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Israel Approves More West Bank Building

Israeli officials announced on September 4 that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will approve the construction of hundreds of new Israeli housing units in settlements in the occupied West Bank in upcoming days.

Reuters news reported that an aide to Netanyahu, who declined to be identified by name, said that after the initial several hundred housing units are authorized, the prime minister would be prepared to consider a several months' long moratorium on building. Israelis are already working on approximately 2,500 housing units in West Bank settlements that are in various stages of construction.



Nabil Abu Rdainah, an aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, told Reuters that the peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel, which have been suspended since December, could not resume unless Israel agrees to a complete freeze on settlement building. He stated: "The Palestinian ... and American position, calls for ... a settlement freeze, including 'natural growth.' A partial settlement freeze is not enough and there must be a commitment to the obligations of the peace process as stated by President Obama."

The *New York Times* quoted Israeli officials on September 4 who stated that following the approval for building the additional housing units, Israel would implement a building freeze of six to nine months geared to facilitate the restarting of peace talks with the Palestinians. However, the freeze would apply only to the West Bank and not to the disputed area of East Jerusalem, which Israel has annexed, but which Palestinians would like to name as the capital of a future Palestinian state. East Jerusalem is also viewed as occupied territory by the international community.

The Obama administration has been exerting pressure on Israel to halt the building of settlements in the West Bank, since the construction is a major obstacle to resuming the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The point has created some tension in U.S.-Israeli relations.

The *Times* cited an article written on September 4 in the *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper by Nahum Barnea, described as a leading Israeli political journalist. Barnea noted that a senior American official telephoned him this week to describe what Netanyahu would receive in exchange for the building freeze: "An improved personal relationship with President Obama; he will get gestures from the moderate Arab states that the Israelis can appreciate, including a reopening of the interests offices in a number of states, tourism and trade relations, flight rights."

The article said that Barnea attributed the phone call, which he said came from a very high-ranking U.S. official, to a new policy in Washington of reaching out to the Israeli public after months in which opinion surveys have shown that Israelis are highly suspicious of President Obama's Middle East policy. ABC News reported that Netanyahu's announcement comes just days before the Obama



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administration's Middle East envoy George Mitchell travels to the region to discuss an Israeli settlement freeze. The report quoted senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who told ABC News: "This is a direct and flagrant provocation by the Israeli side. It is likely to undermine all the efforts of the Obama administration to make peace in the region." Saeb Erekat continued: "This issue is a major challenge to President Obama. If he can't make Netanyahu freeze settlements, how can he expect the Palestinians and the Arab world believe the Israelis are interested in peace? This is about President Obama's credibility." He told the AFP news agency: "The only thing suspended by this announcement will be the peace process."

The report noted that all settlements in the occupied territories are regarded as illegal under international law, and the Road Map for Peace plan (proposed by the "Quartet" comprising the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations) calls for a complete cessation of construction.

The Palestinians, who intend to establish a sovereign state there, see Israeli settlements on the land as a major obstacle to peace. Jordan annexed the West Bank to itself in 1950, but its claim was recognized only by the United Kingdom. Israeli forces captured the area during the 1967 "Six-day War" against Jordan and Egypt, and have occupied major parts of it ever since. In 1988, Jordan ceded its claims to the West Bank to the Palestine Liberation Organization, as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."

As reactions to the Netanyahu decision poured in from around the world, the Middle East-based Al Jazeera news network ran a report by correspondent Jacky Rowland on September 4 entitled "[Palestinian villagers protest land seizure](#)" from the West Bank village of Bilin. (The online article contains a YouTube video of Rowland's report.) Rowland said:

The village of Bilin is literally on the frontline of Israel's confiscation of Palestinian land and the construction of its separation barrier," Ms. Rowland reported from the village.

Later today the villagers of Bilin will protest the fact that not only they, but also five neighbouring villages, have lost their land which has been seized to build an Israeli settlement.

This huge settlement will result in 40,000 Jewish settlers living on occupied land here in the West Bank and as Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu is planning to give the go ahead for even more of these settlement homes to be built.

The issues to be settled before a peaceful settlement can be reached between Israel and the Palestinians are many and complex. It is natural that both peoples desire to live in a state that is both sovereign and secure. But myriad factors work against a successful resolution anytime soon. Primary among these factors is that the Palestinians have yet to form a stable governmental body free from the influences of the radically militant Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), from which the Palestinian Authority was spun off. It was PLO leader Yasser Arafat who appointed Mahmoud Abbas as prime minister of the PA on March 19, 2003. Abbas became the Chairman of the PLO on November 11, 2004 upon the death of Yasser Arafat and became president of the PA on January 15, 2005.

While having such a radical presence on their nation's boundaries is naturally unnerving for Israelis, Israel's case would certainly be helped if it showed more respect for international borders and more compassion for innocent civilians in the lands it occupies. The expansion of Israeli settlements into the West Bank is as unpalatable for Palestinians as it would have been had the United States built



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communities for U.S. settlers in occupied Germany and Japan following World War II. Israel must understand that military victory is not moral carte blanche to treat the residents of occupied territories as mere vassals with no rights.

As for the U.S. role in Middle East peace, under our Constitution, there should not be one. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians should have to worry about pleasing President Obama — neither should the United States be sending foreign aid to Israel and a host of Arab nations, as well.

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