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Stakes are high in Mideast peace talks

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http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2010/08/21/stakes_are_high_in_mideast... [1]

The United States will host the launch of direct peace negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Washington early next month, a diplomatic breakthrough for the Obama administration, which has invested much of the president's global political capital in an attempt to broker peace in the Middle East.

The talks announced yesterday are aimed at creating an independent Palestinian state and ending the decades-old conflict. But they face steep resistance among some in the region and could produce more violence in the short term, especially if they collapse, as previous efforts have.

"The enemies of peace will keep trying to defeat us and to derail these talks," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned yesterday at the State Department as she stood alongside George Mitchell, special Middle East envoy, who conducted 20 months of grueling shuttle diplomacy to get the parties back to the negotiating table. "But I ask the parties to persevere, to keep moving forward even through difficult times."

Israeli and Palestinian officials have not engaged in face-to-face peace talks since December 2008.

President Obama will play a high-profile role that will cast him as a potential international peace maker at the start of the negotiations, which are supposed to conclude within one year.

The plan calls for Obama to meet separately in Washington with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Authority president, on Sept 1. That evening, the president will host a White House dinner that is expected to be attended by Netanyahu and Abbas, as well as King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, whose countries have peace deals with Israel.

The next day, Clinton and Mitchell will sit down with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders at the State Department to sketch out a framework for future meetings, and the sequence in which the parties will tackle contentious issues that have divided them for decades. Those issues include defining Israel's borders, the rights of Palestinians to return to Israel, and the status of East Jerusalem.

Israelis and Palestinians will negotiate with one another directly, said Mitchell, but US officials

will stand ready to provide ideas for potential compromises if the two sides reach an impasse. "We will be active participants," he said.

The extent of Obama's personal involvement moving forward is an open question, counterterrorism adviser John Brennan, who is on Martha's Vineyard with Obama, told reporters yesterday. But he left no doubt of the president's optimism.

"There is a feeling, I think, within this administration that the parties have a strong commitment to forging peace that can endure," he said.

The talks will be the most hands-on White House engagement in the process since President Clinton personally managed talks at Camp David in 2000. The failure of that effort helped spark the second Palestinian uprising.

"Peace between Israel and Palestine has always eluded presidents," said Douglas Brinkley, a history professor at Rice University. But he said Obama's outreach to the Muslim world, including his statement in support of a mosque near ground zero, positions him to be seen as "a fairly decent broker" in the Middle East.

President George W. Bush was widely criticized for taking a more hands-off approach to the conflict. But in the end of his second term, he called a conference in Annapolis that brought Abbas together with Netanyahu's predecessor, Ehud Olmert. Bush made a brief appearance at the conference, and US officials provided minimal support for those talks, believing that peace can only be hammered out by the parties. Those talks broke down in 2008, as Israel was on the verge of a major military operation in Gaza.

Obama appointed George Mitchell — a former senator from Maine who tirelessly midwived the peace process in Northern Ireland — on his second day in office, taking on a thorny issue that other presidents have left to their second terms. But for nearly two years, Mitchell's effort was widely seen as failing. Palestinians refused to resume bargaining until Israel stopped constructing settlements in the West Bank; Israel initially rebuffed the demand, but imposed a moratorium on construction last November, which is due to expire Sept. 26.

Abbas had also refused new talks unless Israel agreed to a one-year deadline on negotiations, an attempt to guarantee that the effort would be serious.

Abbas faces adamant political rivals who have attacked him for negotiating with Israel. Yesterday, Hamas, the militant group that rules Gaza, called the talks a "new attempt to deceive the Palestinian people and international public opinion."

Gaith Al-Omari, advocacy director of the American Task Force on Palestine who is a former aide to Abbas, said that the Palestinian president agreed to resume peace talks under intense international pressure, and because he worried that Obama was beginning to see him as the problem.

"There was a recognition that inevitably, he was going to have to come back to the table, and the longer he waited, he would lose more diplomatic credibility," Omari said. "He was worried about losing Obama. There was no pressure from Obama himself, but the message was sent by Europeans and others that 'you might be losing the president.'"

Obama has met with Abbas and Netanyahu in recent months and urged them to return to talks. The administration has also put unusual pressure on Israel to stop building settlements

in the West Bank ? a sharp departure from Bush, who signed an agreement with the Israelis to keep some settlement blocs.

The administration?s tough stance against the settlements attracted some harsh criticism, especially when it did not lead to a resumption of peace talks.

But yesterday, domestic policy groups applauded the Obama administration?s efforts.

?Now the real hard work must begin,?? said a statement from Americans for Peace Now, an advocacy group dedicated to resolving the conflict. ?Direct talks are not an end in themselves. . . . There is no more room for game-playing or procrastinating to avoid hard discussions and even harder decisions.??

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee ? the largest pro-Israel lobby ? issued a statement welcoming the talks, but said: ?For talks to succeed the PA must match Israel?s commitment to conducting peace talks without preconditions or excuses.??

Even if the leaders reach a peace agreement, it will be difficult to persuade all factions to accept it. Israel?s most entrenched settlers believe they have a religious right to land in the West Bank, while Hamas continues to lay claim to Israel. Hamas will have no role in the talks, Mitchell said. But when asked why this effort had any hope of success, Mitchell brought up the lessons of Northern Ireland.

?We had 700 days of failure, and one day of success,?? he said.

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