

MESS Report / Key U.S. figure in Israel-PA talks, Lt. General Dayton, steps down

Move could indicate Obama administration's intent to lessen its involvement in peace process; Palestinians pressure U.S.: Discuss Israeli withdrawals, not gestures.

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The United States government's special security coordinator in the Middle East, Lt. General Keith Dayton, who has played a key role in peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, will step down from the post in the fall, Haaretz has learned.

Though initially scheduled to serve in his capacity for one year, Dayton has remained in the region for five years, at the behest of the U.S. government.

He is widely credited with equipping and training the security forces that have enabled Ramallah to solidify its rule in the West Bank. The Palestinians are concerned that Dayton's departure signals the Obama administration's intent to lessen its involvement in the peace process.

Washington plans to replace Dayton with another three-star general of the same rank.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority is pressuring the U.S. to abandon talks on possible confidence-building steps by Israel and to begin discussions on extensive Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, Palestinian sources told Haaretz on Tuesday.

The Palestinian Authority is adamantly refusing to enter negotiations based on piecemeal Israeli gestures. It is instead urging Washington to pressure Israel to withdraw from wide swaths of territory and transfer overall security responsibility for all West Bank towns to the Palestinian armed forces.

PA officials told U.S. special envoy George Mitchell, who is mediating proximity peace talks between the two sides, that they have no interest in conducting prolonged negotiations with Jerusalem over Israeli gestures that resemble those offered as part of the "Jenin 2" project.

As part of that initiative, which was hatched over two years ago, Israel agreed to scale back its security operations in the Jenin area and grant the Palestinian Authority security forces extensive freedom of operation. The plan was overseen and aided by Lt. General Dayton.

The Palestinians said recently that they will not accept a limited Israeli offer of PA security responsibility over Nablus, Tul Karm and Qalqilyah, similar to the defense arrangement currently in place in Jenin. Rather, the PA will insist that it be given complete authority over these areas and that Israel limit its activities there to an absolute minimum.

In addition, the Palestinians are demanding that their security forces be permitted to operate in Area C of the West Bank - which is now entirely under Israeli military and civilian administration. Israel opposes this request, while the United States has yet to make known its position on the matter.

The Jenin project involved the deployment of Palestinian units which had been armed and trained by Dayton's staff in Jordan. After initial birth pangs, the initiative has been hailed as a success by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United States. Yet the three parties have since been unable to reach an agreement on the transfer of additional West Bank territories to PA security control.

"We have not discussed confidence building measures and we have no intention of doing so," a senior Palestinian official told Haaretz. "This will not turn into a substitute for negotiations on a permanent status agreement. If [Israel] wants to carry out withdrawals without endless discussions, then it is welcome to do so."

PA officials are wary that a move by Israel to partially relinquish security control over a town such as Nablus will be interpreted as an extraordinary gesture from Jerusalem, even though in practice the Israel Defense Forces would continue to operate freely within the town limits.

Senior Palestinian officials complain that the IDF continues to carry out arrests deep within West Bank towns, including Jenin. Such Israeli operations cast the PA in a difficult position in the eyes of the Palestinians. As a result, Ramallah is seeking to restore the security equilibrium in the West Bank to what it was prior to the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000.

Israeli defense officials are divided as to the extent to which the Palestinians are prepared to take on greater security responsibility. Despite the improved performance of the PA security arms, some high-ranking members of the IDF and the Shin Bet security service believe it is still too soon to discuss a wide-ranging withdrawal. Yet the current calm in the West Bank is likely to compel Washington to press Israel to pull back its forces to their positions before September 2000 - as Jerusalem had agreed to do according to the road map.