

29 US Democrats: Biggest Peace Obstacle is Abbas Stubbornness

by Hillel Fendel

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(Israelnationalnews.com) A large United States Congressional delegation of Democrats blamed the Palestinian Authority for the stalemated diplomatic process at a news conference Thursday in Jerusalem .

"I think the largest thing impeding the negotiations at this point," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) told the journalists Thursday, "is simply the unwillingness of [PA Chairman Mahmoud] Abbas to sit down [with the Israelis]."

Abbas has refused since the Netanyahu government took office over four months ago to meet with Israeli negotiators until Israel ceases all construction in Judea and Samaria.

But Hoyer said the issue of settlements, which he called "marginal," should be addressed via direct negotiations. "The issue of natural growth in the settlements has become a large part of the story," he said, "when really it is a marginal aspect of the peace process."

The congressional delegation has met with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and other Israeli officials, and with PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. A meeting was scheduled with Abbas, but was called off because of a conflict with the Fatah conference held in Bethlehem.

The goal of the week-long Congressional trip is to provide the participants with first-hand knowledge on the value of the U.S.-Israel relationship, the prospects for peace in the Middle East, Israel's security situation, and the status of important economic and political trends in Israel. The trip is sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation, a supporting organization of AIPAC, America's only pro-Israel lobby.

A delegation of U.S. Congress members of the Republican party who visited Israel last week blamed the PA for the stalled talks as well. The group also criticized the Obama administration's policy on Israel as "misguided," and said it puts too much emphasis on the issue of settlements while ignoring the larger threat of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who met with the Democratic delegation earlier this week, said, "The situation wherein there is a split between 'Hamastan' in Gaza and 'Fatahland' in [Judea and Samaria], together with the platform being formulated by Fatah, buries any possibility of reaching a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians in the coming years."

"Israel's policy, in light of this, must be based on reality and not on illusions. We have to sustain a dialogue with the Palestinians and improve their security and economic situation, but that's the most that can be attained in the near future," said the Israeli foreign minister.