

Remarks by Special Envoy Mitchell on Israeli-Palestinian Talks, September 2 2010

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ON-THE-RECORD BRIEFING - Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell

Dean Acheson Auditorium - Washington, D.C. - 1:00 p.m. EDT

MR. CROWLEY: Good afternoon and welcome to the Department of State in Washington, D.C. Today, we have successfully re-launched direct negotiations between the – among the United States, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority in pursuit of a final agreement, a final settlement and a just peace, two states living side by side. George Mitchell will give a statement and answer a few of your questions, but we still have meetings going on with the parties and will have – he'll have to return upstairs rather rapidly to rejoin the negotiations. But here's Senator Mitchell.

MR. MITCHELL: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. The parties have just concluded the first round of trilateral talks. The meeting lasted about an hour and a half. It began with a plenary session involving the full U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian delegations on the eighth floor of the State Department and then broke to a smaller meeting in the Secretary of State's personal office involving Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Abbas, Secretary Clinton, and myself. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas then went into a separate meeting for a direct discussion. That meeting is still going on right now.

In the trilateral meeting, there was a long and productive discussion on a range of issues. President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed their intent to approach these negotiations in good faith and with a seriousness of purpose. They also agreed that for these negotiations to succeed, they must be kept private and treated with the utmost sensitivity. So what I and they are able to disclose to you today and in the future will be limited, but I will now describe some of the key items that were addressed in the trilateral meeting.

Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas condemned all forms of violence that target innocent civilians and pledged to work together to maintain security. They reiterated their common goal of two states for two peoples and to a solution to the conflict that resolves all issues, ends all claims, and establishes a viable state of Palestine alongside a secure state of Israel. President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed that these negotiations can be completed within one year and that the aim of the negotiations is to resolve all core issues.

The parties agreed that a logical next step would be to begin working on achieving a framework agreement for permanent status. The purpose of a framework agreement will be to establish the fundamental compromises necessary to enable them to flesh out and complete a comprehensive treaty that will end the conflict and establish a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The parties agreed that in their actions and statements they will work to create an atmosphere of trust that will be conducive to reaching a final agreement.

They agreed to meet again on September 14 and 15 in the region and roughly two weeks thereafter – every two weeks thereafter. Of course, continued interactions at other levels between the parties and also yet others involving the United States will take place between those meetings. In fact, a preparatory trilateral meeting to plan for that second meeting in the region has already begun at another location in this building and will continue here and in the region between now and September 14th, as is necessary.

As both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have said, the United States pledges its full support to the parties in these talks. We will be an active and sustained partner throughout. We will put our full weight behind these negotiations and will stand by the parties as they make the difficult decisions necessary to secure a better future for their citizens.

As we saw this week, there are those who will use violence to try to derail these talks. There are going to be difficult days and many obstacles along the way. We recognize that this is not an easy task. But as the President told the leaders, we expect to continue until our job is complete and successful.

And with that, I'll be pleased to take some of your questions.

QUESTION: Senator, I'm Jeff Napshin with CCTV News out of Asia. I would like to know what was their personal relationship. At times when you saw them next to each other, it seemed like they were kind of distant. Did they seem to interact? Did they seem to develop any kind of bond or relationship together?

MR. MITCHELL: The relationship was cordial. As you know, these men have known each other for a long time. This is not the first meeting between them. They are not in any way strangers politically or personally. And I felt that it was a very constructive and positive mood, both in terms of their personal interaction and in terms of the nature of the discussion that occurred.

QUESTION: Thank you. Nadia Bilbassy with MBC Television. Senator, President Obama yesterday talked about some progress when asked, and I appreciate the fact that you don't want to divulge too many details, but today, Prime Minister Netanyahu talk about the Jewishness of the state, which is considered nonstarter issue for the Palestinian. Just generally, do you think that these issues can be – can you bridge the gap considering there is obviously so many difficulties? But since re-launching the negotiation today, do you think this is – could be an issue that could be an explosive for the whole issue – for the peace process?

MR. MITCHELL: First, I believe very strongly, deeply, and personally that this conflict can be resolved and that these negotiations can produce a final agreement that enables the establishment of a Palestinian state and peace and security for both peoples.

Secondly, it is, of course, self-evident that the reason for a negotiation is that there are differences. The differences are many, they are deep, they are serious, and it will take serious, good-faith negotiations, sincerity on both sides, a willingness to make difficult concessions on both sides if that agreement is to be reached.

But I don't think that any human problem can be solved if one begins by viewing the problems as insurmountable, as suggesting that the mountains are too high and the rivers are too wide, so let's not undertake the journey. There has to be a sincerity and a seriousness of purpose combined with a realistic appraisal and understanding of the difficulties, but a determination to overcome them.

I believe that exists. I believe these two leaders, President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu, are committed to doing what it takes to achieve the right result.

MR. CROWLEY: Major.

QUESTION: Hello, Senator Mitchell. Major Garrett, Fox News. You remember well from your life on Capitol Hill the phrase, whenever a tough negotiation was going on, "Nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to." Will that be the operative approach, you believe, for this process? And as a result, will you be reluctant to talk about anything that's agreed upon until everything is agreed upon? That's one process question.

The second one is you discussed the framework; is the deadline for the framework one year? Or is the framework something we're likely to see much earlier and the one year still governs the entire solution to all remaining issues?

MR. MITCHELL: In terms of process, that and other questions will be resolved by the parties. The – you cannot separate process from substance in these discussions. There is an interaction that affects both and we've made it clear that these issues are to be determined by the parties. We have had extensive discussions with them on that and many other issues, and those will continue.

Our goal is to resolve all of the frame – all of the core issues within one year. And the parties themselves have suggested and agreed that the logical way to proceed, to tackle them is to try to reach a framework agreement first. And as I said – and I think this ought to be made clear because there has been a good bit of misunderstanding or not a full meeting of minds publicly regarding a framework agreement – a framework agreement is not an interim agreement. It's more detailed than a declaration of principles, but is less than a full-fledged treaty. Its purpose is to establish the fundamental compromises necessary to enable the parties to then flesh out and complete a comprehensive agreement that will end the conflict and establish a lasting peace.

MR. CROWLEY: Charlie.

QUESTION: Thank you. Charlie Wolfson with CBS News. You mentioned that a number of issues were talked about today, but can you mention specifically that settlements was among them? And do you plan to be in the region for the talks that will take place on the 14th and 15th and at the table as well? Though you said the U.S. would be a part of the talks, take an active role, do you plan to be there for those talks, and can you tell us where they're going to be?

MR. MITCHELL: As I said at the outset, what I will be able to disclose to you, that the parties will disclose will be limited. And so you've given me the first opportunity to invoke that principle with respect to the first part of your question, for which I thank you. (Laughter.)

Secondly, both Secretary Clinton and I will be at the meeting in the region on September 14th and 15th, and one of the subjects now being discussed in the trilateral preparatory meeting that's ongoing in another room in this building, to which I must go in a few moments, is that subject. So a determination has not yet been made. That will be made, I believe, obviously in the near future and well in advance of the meeting.

MR. CROWLEY: Kirit, and then we'll go there and then come back.

QUESTION: Kirit Radia with ABC News. I would like to take another crack at it after Charlie. I understand and appreciate that you can't get into specifics about what was talked today, but I'm curious whether you could say – could speak about the scope of today's talks, whether they did involve any substantive discussions on any of the core issues or whether this was strictly to lay out the plan for the coming year. Thanks.

MR. MITCHELL: As I mentioned in my response to Major's questions, I don't think one can neatly characterize process and substance as though they're two separate things in these matters. They do interact and relate. You can't discuss a process issue in any meaningful way without some relations to the substance that's being discussed.

And so as I appreciate you said you're taking another crack at Charlie's question, and that gives me the chance to say for the second time that I'm not going to be able to get into the substance. But yes, there were discussions that touched on subject – on substance, although I don't want to suggest to you that the meeting was such that there was a detailed and extended discussion or debate on a specific substantive issue.

MR. CROWLEY: We'll move over here and then we'll wrap up.

QUESTION: Ron Kampeas from JTA. It appears from this morning that obviously there weren't any substantive concessions. There were – there have been rhetorical concessions. President Abbas talked about security, which is something that Netanyahu has wanted him to talk about, and Netanyahu yesterday at the dinner talked about recognizing the Palestinian claim that they're – that the Palestinians live there.

Is that something that you've noticed? Is that something that the Americans have been encouraging? Have you played a role in asking the leaders to get out those statements?

MR. MITCHELL: We have encouraged the parties to be positive in their outlook, in their words, and in their actions. Any realistic appraisal of the situation, including the recent history – by which I mean the last two decades – makes clear that there are very serious differences between the parties, that there are many difficulties which lay ahead both in terms of the substance of the issues, the impact on their domestic politics, the needs and interests of their societies. We have not, of course, attempted to prescribe what they can or should say about any issue. These are independent and extremely able leaders representing the interests of their societies.

What we have sought to convey in innumerable conversations that I have had personally with both leaders over many, many months is President Obama's conviction that despite all of the difficulties – near term, long term, political, substantive, personal, and otherwise – the paramount goal of making the lives of their citizens more safe, more secure, more prosperous, more full can best be achieved by a meaningful and lasting peace between the parties and in the region; that the alternative to that poses difficulties and dangers far greater to the individuals, to the leaders, to their societies, than those risks which they run in an effort to reach an agreement that brings about their lasting peace; that any realistic evaluation of the self-interest of the people of Israel and the Palestinian people must, in our judgment, conclude that they are far better off living side by side in two states in peace and security than in a continuation of the current situation.

MR. CROWLEY: Two last questions here (inaudible).

QUESTION: Yeah. Mohamed Ouasi of France 24 Washington. Senator, Prime Minister Netanyahu mentioned Iran this morning. Wouldn't that be making things more difficult for you to close the gap between the two parties?

MR. MITCHELL: In every aspect of human life, including your personal life and mine, the world is much different today than it was 10 years ago and vastly different than it was 20 years ago. And that is certainly true of the Middle East. It is an area of rapid change, of many conflicting currents that historians and analysts have described far better than I could in any exchange we have here.

But obviously, the actions and policies of the current Government of Iran have an effect in the region and in the wider world, and they influence what is occurring here. And in my judgment, they add another argument to those which I've already made and which many others have made as to why this conflict should be resolved. It is in the interests of the people involved, and in this respect, the word "comprehensive peace" is directly relevant. Please recall that when President Obama announced my appointment two days after taking office, he specifically identified comprehensive peace as the objective of U.S. policy in the region: Israel and the Palestinians, Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, Israel at peace with all of its neighbors in normal relations.

And obviously, one of the factors that makes that desirable, in my judgment necessary, for all of these parties is, in part, the actions and policies that have been and are being taken by the Government of Iran. Yes, so it is a factor. Even if it didn't exist, there would be a compelling reason for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but that's an additional factor.

MR. CROWLEY: Last question.

QUESTION: Senator, Laurie Ure, CNN. Peace negotiations between the parties have taken place, obviously, several times in the past. What is Secretary Clinton doing differently than her predecessors, including President Clinton?

MR. MITCHELL: Although my comment on that is not constrained by the agreement which I earlier described - (laughter) - there are other constraining factors - (laughter) - which come into play that somehow come right into my head as you completed the question. (Laughter.) Since I was not a part of the immediately preceding administration, although I did serve at the request of President Clinton and the then prime minister of Israel and the president of the Palestinian Authority as chairman of an international commission in 2000 and 2001 following the eruption of the second intifada, I'll tell you my own belief.

First, we can't be deterred by the fact that previous efforts didn't succeed. The cause of peace is so important, so just, indeed - I'm not trying to use hyperbole - so noble, that it must continue notwithstanding prior efforts at failure. Indeed, an argument can be made to the reverse that the prior failures create an even more compelling imperative to proceed now.

Secondly, with respect to past efforts, as I said previously, not today but at an earlier briefing, we think that the best approach is to carefully review them, as we have done, and to try to draw the best lessons out of each one, not be bound by any particular practice or process or procedure, and always trying to keep in mind the dynamic changes in the region that have occurred in what is, in historical terms, a very short period of time.

So we don't - I've been asked often, "Is this a continuation of Annapolis? Is it a continuation of some other process?" Our view is this is an effort that will try to learn from the lessons of the past, take the best and bring them forward, but not be bound by any label or category or previous process. Everything should be judged on the basis of what it will do to advance - help us advance to achieve the ultimate goal of peace in the region.

Now, one obvious difference is that President Obama is the only president in recent times, to my knowledge, to have established this as a high priority immediately upon taking office and to have acted immediately at that time. There have been many very well-written books on the history of the past 20 years. I think I've read most of them. And it's very clear that at least in a couple of instances, time ran out. Indeed, the authors of several of these books used exactly those words to describe the problem: They ran out of time at the end.

Well, this President, I believe, will succeed. But as he said yesterday, neither success nor failure is predetermined or guaranteed, but it isn't going to be because time ran out at the end. So that's a vast difference.

I have a high opinion of the men and women who served in these tasks in the past. I know most of them personally, and I don't think you can attribute inability to achieve a result to their individual or collective failures. They are the product of the difficulty and what many regard as the intractability of the problems and issues. But we believe that there are dynamic changes that occur. There are the more obvious difficulties that lie ahead for both sides if they don't reach agreement that may be even more obvious than they were five or eight or 12 years ago.

You have to remember that these leaders must weigh two things. They must weigh the difficulties they face in getting agreement and they must weigh the difficulties they will face if they don't get an agreement. And we believe it's a very powerful argument that if you subject these to careful, reasoned, and rational analysis, to conclude that the latter difficulties, if they don't get an agreement, will be much greater and have a much more profound impact on their societies than those they face in trying to get an agreement.

Thank you all very much. Been a pleasure to see you and I look forward to reporting to you on a regular basis.