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Obama Criticizes Israeli Settlement Building

U.S. government-controlled VOA news on November 18 cited President Obama's statement that Israel's recent decision to authorize the construction of new settlements in East Jerusalem does not make Israel safer, and could complicate peace efforts. In an interview the president had with Fox News in China, he said: "I think that additional settlement building does not contribute to Israel's security. I think it makes it harder for them to make peace with their neighbors. I think it embitters the Palestinians in a way that could end up being very dangerous."



VOA cited a statement made by a U.S. official who declined to be identified that during a November 16 meeting in London, U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell had urged Israeli leaders to block the proposed settlement construction.

Reuters reported that the planned construction would be in Gilo, a settlement of 40,000 Israelis built in a part of the West Bank that Israel captured in 1967 and annexed to Jerusalem.

The report noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated that he would limit new construction in West Bank settlements, but that building in Israel's Jerusalem municipality would continue. This area includes East Jerusalem and adjoining areas of the West Bank that Israel annexed in a move not recognized internationally.

"Construction in Gilo has taken place regularly for dozens of years and there is nothing new about the current planning and construction," a Netanyahu aide said.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly told reporters on November 17: "We believe that neither party should engage in any kind of actions that could unilaterally preempt or appear to preempt negotiations. I think that we find the Jerusalem planning committee's decision to move forward on the approval process for the expansion of Gilo in Jerusalem as dismaying."

Kelly continued: "This is at a time when we are working to relaunch negotiations and we believe that these actions make it more difficult for our efforts to succeed. So we object to this and we object to other Israeli practices in Jerusalem related to housing, including the continuing pattern of evictions and demolitions of Palestinian homes."

The official Israeli position is that east Jerusalem is part of Israel and that outside efforts to restrict building there must be rejected. Palestinians, however, plan to make East Jerusalem the capital of a future state they hope to establish in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Bloomberg News quoted State Department spokesman Ian Kelly as calling the building approval "dismaying." The European Union expressed similar sentiments today in a statement e-mailed to Bloomberg, which also quoted U.K. Foreign Secretary David Miliband saying the decision "is wrong and we oppose it." In the past, the official U.S. policy has been that the status of Jerusalem must be resolved



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through negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. However, back in June, President Obama said: "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."

Americans, like most outside observers, are bound to hold varying opinions concerning the legitimacy of each of the opposing sides' claims to disputed territory in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. And, as private citizens, Americans can, and should, make their viewpoints known, especially when motivated by a conscience informed by their religious and ethical principles.

Regardless of where most Americans' sympathies lie, however, neither our Founding Fathers nor the Constitution they crafted foresaw an official role for U.S. government involvement in foreign disputes. This philosophy was expressed unequivocally by George Washington in his 1792 Farewell Address:

A passionate attachment of one Nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite Nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification.???

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