

MEMMO

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Direct Talks—Not Preconditions—Can Lead to Peace

During the past 18 months, Israel has offered numerous goodwill gestures to woo Palestinians back to direct peace talks: calling for a Palestinian state, reducing barriers to movement in the West Bank, and implementing a West Bank housing construction moratorium. Unfortunately, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas refused to resume direct talks until it became clear that this would lead to no further Israeli concessions. He is now threatening to quit the nascent talks when the moratorium expires at the end of September and said he will make no concessions in the talks. Such behavior threatens the prospects for peace, which can only be achieved through serious, direct talks between two sides willing to make the necessary compromises—steps Israel has repeatedly shown it is prepared to undertake.

The Palestinians refused to talk during the past nine months as Israel implemented an unprecedented housing freeze in the West Bank.

- Since Nov. 2009, Israel has implemented an unprecedented construction moratorium on new homes in the West Bank as a goodwill gesture. Construction of Israeli homes in the West Bank came to a virtual standstill.
- Unfortunately, the Palestinians refused to resume direct talks, continuing to place preconditions for their return to the negotiating table.
- Now that he has finally agreed to return to talks, Abbas is threatening to quit the negotiations if Israel does not continue the self-imposed moratorium and expand it to include east Jerusalem.
- These continuing demands come despite the fact that Israel and the Palestinians agreed as far back as 1993 that settlements are a final-status issue to be resolved in negotiations, not as a precondition to starting them.
- Moreover, the Palestinians' demand regarding Jerusalem is unrealistic and inappropriate. Jerusalem is Israel's capital, not a settlement.
- Israel has been prepared to sit down for serious talks without preconditions for the past 18 months to address the issue of settlements, Jerusalem and all the other difficult issues that will only be solved during direct negotiations between the two parties.



PA President Mahmoud Abbas' preconditions for continuing the talks with Israel are not conducive to successful negotiations.

Israel has proven time and again that it will not let the issue of settlements block its efforts to pursue peace.

- Israeli governments from across the political spectrum have dismantled settlements and withdrawn from territories as part of signed peace agreements or Israeli initiatives to spur peace efforts.
- In 1979, Israel, led by Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin, withdrew from the entire Sinai Peninsula and removed more than 7,000 Jewish residents living there in exchange for a peace treaty with Egypt. Israel also relinquished productive oil fields and abandoned strategic air force bases.
- With the Oslo agreement in 1993, Israel, under the Labor-led government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, granted the Palestinians unprecedented authority over Gaza and parts of the West Bank and formally commenced negotiations designed to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.
- In 1994, as part of the peace treaty with Jordan, Israel ceded land in the Arava Valley—the eastern part of the Negev—to Jordan.
- In 1997, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed an accord that gave the PA control over most of the city of Hebron, historically a key Jewish religious center.
- In 1998, Netanyahu signed the Wye River Memorandum, under which Israel gave the PA control of large portions of the West Bank.

The main obstacles to progress have been the refusal of the Palestinians, and Arab states, to match Israel's compromises with their own.

- In 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak accepted President Clinton's proposal to cede all of Gaza and 96 percent of the West Bank, recognize an independent Palestinian state and cede parts of eastern Jerusalem to serve as the Palestinian capital. The offer was rejected by PLO leader Yasir Arafat.
- In 2005, with U.S. support, Israel unilaterally withdrew all its civilians and soldiers from Gaza and civilians from an even larger geographic area in the northern West Bank, evacuating 8,500 Jewish residents from these areas.
- Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza provided Palestinians with an historic opportunity to prove that they are willing to govern responsibly and live in peace with Israel. Regrettably, they chose to turn Gaza into a launching pad for unprovoked rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli civilians.
- Despite the takeover of Gaza by Hamas after Israel's withdrawal, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert continued to seek a peace deal with the Palestinians. Near the end of his premiership, Olmert offered to withdraw from 97 percent of the West Bank and most of the settlements. Palestinian Abbas confirmed to the *Washington Post* that he rejected the offer, saying "the gaps were wide" and giving no indication that he sought a compromise solution.
- Abbas once again is saying that he will not compromise. Rejecting Netanyahu's call for "historic compromises," Abbas and other top PA officials said they will not compromise on key issues.
- They have even stated their refusal to recognize Israel as a Jewish state—so as not to preclude the return of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to Israel—a move that would ultimately destroy the viability of the State of Israel as we know it.