

# Voice of America

## Middle East

### Mistrust Frustrates US Effort to Get Israelis, Palestinians Talking

Luis Ramirez | Jerusalem 12 August 2010

U.S. special Middle East envoy George Mitchell left Israel this week without an agreement in hand for the resumption of direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Wide gaps remain on key issues and mutual distrust remains an obstacle.

Mitchell spent two days in meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials in which he relayed the latest proposals between two sides. At the end of the U.S. mediator's trip, there was not enough common ground for the Israelis and Palestinians to begin talking.

U.S. officials had expressed optimism that an announcement would be made this week for direct negotiations to begin for the first time since the end of 2008.

The director of the Institute of National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Oded Eran, used to head Israel's negotiations team in previous talks with the Palestinians. He said the rift remains wide on key issues, such as the status of Jerusalem, refugees, and the borders of a future Palestinian state.

"The problem right now is to get to an agreement on the terms of reference, and their inability to reach an agreement reflects the deep gap in the positions," said Eran.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' proposal calls for a clear framework for direct talks, a framework that would include an end to all Israeli construction at Jewish settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The Palestinians also want Israel to commit to the establishment of a Palestinian state whose borders would be along the lines that existed before the 1967 Arab Israeli war during which Israel captured the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, heading into talks with Mr. Mitchell this week, said Israel wants no preconditions. The two men bantered in front of reporters.

A temporary partial freeze by Israel on construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank expires next month. Mr. Netanyahu has suggested his government will not extend the ban.

Analyst Oded Eran says the way Mr. Netanyahu sees it, agreeing to a construction freeze outside of direct negotiations would weaken Israel's position. "The Israelis are saying, 'If we agree to this, we already made a concession which pertains to one of the three core issues, so why would we do it?'"

Palestinian leaders say they are wary after engaging in past negotiations that they say have led nowhere. They essentially want a guarantee that any new talks will bring an end to the conflict. Ali Jerbawi is a professor of political science at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank and a member of the Palestinian cabinet. He said, "We started negotiations many years ago and we have not reached a settlement. So, are we sure that this time when we go to direct negotiations we are going to reach that settlement?"

Palestinian leaders called off direct talks at the end of 2008, after Israel launched a 22-day assault on militants in the Gaza Strip.

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