

## Egypt FM: Israel-Palestinian proximity talks could last a decade

**White House: Transforming proximity talks to direct peace talks will be major focus of upcoming Obama-Netanyahu meet.**

By Natasha Mozgovaya and News Agencies

Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said Saturday there was no progress in proximity talks between Israel and the Palestinians, London-based Arabic-language daily Asharq al-Awsat reported Saturday.

Aboul Gheit criticized United States special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell and said that his negotiation tactics could take at least a decade before the realization of a peace agreement in the region.

Earlier, a senior White House official said Israeli and Palestinian officials have narrowed their differences in U.S.-sponsored indirect talks, dismissing suggestions that little progress had been made so far.

The talks, mediated by Mitchell, began in May and aim to bring the two sides to the same table to discuss obstacles to the creation of a state for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank alongside Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he wants to move to direct talks without delay, but Palestinian leaders say the slow-moving U.S.-mediated talks have not yet made enough progress to justify the start of face-to-face negotiations.

U.S. officials previewing a Netanyahu visit to the White House next week offered a more optimistic assessment of the talks in a briefing call with reporters on Friday.

"These talks have been really quite substantive. We have engaged with both sides on all the core issues that are relevant to this conflict," said Daniel Shapiro, a Middle East adviser to President Barack Obama.

"The gaps have narrowed," he said.

Another Obama adviser, Ben Rhodes, said the president was encouraged by the progress that had been made in the talks, although neither official offered any specifics on how the two sides were arrowing their differences.

Shapiro said the talks were moving "in a positive direction," but it was too early to give a timetable for moving to direct talks.

Pushing forward the Middle East peace process is central to the Obama administration's policy of repairing U.S. relations with the Muslim world, strained by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the battle against Muslim militants.

Getting Israel and the Palestinians to agree to indirect talks marks Obama's most tangible Middle East achievement since he took office last year, but expectations remain low for any kind of breakthrough.

The White House officials said Obama and Netanyahu would discuss additional steps that Israel could take to address the "unsustainable" situation in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, as long as they did not undermine the Jewish state's security.

Netanyahu last month eased a land blockade on the Gaza Strip that has been criticized as collective punishment of the territory's 1.5 million Palestinians. Under the new rules, all goods, except weapons and material that could be used to make them, are allowed in.

Obama's meeting with Netanyahu will be his fifth since taking office in January 2009. He met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House on June 9 and Saudi King Abdullah earlier this week.

Netanyahu was originally due to have met Obama last month but postponed his visit after a deadly Israeli raid on a Gaza aid flotilla on May 31 sparked an international uproar.

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