

International troops bound for West Bank?

By David Harris

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A report in a Jordanian newspaper suggesting the Palestinians want to see an international force deployed along the borders of any future Palestinian state has sent ripples around the diplomatic world over the weekend.

The newspaper Al-Ghad quoted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as saying that he will enter direct peace talks with Israel if the Israelis accept in principle the deployment of foreign troops around the borders of what are presently referred to by the international community as the occupied territories.

Some journalists are suggesting this idea was already discussed and agreed during talks between Abbas and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, before the negotiations ended in December 2008.

The imperative

Incumbent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants direct talks to commence as soon as possible. He is facing a possible domestic coalition crisis if there are no face-to-face negotiations prior to September 26 when Israel's 10-month partial settlement freeze terminates.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned on Monday that the moratorium on building in the West Bank will not be extended. Netanyahu knows that if he ignores Lieberman, several hawkish parties may quit his government. As a result he wants the direct talks to be in place before September 26.

However, Abbas is insisting that he receive something concrete from Israel before committing to sitting in the same room.

Meanwhile, analysts and journalists have already largely ruled out several possible goodwill gestures that Netanyahu would have to make, right now the idea of the deployment of an international force is gaining momentum.

Role for NATO?

There is some media speculation that earlier this month Abbas has suggested NATO take on the role. He is said to have formulated the idea in cooperation with the U.S. envoy to the Middle East and former senator George Mitchell.

The reason the Palestinians are suggesting the deployment of such a force is that they hope it would answer Israel's security concerns about a Palestinian state and at the same time guaranteeing that Israel cannot deploy its soldiers on what would be the Palestinian border with Jordan.

Israel continually raises its concern that a Palestinian state could become a platform for militants to launch attacks against the Jewish state. Should there be no oversight of the Palestinian- Jordanian border, unwanted elements could enter the Palestinian areas unimpeded, Israel said.

In order to allay Israeli fears about the competence of such an international force, the model would have to be chosen very carefully.

[Israel would not be able to accept a United Nations deployment akin to UN Interim Force in Lebanon, according to Shlomo Brom, director of the Program on Israel-Palestinian Relations at The Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv University.](#)

["The UN is a political body and we know how it works and who has power there. We know about the problems Israel has with this political body," Brom said.](#)

[Speaking to Xinhua on Monday he proposed two alternatives that he said could prove satisfactory to Israel.](#)

[The first is the model of the Multinational Force and Observers \(MFO\) responsible for peacekeeping in the Sinai Peninsula, which was established in the wake of the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. The reason this model works, he said, is that, as the MFO puts it, "the parties negotiated a protocol in 1981 establishing the MFO 'as an alternative' to the envisioned UN force."](#)

The MFO's work includes operation of checkpoints, reconnaissance patrols and observation posts. The Rome-based organization was established specifically for this purpose.

Brom's other suggestion for a workable solution fits glove in hand with that of Abbas.

"That's where a credible, international organization that can do it agrees to take on the mission. Today there's only one that can do so and that is NATO," he said.

Here the UN can play a role, with its Security Council mandating NATO to perform the task, giving the mission broad international legitimacy, he added.

Netanyahu's likely reaction

On the question of whether Netanyahu would accept this request from Abbas, Brom said it is hard to know exactly what Netanyahu wants, but previous Israeli administrations have been prepared to accept such a proposal.

Gadi Wolfsfeld, a professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, believes Netanyahu would not accept the deployment of an international force. In his opinion, Israel's experience with UNIFIL has not been good.

In the event that Israeli troops were in hot pursuit of terrorists, Netanyahu would not want to have to deal with a NATO or similar force while trying to capture a terror cell, Wolfsfeld said.

If the Jerusalem academic is correct and Netanyahu does not agree to this condition from Abbas, that could leave a serious question mark over the fate of direct talks and indeed the entire peace process. The same can be said for any other terms that Netanyahu has already or will reject.

"As far as I can see unless there is a breakthrough on some major issues there aren't going to be direct talks," Wolfsfeld said.

He sees the Americans and the Israelis on the one hand calling for direct talks, while the Palestinians and the Egyptians are insisting they want to see Israeli movement before agreeing to enter a face-to-face parley.

With the September deadline drawing ever closer, Wolfsfeld does not see anything in the offing and even if direct talks do begin, they could well break off pretty quickly should Israel resume building in the West Bank, he said.

The truth is that at this stage no one outside of a handful of Israelis, Palestinians, Americans and Egyptians really know what the actual picture is. Hints, leaks, speculations and trial balloons on the part of Palestinian and Israeli officials are only succeeding in muddying the waters.

While much of the analysis is very negative, it is still the case that the parties are talking to one another, albeit indirectly, and there is a chance that direct talks could take place secretly to try to work out some form of compromise formula that could then take direct negotiations into the public eye.

http://www.china.org.cn/world/2010-07/20/content_20535874.htm