



Written by on October 8, 2009

Israel's Foreign Minister Pessimistic About Palestine Peace

Speaking in a radio interview reported by the BBC on October 8, Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that those who think Israel and the Palestinians can reach a peace deal "do not understand reality and are sowing illusions."

"We have to be realistic — we will not be able to reach agreement on core and emotional subjects like Jerusalem and the right of return [of Palestinian refugees]," said Lieberman. "I am going to say very clearly — there are conflicts that have not been completely solved and people have learned to live with it, like Cyprus."



Lieberman recommended that the two sides come up with a long-term interim arrangement that would ensure prosperity, security, and stability, while leaving the more difficult areas of disagreement "to a much later stage."

BBC reported having seen an Israeli Foreign Ministry document that was leaked to the Israeli press the same day as Lieberman's comments, and noted that they are consistent with policies outlined in that document, which states:

Creating expectations that a comprehensive solution to the conflict can be reached might lead again to disappointment and frustration that will sour our relations with the US and Europe, and cause a violent reaction among the Palestinians.

We can reach an interim agreements between the sides without solving the core issues such as Jerusalem, right of return and borders – that is the maximum which realistically could be attained and its very important to convince the US and Europe of this.

The Foreign Ministry commented that the reports about the policy proposal were "partial leaks from internal documents" and the leaks were "regrettable."

George Mitchell, the U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East, returned to the Palestine region this week and was to meet with Lieberman and Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak on October 8 and with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas the following day. President Obama met with Netanyahu and Abbas individually on September 22, then hosted a meeting with both of them in an attempt to lay the groundwork for renewed negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, but little progress has been made so far. Since then, Mitchell has also met with representatives of Netanyahu and Abbas in the United States.

The key areas of disagreement between Israel and the Palestinians center around the construction of settlements in West Bank territory that Israel seized during the 1967 war, as well as Jewish



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construction in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem. Palestinians intend to create their future independent state largely on the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Jerusalem was divided into two parts — the predominantly Jewish western portion, which became part of Israel, and the heavily Arab eastern portion, which came under Jordanian rule. Within East Jerusalem are some of the holiest sites of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (on the spot where Jesus was crucified and entombed), the Temple Mount (upon which Moslems built the al-Aqsa mosque), and the Western Wall.

In 1917, after British forces under his command captured Jerusalem from the Turks, Edmund Allenby pledged "that every sacred building, monument, holy spot, shrine, traditional site, endowment, pious bequest, or customary place of prayer of whatsoever form of the three religions will be maintained and protected according to the existing customs and beliefs of those to whose faith they are sacred."

After Israel's 1967 Six-day War with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, East Jerusalem came under Israeli rule and was annexed into the rest of the city. In November 1967, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 242, which called for Israel to withdraw "from territories occupied in the recent conflict." But in 1980, Israel's Parliament, the Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law, which declared that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel." In turn, the law was declared "null and void" by UN Security Council Resolution 478. The dispute has never been settled.

While the dispute over East Jerusalem is often regarded as a "Jewish-Moslem" conflict, often overlooked is that fact that the area's three-percent Christian minority comprise 92 percent of the Christian population of Jerusalem. Christians have inhabited Jerusalem and its environs almost without interruption since their church was founded there almost 2,000 years ago.

While the United States continues to exert pressure on Israelis and Palestinians to settle their differences, on October 8 senior Fatah official Jibril Rajub — an ally of Palestinian President and Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas — invited Fatah's Gaza-based rivals, Hamas, to join his group in bringing Israeli officials to trial "for crimes against the Palestinian people." "The Fatah leadership has decided to invite the Hamas movement as well as all other Palestinian factions to form a joint Palestinian committee," Rajub was quoted by AFP in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Rajub said the committee's objective is "to take action on the regional and international levels in order to relaunch the Goldstone report." The Chinese-based Xinhua news service noted that the 575-page Goldstone report prepared by South African Justice Richard Goldstone accused Israel of committing war crimes during its December 27 to January 18 war — but also said that Hamas' rocket attacks on southern Israel's communities violated laws of war. The Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was set to vote on the Goldstone's report on October 2, but it has postponed the voting to its next session in March 2010.

"We want our joint efforts ... to bring all the Israeli generals and leaders who had committed crimes against our people before the [International Criminal] Court in The Hague for war crimes," he said.

Fatah leader Abbas had come under fire from Hamas and other Palestinians for agreeing to delay a vote on the Goldstone report at the UN Human Rights Council following Israeli and U.S. pressure. Rajub explained that Fatah was checking the reasons that led to the delay in the vote on the report but urged Hamas "to end its provocation. I am not threatening anyone but the provocation does not serve Hamas or anyone."

Rajub's offer of joint cooperation with Hamas in moving the Goldstone report forward and bringing



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Israeli officials before the UNHRC represents a conciliatory tone that has not existed since the two Palestinian groups parted ways over control of Gaza. After the takeover in Gaza by Hamas in June 2007, PA Chairman Abbas dismissed the government and appointed Salam Fayad Prime Minister to form a new government. The new government claimed authority over all Palestinian territories, but since Hamas retains control of Gaza, Fatah/PA in reality exercises authority only over PA-controlled areas of the West Bank.

The PA is an offshoot of the radically militant Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Former PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat was elected as president of the PA in a landslide victory in 1996. Neither Israel nor the United States had confidence in Arafat, because of his past terrorist connections, and refused to negotiate with him.

While both Palestinian factions have questionable histories, Fatah — even if only for the sake of achieving a more moderate image — has expressed a willingness to negotiate with Israel. However, by indicating a willingness to work with Hamas in a joint project directed against Israel, one wonders how much the two rival Palestinian factions really differ from each other.

Photo of Avigdor Lieberman: AP Images



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