saying it now supported construction in the settlements.

Nevertheless, Israeli officials said there were still ways to finesse the issue.

US State Department spokesman Ian Kelly, speaking as the meeting was wrapping up, had called the discussions "good and constructive" but downplayed the possibility of a breakthrough on the sensitive areas the sides have been exploring in efforts to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

"We don't expect any dramatic agreement today," he had said.

Kelly had reiterated the American position that "all parties have to meet their obligations under the road map. And, of course, you know for the Israelis that means a stop to settlements, which means a freeze of all activity, including natural growth."

In addition, he had stressed that "the Palestinians have their own obligations under the road map, and that's stopping incitement and proving that they can improve security. We also have made it clear to Arab states in the region that they should take steps toward normalization."

US officials have begun to make calls for Arab action a standard part of their talking points on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, indicating the heightened importance they attribute to Arab participation.

Though Mitchell's meeting Tuesday was only with Barak, he has traveled throughout the world, including stops in North Africa and the Gulf, to try to elicit greater regional support and help if Israel made difficult concessions on settlements and other matters.

While the settlements were a significant part of the discussion, Barak - according to sources in his office - also steered the conversation in other directions, such as the recent steps Israel has taken to loosen its control in the West Bank, including moving IDF troops back from four key cities.

During the first two hours of the meeting, staff members participated, including Yitzhak Molcho, the prime minister's adviser on the Palestinian track, and Mike Herzog from the Defense Ministry. The second two hours were a private discussion between Barak and Mitchell.

Even as the discussion with the US over the settlements continued, the US confirmed Tuesday that it would provide as much as $3.8 billion in loan guarantees for Israel through 2011, as long as budgetary targets and other economic commitments are met.

Israel will sell shares in the Haifa and Ashdod ports on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange by the end of March 2011, according to conditions set in the agreement signed by the two countries Tuesday. It will also start the construction of private power plants by the same date.

"The confirmation of the guarantees is a significant vote of confidence by the US administration," Finance Ministry Director-General Yarom Ariav said in an e-mailed statement.

Israel's budget deficit will balloon this year and next as the economy contracts and tax revenue falls. Israel must raise a net NIS 60b. ($15.4b.) in the next year and a half to finance the shortfall, Accountant-General Shuki Oren said, in a May 12 letter to Cabinet Secretary Zvi Hauser.

The US agreed in 2002 to provide Israel with $9b. in loan guarantees over several years, which was finally extended to 2011. Israel has used about $4.1b. of the guarantees, and about $1.1b. has been deducted by the US because of investment by Israel in settlements in the West Bank, a Finance Ministry spokesman said.

In 1992, then-president George H.W. Bush opposed a $10b. loan guarantee to Israel, because of settlement construction. He finally agreed in August 1992 - following the election of Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister and a shifting of Israel's settlement policy - as long as money being spent in the settlements was subtracted from the loan guarantees.

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Links:
[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/30/AR2009063004136.html
[2] http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-06-30-voa41.cfm
[3] http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0701/p06s02-wome.html
[4] http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0701/p06s01-wome.html
[5] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127145.stm
[6] http://www.mcclatchydc.com/world/story/71011.html
[7] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127980.stm
[8] http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/01/jerusalem-israel-palestine-settlement
[9] http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSLU896214
[10] http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090701/FOREIGN/706309808/1140
[11] http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7&section=0&article=124182&d=1&m=7&y=2009
[12] http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096775.html
[13] http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096955.html
[14] http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1096969.html
[15] http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3739814,00.html
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[17] http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1246296544905&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull