



Written by on July 28, 2009

Obama Presses Israel on West Bank Settlements

U.S. special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell wrapped up three days of talks in the Middle East on July 28, telling reporters that he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made "good progress" in their talks on advancing Middle East peace efforts.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that following the meeting between the two officials, Mitchell told reporters that a "comprehensive peace in the Middle East would include peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as peace between Israel and Lebanon, and Syria and Israel."



Mitchell added that the peace deal would include "full normalization between Israel and all of its neighbors in the region."

"That is our objective," Mitchell said, "and to that we have committed ourselves fully."

Bloomberg News reported that the goal of Mitchell's trip was to try to resurrect Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that were suspended last year. After meeting Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus on July 26, Mitchell held talks with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo, and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak in Tel Aviv.

The *Post* quoted Netanyahu's assessment of the meeting: "I think we're making progress toward achieving an understanding that would enable us to continue, and in fact complete, a peace process that would be established between us and our Palestinian neighbors and ultimately the entire region."

According to a report in the *Christian Science Monitor*, however, one of Mitchell's objectives for the trip remained unfulfilled. That goal was to convince Prime Minister Netanyahu to stop the expansion of Israeli settlements in territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 war. President Obama has indicated he considers such an agreement to be a starting point in efforts to get Israeli and Palestinian leaders to come to a "two-state solution" — a sovereign Palestinian state to the East of Israel. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has said that he will not resume talks with Israel unless a freeze on the expansion of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian West Bank is put in place.

The British *Telegraph* newspaper reported that the White House has asked at least seven Arab countries to consider what concessions they might make in return for an Israeli pledge to freeze construction of settlements in the West Bank.

Disagreement over the expansion of Israeli settlements is one of the most difficult obstacles to reaching an agreement satisfactory to the two sides. The Palestinians view the settlements as an impediment to their plans to build part of their future state in the West Bank.

A member of senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat's staff told the London-based newspaper *al-Hayat* that it's the Palestinian position that talks would not continue until the settlements stop growing remains firm. "We don't have a Palestinian position for the renewal of negotiations," he was quoted by



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al-Hayat. "Rather, Israel has a commitment under the framework of the road map." He also told reporters that when Mitchell visited Palestinian Authority President on July 27, he told the Palestinian leader that "contrary to what has been said in the mass media, there is no agreement with the Israeli side on anything."

The settlement issue remains a stumbling block to a deal between Israel and the Palestinians and one which the United States has started pressing Israel to compromise on. A report in the *New York Times* for July 29, "has begun with a direct and public challenge to Israel's latest plan to build new settlements in East Jerusalem."

Ground zero for the controversy is the site of the former Shepherd Hotel, which Israelis are converting into a 20-unit housing project. The United States, the European Union, Russia, and France have all voiced objections to the project. And, noted the *Times*, Israel's granting of a building permit for the project in July, mere weeks after the Obama administration indicated that it would object to any new construction in the occupied territories, was a provocative rebuke to the American position.

Or, noted the *Times*, "it might have been intended as a signal that Israel would continue to build as Israel saw fit, no matter what Washington said."

In a statement made on May 27, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the United States "wants to see a stop to settlements — not some settlements, not outposts, not 'natural growth' exceptions."

Israel's position is also adamant. The Israelis assert that an undivided Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. "Our sovereignty over it cannot be challenged," Prime Minister Netanyahu said at a July 19 cabinet meeting. No one, he added, has the right to tell Israelis where they can live in their own capital city.

Though Israel would not be the first — and probably not the last — small nation to have its sovereignty negatively impacted by U.S. diplomacy that has often been on the wrong side of a just solution, Israel's territorial claims have often been unilateral and not recognized internationally — and therefore problematic. When Israel was created in 1948, the West Bank and the Eastern part of Jerusalem, which is predominantly Arab, were considered to be Jordanian territory. During the 1967 Six-Day War, Israeli troops occupied territory beyond its borders for strategic military purposes, including the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula and about a third of the Golan Heights, but continues to occupy the remaining areas. Jordan eventually ceded the West Bank to the PLO.

In 1980, Israel's Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law, which stated that "the integrity and unity of greater Jerusalem in its boundaries after the Six-Day War shall not be violated." The law stated, essentially, that Jerusalem, complete and united (including East Jerusalem), is the capital of Israel; places holy to all religions should be protected; and Israelis shall provide for the development and prosperity of Jerusalem.

However, United Nations Security Council Resolution 478, passed in 1980, declared Israel's 1980 "Jerusalem Law" null and void and required that it be rescinded, while affirming that it was a violation of international law. The resolution passed 14-0, with the United States abstaining.

Following the passage of the resolution, all foreign governments closed their embassies in Jerusalem, most relocating to Tel Aviv. The U.S. Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act in 1995, stating that "Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the State of Israel; and the United States Embassy in Israel should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999." However, bowing to pressure from the International Court of Justice, the embassy was never reopened in Jerusalem, though official



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U.S. documents and websites refer to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Since it is the intention of Palestinians to name East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, the importance of this dispute cannot be underestimated.

It would be better for all concerned if each nation would defend its own sovereignty, and only its own sovereignty, respect the sovereignty of its neighbors, and leave the UN, which over the years has undoubtedly done more harm than good in the Middle East, completely out of the equation.

History shows us, however, that border disputes have seldom been resolved so easily.



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