



In brief: Israel and the Palestinians - recent developments

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On assuming office in 2009, the Obama administration's declared aim was to give the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians a higher priority. The first blow to this policy came when Binyamin Netanyahu was installed as Prime Minister after inconclusive elections in February 2010. The new Prime Minister did not express support for a two-state solution, as proposed by the US, and did not stop the construction of Israeli settlements in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank – this was the key obstruction to successful negotiations.

After considerable pressure from the US, and talk of the worst relations between Israel and the Americans for some time, Netanyahu reluctantly endorsed the “road map” proposals for a land-for-peace deal and, in November 2009, offered a partial and temporary freeze on construction. It did not include East Jerusalem, which Israel has declared to be a permanent part of its territory, and would last for 10 months.

It was not until May 2010 that indirect talks resumed. The Arab League agreed to support negotiations for four months, a period which would end at about the same time as Israel's settlement moratorium. On 2 September, less than one month before Israel's moratorium on construction was due to end, US pressure on a reluctant Palestinian negotiating team led to a brief resumption of direct talks.

The settlement moratorium expired on 26 September and construction resumed. All direct contacts were ended but, under pressure from the US, the President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority did not announce a definitive end to the negotiations, saying that he would consult his party, Fatah, and the Arab League.

In a sign of its more conciliatory approach to the Israeli Government, it was reported that the US had made new offers to Israel if the talks were kept alive by a 60-day extension of the partial construction freeze, including an important new arms deal; the acceptance a continuing Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley; and a US veto of any UN Security Council resolution critical of Israel while the talks continued. The Palestinians were reportedly offered US support for their position on the borders of a Palestinian state, in return for continuing the talks in the absence of a settlement freeze.

On 8 October, the Arab League released a statement giving US negotiators a month to resolve the impasse over settlements construction. Rather than any discussions of core

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issues, participants continued to concentrate on getting around the settlements obstacle. Meanwhile, no further talks took place.

On 10 October, the Israeli cabinet approved a draft law which would require non-Jewish immigrants to declare an oath of allegiance to Israel as a democratic and Jewish state. Labour Party government ministers voted against it. Some suggested it was a gift to the right of the coalition to prepare for the granting of concessions to the Palestinians. The following day, Netanyahu offered to re-instate the freeze on construction if the Palestinian side agreed to recognise the Jewish nature of Israel. The Palestinian side quickly rejected any acknowledgment of Israel as the Jewish homeland, worried that this meant accepting that the 4.5 million Palestinian refugees had no right of return to Israel. On 15 October, Israel announced the construction of 238 new housing units in East Jerusalem.

With negotiations at a standstill, the US announced on 9 November new aid of \$150 million to the Palestinian Authority. This was described as “part sweetener, part vital aid for Palestinian institution-building”.¹ Palestinians have considered a unilateral declaration of independence for Palestine and trying to have the Security Council recognise that. The US is likely to block such an attempt.

In November, the Israeli parliament passed a law requiring a two thirds majority within the Knesset or a positive vote in a national referendum before any withdrawal from East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights (part of Syria under international law). Analysts worried that this would make any agreement more difficult to achieve, worsening the *impasse* particularly over East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians claim as their capital.

Analysts worry that both sides have an interest in delaying the negotiations, suggesting that the Israelis want to delay progress while changing “facts on the ground”, that is settlement-building, allow them to claim the territory in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that they want (the two sides agree that the 1967 borders are not sacrosanct and that some swaps can take place).

Some commentators also suggest that the Palestinian Authority has little interest in making concessions to the Israelis, especially while construction continues, because that would weaken Mahmoud Abbas, who is in competition with the more radical Hamas for public support. The division between Hamas and Fatah is a major obstacle to any resolution. At the same time, Palestinians are aware of the demographic factor and may be playing a “long game”, looking forward to a situation where Palestinians outnumber Jews, which could result either in a Muslim takeover of Israel or an exclusion of Palestinians from the democratic process, leaving Israel in a situation not unlike that of apartheid South Africa.

The legitimacy of Israeli policies has been called into question by some recently, with the situation in Gaza causing particular concern to human rights organisations and Western governments. The assault on the Turkish-led flotilla delivering humanitarian supplies in May 2010, which resulted in nine deaths, was widely seen as a public relations disaster for Israel.

Israel’s supporters say that international terrorism and the influence of Iran in Gaza and Southern Lebanon, not to mention the Iranian nuclear programme, show that Israel is an important bastion against extremism in the region that deserves support from the West. They also compare Israeli policies to Western action in Afghanistan, and wonder why this is considered acceptable while Israeli actions are criticised.

¹ “New US aid for Palestinians as peace talks stall”, *BBC News online*, 10 November 2010