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On eve of Obama-Netanyahu meet, Abbas offers Jerusalem compromise

Al Hayat reports Abbas proposed creation of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders, with a possible land swap of 2.3 percent of West Bank.

By Avi Issacharoff and Natasha Mozgovaya

The London-based Arabic newspaper, Al Hayat, reported this weekend that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas had proposed the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with a possible land swap of 2.3 percent of the West Bank to ensure a fair solution for Israeli settlement blocs. Al Hayat reported that the Palestinians agreed to leave settlement blocs including Gush Etzion, Pisgat Ze'ev and Modi'in Ilit, along with a swath of land overlooking Ben-Gurion International Airport, in Israeli hands.

In exchange, the PA would receive land of comparable size and quality in the southern West Bank as well as a corridor between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Abbas also reportedly proposed easing Palestinian demands over East Jerusalem to permit the Jewish Quarter of the Old City as well as the Western Wall to remain under Israeli sovereignty. The remainder of the Old City, he proposed, would become the capital of a Palestinian state but fully open to the adherents of all faiths.

U.S. officials in Washington said that Tuesday's scheduled meeting between Netanyahu and President Barack Obama will focus on the need to move Israelis and Palestinians from indirect to direct talks.

In a Friday press briefing, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes said the meeting represents an opportunity to seize the momentum created by the proximity talks to advance regional peace. "Our focus is on building what really has been some momentum in a number of areas," Rhodes said.

White House Middle East adviser Daniel Shapiro said the Obama administration wants the proximity talks to lead to direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians as soon as possible.

"We've engaged with both sides on all the core issues that are relevant to this conflict," Shapiro said. "And we've always viewed the proximity talks as a mechanism to get to direct talks, which is where the real negotiations toward agreements and ultimately an agreement that will produce a two-state solution can be achieved." Egypt's Foreign Minister, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, on Saturday criticized the United States for failing to advance the Middle East peace process and said that the conduct of Washington's envoy to the region, George Mitchell, would not bring about peace between Israelis and Palestinians even 10 years from now.

Speaking to another London-based Arabic newspaper, Asharq Al-Awsat, Aboul Gheit said that Abbas had delivered a series of written proposals to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, including concrete steps to reach final-status agreements on contentious issues such as borders and security arrangements.

A high-ranking PA official in Ramallah told Haaretz that the PA had submitted a written response to 16 questions that Mitchell had asked Abbas, covering nearly all of the core issues still to be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians. The official said the PA is leaning toward opposing the renewal of direct talks with Israel, particularly in the event that Netanyahu's government chooses to renew building in West Bank settlements.