



ISRAEL MATTERS!

Publication of the Israel Affairs Committee of Temple Beth Shalom
1809 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, CT 06517-1401



Issue Number 81
June 2014

Israel Suspends Peace Talks After Palestinian Authority and Hamas Unity Bid

J Street Bid to Join Presidents Conference is Rejected

J Street failed in its recent bid to gain admission to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The vote of Presidents Conference members was 17 in favor, 22 against, and three abstentions, according to sources.

J Street needed a two-thirds majority of the entire Presidents Conference, or 34 of the 51 member groups, to join the Jewish community's foreign policy umbrella.

A number of leading Jewish groups had come out in favor of the dovish Middle East policy group's entry, including the Anti-Defamation League, arms of the Reform and Conservative movements, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the community's domestic policy umbrella. They argued that the Presidents Conference needed to include what they say is the Jewish community's diverse opinions on Israel. The Presidents Conference said in a statement issued after the vote that its current membership reflected the community's diversity.

J Street is a strong critic of the current Israeli government's policies and backs the Obama administration's approach toward Iran opposed by many pro-Israel groups. Opponents of the membership bid said J Street too often opposes other Jewish groups in the broader public arena and not just within the community.

J Street's president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, said the organization had "no plans at this time" to reapply. [JTA.org]



Israel has suspended U.S.- sponsored peace talks with the Palestinian Authority in response to its President, Mahmoud Abbas' unexpected unity pact with the rival Islamist group, Hamas. "The government of Israel will not hold negotiations with a Palestinian government that is backed by

Hamas, a terror organization that calls for Israel's destruction," an official statement said after a six-hour meeting of the security cabinet.

In Washington, a U.S. official said the United States would have to reconsider its assistance to Abbas's aid-dependent Palestinian Authority if the Western-backed leader and Hamas formed a government. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry spoke by telephone with Abbas and expressed his disappointment at the reconciliation announcement. Kerry stressed that any Palestinian government must abide by the principles of nonviolence, recognition of the state of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, said a State Department spokesperson.

Kerry, who has shuttled repeatedly to the Middle East to push peace efforts, said he was not giving up hope. "There's always a way forward, but the leaders have to make the compromises necessary to do that," he told reporters. "We will never give up our hope or our commitment for the possibilities of peace. We believe it is the only way to go. But right now, obviously, it's at a very difficult point and the leaders themselves have to make decisions. It's up to them."

U.N. Middle East envoy Robert Serry offered support for the Palestinian agreement after meeting Abbas, saying in a statement it was "the only way to reunite the West Bank and Gaza under one legitimate Palestinian Authority."

The deal envisions a unity government within five weeks and elections six months later. Palestinian divisions widened after Hamas, which won the last general ballot in 2006, seized the Gaza Strip from forces loyal to Abbas in 2007.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to leave open a window for future talks if Abbas reversed course or reconciliation with Hamas, seen by the West as a terrorist group, fell through. "I hope (Abbas) changes his mind," Netanyahu said. "I will be there in the future if we have a partner that is committed to peace. Right now we have a partner that has just joined another partner committed to our destruction. No-go."

(Continued)

(Continued from page 1)

Israeli chief negotiator Tzipi Livni said she hoped a way could be found to return to talks. "The door was not closed today," she said.

Wasel Abu Yousef, a top Palestine Liberation Organization official, rejected what he called "Israeli and American threats" and said a unity government would be made up of technocrats. Netanyahu dismissed any notion that Hamas would not be the real power behind the bureaucrats.

For Netanyahu, Abbas's approach to Hamas offered an opportunity to withdraw from the negotiations with a reduced risk of a rift with the United States, Israel's main ally, which also refuses to deal with the Islamist militant group. A suspension of the talks, while casting blame on the Palestinian reconciliation venture, is also likely to calm far-right allies in Netanyahu's governing coalition who oppose the creation of a Palestinian state and territorial compromise. For Abbas, whose official mandate as president expired five years ago, an alliance with Hamas leading to a new election potentially strengthening his political legitimacy could outweigh the prospect of any international backlash.

The next immediate steps stemming from the collapse of the talks seemed likely to be Israeli sanctions against the Palestinian Authority, which exercises limited self-rule in the West Bank. "The sanctions will be measured. We will not cause the Palestinian Authority to collapse," Livni said.

Palestinian leaders have already made clear they would seek to further their bid for nationhood via unilateral moves to join various international bodies and United Nations agencies.

The biggest threat for Israel could come from the International Criminal Court, with the Palestinians confident they could prosecute Israel there for alleged war crimes tied to the occupation of lands seized in 1967. "Israel will respond to unilateral Palestinian action with a series of measures," said the Israeli statement issued after the security cabinet meeting, without going into detail.

The talks had moved close to a breakdown when Israel refused to carry out the last of four waves of prisoner releases, demanding that Palestinians first commit to negotiating after the April deadline. Abbas responded by signing 15 international treaties, including the Geneva Conventions on the conduct of war and occupations. Israel condemned the move as a unilateral step towards statehood.

In response to Israel's actions, PLO Deputy Secretary Yasser Abed Rabo said it was too soon to penalize a government that had yet to be formed. [YAHOO!News]

Autism in the IDF: The Soldiers of Intelligence Unit 9900

Special intelligence Unit 9900 is dedicated to everything related to geography, including mapping, interpretation of aerial and satellite photographs, and space research. Within this unit there is a small unit of highly qualified soldiers, who have remarkable visual and analytic capabilities. They can detect even the smallest details, undetectable to most people. The uniqueness of the intelligence soldiers in Unit 9900 lies in the fact that they are all diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

"After many doubts and expectations the project came to light after almost a year of processing," said the unit's commander. "There were many problems along the way. The actual process took about a year and we started with the assumption that this could, should and would succeed," said Colonel J, admitting that the success of this project exceeded the optimistic expectations of its initiators. "The concerns were understandable, because I knew nothing about autism. The result was a task of trial and error. Everything we did was happening for the first time in the history of the IDF. We planned, worked and focused until we achieved success," he said.

The job of the soldiers in Unit 9900 is to take visual materials from satellite images and sensors and with the help of their officers and decoding tools, analyze the images and find specific things needed to allow those who are planning a mission to get the best data of the area.

People on the autism spectrum have strengths in music, mathematics, as well as the visual field. The autistic soldiers of Unit 9900 play a major role in intelligence gathering—a role not easily filled due to the difficulty of the unit's task. The IDF believes in the ability of the autistic soldiers and will continue to work for their advancement in military and civilian life.

Veterans of the IDF and intelligence organizations introduced an idea to utilize the special strengths of people on the autistic spectrum for the needs of the IDF and Israeli intelligence. The Ono Academic College, a private academic institution was contacted to participate in the project. Together, they set up the RR Program – ("Roim Rachok" – which in Hebrew means looking far beyond the horizons). The three-month courses take place at the school. When the students finish they join the army where the RR program is still involved in guidance and assistance of the soldiers and their commanders.

The RR plan is developing two more courses that utilize other strengths of persons on the autistic spectrum. One, for software quality assurance and the other, for information management. Both courses have been developed in cooperation with Intelligence Units of the IDF, which will eventually be the home units for the course graduates. [IDFblog.com]