



## Israel's Netanyahu Urges Reconsideration of West Bank Development

Following negative reactions from the United States over Israel's November 12 announcement that the Jewish state would add 20,000 housing units in West Bank settlements, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (shown) directed Construction and Housing Minister Uri Ariel to "reconsider" such plans.



The [Jerusalem Post](#) reported that an announcement released by the prime minister's office stated that Ariel agreed to reconsider the housing expansion plans.

Before Netanyahu indicated that his government would shift gears, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the United States was surprised and "deeply concerned" by Tuesday's announcement.

The Palestinian governing authority went a step further and threatened to appeal to the UN Security Council — as well as stepping up efforts to join several UN organizations. "In the coming hours, the Palestinian leadership is going to consider appealing to the UN Security Council and seeking membership of international organizations if Israel does not reverse its latest settlement moves," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told Agence France-Presse.

According to the *Post*, sources in the prime minister's office expressed "unhappiness" on Tuesday concerning the timing of the announcement that Israel would increase the number of housing units in the West Bank.

The *Post* cited unnamed Israeli officials who said that Netanyahu, after being informed of Tuesday's announcement and the controversy it was creating, had stepped in immediately and demanded that the ministry freeze the "E1 plans," saying this issue was too sensitive and would detract international attention from negotiations between the West and Iran.

E1 Plan is an Israeli administrative name for the stretch of land northeast of Jerusalem (with E1 being an abbreviation for "East 1") that would form a connection between Jerusalem and the Israeli West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim.

Ma'aleh Adumim Mayor Benny Kashriel wrote a letter of concern to Netanyahu, in which he said: "I understand that we are under pressure from the U.S. government because of the need to stop Iran's nuclear program and the need to advance the negotiations with the Palestinians. But preparing building plans for land in Ma'aleh Adumim is solely a municipal issue. Marketing homes would still need authorization from the prime minister."

"I am therefore asking you to rescind your decision to freeze technical planning for [E1] and to allow the Construction and Housing Ministry to continue its work on these plans," Kashriel continued.

According to the official cited by the *Post*, Netanyahu instructed that the E1 plans not be implemented,



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“because at this sensitive time, the international focus must be clearly on Iran, and we don’t want any issue to divert the attention of the international community from this crucial goal.”

Reports from both the Middle East-based [al-Jazeera news network](#) and the [World Bulletin website](#) quoted State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki: “Our position on settlements is quite clear; we do not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement activity. We’ve called on both sides to take steps to create a positive atmosphere for the negotiations.”

Al-Jazeera quoted a statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu that was somewhat critical of Ariel, who is a member of the pro-settlement Jewish Home Party. Netanyahu said that Minister Ariel had drawn up the plan “without any advance coordination.”

“This step does not contribute to settlement. On the contrary, there is damage here for settlement,” Netanyahu said. “This is a meaningless step — legally and in practice — and an action that creates an unnecessary confrontation with the international community at a time when we are making an effort to persuade elements in the international community to reach a better deal with Iran.”

This issue is not clearly partisan, however. Israeli Energy Minister Silvan Shalom, who is a member of Netanyahu’s conservative Likud Party, issued a statement on Wednesday that Israel would continue settlement building, but would be more careful in the future about the timing of such announcements.

“The question is always about the timing. Is the timing right? Is the timing wrong?” Shalom told Israel Radio. “We need the support of the United States on the Iranian issue and have to do our utmost to lower any tensions with it.”

In a related, but separate, matter, Israel’s [Haaretz](#) daily newspaper reported on November 13 that Israel has submitted a proposal to the European Union agreeing to guidelines for the joint EU-Israeli Horizon 2020 initiative — a research and development program. Israel’s newly worded proposal, given to senior EU officials in Brussels, recognizes the EU’s policy of not allowing the transfer of EU funding to agencies in Israel’s West Bank settlements.

According to *Haaretz*, the EU’s new rules also state that any agreement made between Israel and the EU must include a provision stating that the settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Golan Heights are not part of the State of Israel.

A Reuters report carried by [Haaretz](#) on November 13 quoted from a statement that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made in an interview with Egyptian CBC television saying that his peace negotiators had resigned because of the lack of progress in the U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. However, Abbas was hopeful that talks would resume, saying: “Either we can convince [the delegates] to return, and we’re trying with them, or we form a new delegation.”

In a statement to Reuters TV on Wednesday, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said: “In reality, the negotiations stopped last week in light of the settlement announcements last week.”

There was no news of whether Netanyahu’s subsequent plea for reconsideration of the settlement policy would hasten the Palestinian delegates’ return to the negotiating table.

The *Haaretz* report explained:

Palestinians seek to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip — now controlled by Hamas Islamists opposed to Abbas’s peace moves — with East Jerusalem as its capital. They fear Israeli settlements will deny them a viable country.



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For years, the dominant Palestinian force in the West Bank was the terrorist Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Representatives of Israel and the PLO met in 1993 in Oslo, Norway, and produced an agreement, the Oslo Accord, signed by Mahmoud Abbas for the PLO, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres for Israel, Secretary of State Warren Christopher for the United States, and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev for Russia.

The Oslo Accord called for the creation of an interim government, the Palestinian Authority, and for the gradual withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces from parts of the West Bank and Gaza. However, many areas of dispute between Israel and the Palestinian leadership (e.g., the status of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements in parts of the West Bank, the exact location of borders between Israel and Palestinian territory, etc.) have yet to be resolved and the two sides have so far failed to reach a final peace agreement.

*Photo of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: AP Images*



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