

Arab League expected to demand settlement freeze before peace talks continue

Israelis-Palestinian peace talks remain stalled over Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The Arab League is debating the matter today and tomorrow.



Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League (l.) Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian president (c.) and Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani (r.) talk before starting the Arab League follow-up committee to discuss the progress of Arab-Israeli negotiations, in Sirte, Libya, Oct. 8.

Asmaa Waguih/Reuters

By [Josh Mitnick](#), Correspondent / October 8, 2010

Tel Aviv

Despite efforts to resolve a dispute on West Bank settlements before the Arab League meeting today and Saturday in Libya, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process inaugurated last month by President Barack Obama appears stalled.

The 22-member association is expected by observers to back [Palestinian](#) Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's demand for a freeze on [Israeli](#) building in the West Bank before reengaging [Israel](#) in peace talks, though it won't close the door to negotiations entirely.

The Arab League "won't say 'We're done,' they'll say that, 'We support the Palestinian decision,'" says Palestinian Legislative Council member Hanan Ashrawi. "It's not walking away, it's saying the Israelis are destroying the substance of peace."

Palestinian spokesmen said they expect a final statement from the Arab League on Saturday.

Time-out

As mutual recriminations replace the optimism stoked by the Washington summit, there is no clear way forward for direct negotiations beyond the Libya summit. The Arab League may choose to endorse the indirect "proximity talks" that were conducted earlier this year, but few see it as a path toward progress in the negotiations and the Israelis have said they won't discuss the core issues of the conflict with the Palestinians unless it's face-to-face.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is mulling a package of American security gestures in return for an extension of a moratorium on new settlement building that expired Sept. 26, but it is unclear if he can sell the deal to his right-wing cabinet.

Many observers expect the time-out to continue at least until after the conclusion of the Nov. 2 midterm congressional elections. That will free up the Obama administration to revisit foreign policy priorities like the limping Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"Obama is not focused on this," says Mohammad Dajani, a political science professor at Bar Ilan University. "The option is for the Americans to pressure both to come back to the table to see how both can start again. They are the only one who has input within both."

Despite the upbeat assessment from US spokesmen last month that Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Abbas' meetings touched on the core of the conflict, critics say the talks were bogged down by protocol and were thin on substance.

Uncertainty ahead

The upcoming period of limbo, however, could lead to a further unraveling of the talks.

Hamas today vowed revenge and called on Abbas to unleash the resistance in the West Bank in retaliation for the Israeli military's killing of two militants who Israel claimed were responsible for the shooting deaths of four Israeli settlers on Aug. 31.

Meanwhile, Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath threatened that Abbas might make good on a vow to resign if the peace process stalls, a move that would plunge the Palestinians and the negotiations into a political chaos. "[Abbas] is not clinging to the post," he told the Ma'an News Agency.

On the Israeli side, some are saying that the time-out should be used to rethink the goal of reaching an agreement within a year.

"The paradigm of trying to reach a comprehensive permanent status agreement was likely to lead to a disaster," says Gidi Grinstein, the president of the Tel Aviv Reut Institute and a member of the Israeli team during the Camp David talks in 2000. "We should instead focus on building the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank into a state which will be recognized by Israel and the world."

Ms. Ashrwai says she prefers peace talks. But if there is no resolution to the settlement dispute, she says the Palestinians must consider alternative approaches to bilateral talks such as a non-militarized uprising against Israel or a campaign to obtain United Nations recognition of Palestinian statehood.

"We don't look at the negotiations as a strategic commitment," she says. "It's a political moment of truth."