

Palestinians Resuming Talks Under Pressure



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Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Special Envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell spoke at the State Department, in Washington, Friday.

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WASHINGTON — The [Palestinian](#) president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#), agreed to resume direct negotiations with [Israel](#) only after intense pressure from the United States and Europe, diplomats said Friday, as the Obama administration sought to restart the Middle East peace process but left many key questions unanswered.

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In formally announcing the new talks on Friday, Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) said that the negotiations would cover all the issues that had bedeviled peace negotiators since 1979 — the status of Jerusalem, the borders of a Palestinian state, the right of return for Palestinian refugees who were forced to leave their homes and security provisions for Israel. But she pointedly did not mention a basic plank of previous talks — using Israel's pre-1967 borders as a basis for territorial negotiations.

Nor did the Obama administration announcement make any mention of a set agenda, a plan for which issues would be tackled first, or any basic terms of negotiations. And neither Mrs. Clinton nor the administration's Middle East envoy, [George J. Mitchell](#), made any mention of whether Israel would agree to extend a moratorium on the construction of Jewish settlements, which Palestinian advocates had previously indicated was a crucial requirement to the success of any peace deal, and which Mr. Abbas himself had previously demanded as a condition to talks.

Middle East experts said that the lack of specificity in Friday's announcement, and the lack of any public signal by Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) of Israel that he would make any concessions, could prove perilous domestically for Mr. Abbas, who is already the politically weak leader of a divided people. As a result, analysts said, Mr. Abbas is coming to the table reluctantly. Mr. Abbas made no public statement endorsing the deal on Friday.

Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator, said: "Abbas wanted a clear reference to the 1967 lines; instead he was given 12 months to continue making his case in the hopes that the Americans will intervene decisively." Arab diplomats offered a similar analysis.

But American diplomats, their European counterparts and Mr. Obama made the case to Mr. Abbas to return to the negotiating table without conditions, administration officials and Arab diplomats said. American officials argued that they could do more to help the Palestinian cause through direct negotiations. By setting a one-year deadline for the negotiations, Mr. Obama, who met with Mr. Abbas at the White House in June, is implicitly giving the Palestinian leader the assurance that if the two sides cannot make progress soon, the United States will step in with its own proposal outlining what a peace deal should look like.

"We will be active and sustained partners, although we recognize that this is a bilateral negotiation," Mr. Mitchell told reporters at a State Department news conference. "And we have indicated to both parties that, as necessary and appropriate, we will offer bridging proposals."

For Mr. Obama, "the challenge is straightforward — difficult, but straightforward," said [Martin S. Indyk](#), a former American ambassador to Israel and Middle East peace negotiator. "The U.S. job is to determine the

minimum requirements of the two sides through the process, and then to offer bridging proposals.”

In fact, even while criticizing the vagueness of Friday’s statement, several Middle East experts acknowledged that at this point, there has been so little progress on a peace track that the United States, and Mr. Abbas, had no other option than to agree to the direct talks if they hope to inject some momentum into a seemingly intractable issue.

“There is every reason to be skeptical — the state of Palestinian politics, the shape of the Israeli government, the record of our diplomacy,” said Robert Malley, Middle East and North Africa program director for the International Crisis Group. “But there’s also a flip side: a Palestinian leader who needs an achievement; a U.S. president who appears deeply invested, and a hard-line Israeli prime minister who, if he were to sign an agreement, would be better placed than most to sell it.”

Mr. Mitchell offered a reminder of how the administration viewed resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as important to protecting American interests throughout the Middle East. A peace agreement, he said, was in the “national security interests” of the United States — repeating a phrase used by Mr. Obama, which has unsettled Israeli officials who worry about the steadfastness of American support for Israel.

Mr. Obama’s personal relationship with Mr. Netanyahu is on better footing these days, officials said, following a 79-minute one-on-one session in the Oval Office last month during which the two sought to relieve tension that had flared after a year and a half of deep policy differences.

Appearing before reporters after that session, Mr. Obama, who had spent the last year publicly pressing Mr. Netanyahu to curb the building of Jewish settlements in a policy that fanned resentment in Israel and among some conservative Jewish organizations in the United States, did not push the Israeli leader to extend the existing moratorium. Instead, he said that moving to direct talks would give Mr. Netanyahu the incentive and domestic political leeway to act on his own.

For Mr. Obama, the issue has domestic ramifications as well. He has always been viewed with a degree of wariness by some Jewish voters in the United

States, and undertaking a high-profile initiative heading into the midterm elections could hold both opportunity and peril for him and his party.

Both American and Arab diplomats said Friday that they were hoping that Mr. Netanyahu would announce an extension of the moratorium anyway, since allowing it to expire could end the talks. The chief Palestinian negotiator, [Saeb Erekat](#), said Friday that if Israel announced new settlement construction, the Palestinians would withdraw.

The diplomats said that if Mr. Netanyahu did extend the moratorium, he would go out of his way to deny any link between the concession and the negotiations, for fear of further infuriating his right wing or making a concession that he would then have to stick to during the peace talks.

Though the Israeli government did not budge on the settlement freeze, analysts said the Israelis offered the Palestinians other assurances, including a plan to develop a part of the Dead Sea coast as a resort area for Palestinians, provided Israeli investors were included in the project.

Mr. Abbas has told American visitors this project is important to the [Palestinian Authority](#), as a symbol and as an engine of economic growth. There is a joint Palestinian-Israeli hotel in the West Bank town of Jericho.

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