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Israel Takes Steps for Peace; Palestinians, Arabs Demur

The Obama administration has been making an enormous effort to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Israel has assisted this effort by taking significant steps toward the Palestinians. Unfortunately, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Arab states have failed to reciprocate. The PA and Arab world need to fulfill their responsibilities in order to promote peace. As President Obama recently said, he expects to see "not just movement from the Israelis, but also from the Palestinians around issues of incitement and security, from Arab states that show their willingness to engage Israel."

Israel has taken significant steps to demonstrate that it is committed to resuming serious negotiations with the Palestinians and Arab states.

- For the first time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in June explicitly accepted a two-state solution to the conflict: a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside the Jewish state of Israel.

- Israel has taken a series of steps to improve the day-to-day conditions and boost the economy in the West Bank by substantially reducing the number of checkpoints and roadblocks and implementing policies to spur trade and investment.

- Amid the worst global recession in decades, the IMF is forecasting a seven percent growth rate in the West Bank for 2009.

Israeli soldiers help Palestinian children proceed through a checkpoint on the way to Jerusalem.

- In a landmark speech at Bar-Ilan University, Netanyahu said Israel has "no intention of building new settlements or of expropriating additional land for existing settlements." The United States and Israel have been holding high-level and intensive discussions in an attempt to forge a common way forward on the issue of settlements.

- Israel has not issued any tenders for government construction in the West Bank since November 2008 when former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was still in power, according to Hagit Ofran of Peace Now's Settlement Watch program.

- Netanyahu has called for negotiations with the Palestinians without preconditions. "Whoever sets pre-conditions for opening negotiations delays the peace process. We wholeheartedly support President Obama's regional initiative," he said on Aug. 2.

- Netanyahu also has called for the immediate resumption of peace negotiations with the Arab states without pre-conditions and said he is ready to travel "to Damascus, to Riyadh, to Beirut, to any place," to meet with Arab leaders to discuss ways to end the conflict.

The Palestinians are damaging peace efforts by setting increasingly tougher preconditions for resuming negotiations with Israel.

- Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has refused to hold negotiations with Israel, insisting that Israel meet a number of conditions before such talks could ensue.

- Hardening this stance, Abbas' Fatah party passed resolutions at its recent Sixth General Conference accusing Israel of murdering Yasir Arafat and saying talks should not commence until Israel meets a litany of conditions.

- This stands in sharp contrast to Netanyahu's call for the immediate resumption of negotiations without preconditions, as the Palestinians agreed to do with the previous government of Ehud Olmert.

- Abbas and his Fatah party also refused to fully renounce violence, a key requirement for peace. The Fatah platform passed at the conference states, "We believe that all forms of resistance are the legitimate right of all occupied nations…"

- The PA also continues to allow efforts to delegitimize Israel. The PA's chief Islamic judge, Sheikh Tayseer Rajab Tamimi, said on Aug. 26 that there is no evidence to back up claims that Jews have ever lived in Jerusalem or that the Temple ever existed. "Jerusalem is an Arab and Islamic city and it always has been so," he said.

- Chaos and internal fighting among Palestinian factions also remains a major impediment to negotiations with Israel. The PA has no control over Gaza, where Hamas continues to tighten its control and rebuild its terrorist infrastructure. Hamas continues to reject the Quartet conditions of recognizing Israel, accepting previous agreements with Israel and renouncing violence.

Most Arab states have rebuffed the administration's call to move toward normalizing relations with Israel.

- Most Arab states have said they are prepared to live in peace with Israel – but only after Israel withdraws fully from the West Bank and meets other conditions. They have thus far refused to take concrete normalization actions with Israel unless and until Israel has met all of their demands.

- The United States is urging the Arab states to implement a set of confidence-building measures— such as granting overflight rights to Israeli civilian aircraft—to prepare the environment for peace talks. "President Obama has asked all involved to support our effort," U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell said on July 27. "For the Arab states, that means meaningful steps toward normalization of relations with Israel."

- So far, Arab states have rejected such an approach. "Temporary security, confidence-building measures will also not bring peace," said Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal on July 31 during a news conference with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

- Israel's Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz told the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* that the Saudis have rejected the idea of Israeli overflights because the Saudis believe that "the Israelis will defile the Islamic holy places."

- The Emir of Kuwait, Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, said that steps would not be taken until Israel withdraws from all the territories it captured in 1967, thus setting preconditions for further peace negotiations.

- The Arab League ruled out the possibility of its member states beginning to normalize ties with Israel. While standing beside Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, Arab League chief Amr Moussa recently said, "I don't believe that any Arab government can offer Israel the gift [of normalization] on a silver platter. This issue must be closed."