



New Israeli demand complicates US peace mission

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JERUSALEM - Washington's Middle East envoy faced a new obstacle Thursday as he launched his latest attempt to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks: Israel wants to keep troops on the West Bank's border with Jordan even if a deal is reached.

Palestinians rejected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's demand, made just before U.S. envoy George Mitchell arrived in Israel on Wednesday. Mitchell has been laboring without success for a year to get both sides back to the negotiating table, and Netanyahu's new demand made his mission even more formidable.

Netanyahu said Israel must maintain a presence "on the eastern side of a prospective Palestinian state" to keep militants from using the territory to launch rockets at Israel's heartland.

The eastern side of such a state would be the part of the Jordan Valley that lies in the West Bank.

Saeb Erekat, a confidant of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, called the demand "absolutely unacceptable."

"The borders of the state of Palestine will be Jordan," Erekat told Israel Radio. "The Jordan Valley is ours, is Palestine. Why do they insist on being on our territory?"

The Palestinians have refused to sit down with Israel until it stops all construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, saying it is eating up lands they claim for their future state. Israel, which captured both areas in 1967, has slowed settlement construction in the West Bank, but has applied no restrictions in east Jerusalem, which Netanyahu hopes to retain.

Israel also says negotiations should begin immediately with no conditions, but the Palestinians accuse Israel of heaping plenty of conditions of its own, including the demilitarization of a future Palestinian state, the retention of east Jerusalem and now, a military presence along Jordan's border.

To stake out these positions "and then tell us, come negotiate: Negotiate on what, Mr. Netanyahu? You left nothing to negotiate," Erekat fumed.

The hard-line Israeli leader heads a coalition largely opposed to the sweeping territorial concessions that would be necessary to clinch a peace deal with the Palestinians. He himself had long refused to endorse the concept of Palestinian statehood, doing so only in June under intense U.S. pressure.

Mitchell is to meet with Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials on Thursday, and with Palestinian officials in the West Bank on Friday.

Erekat, meanwhile, denied that Abbas has floated the idea of having the U.S. try to close a deal on the final borders of a Palestinian state on their behalf.

Abbas aides, speaking on condition of anonymity, have told The Associated Press that the Palestinian president made such a proposal in recent meetings with Egyptian officials, as a way of getting around the current deadlock.

On Thursday, Erekat said Abbas has asked the U.S. to state clear terms for future talks, but not to negotiate on the Palestinians' behalf.

"We never asked the U.S. to close the deal for us," he said.

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