
Arabs disappointed by Clinton stance on Israel: Moussa

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Amr Moussa

Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa reported that Arab foreign ministers on Monday are likely to tell U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton they are disappointed she did not exert more pressure on Israel to freeze settlements

Clinton was to begin sounding out Arab officials after a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at which she endorsed Israel's view that settlement expansion in the West Bank should not be a bar to resuming negotiations.

Moussa said Arab states shared the Palestinian position that resuming negotiations was futile without a halt on settlement expansion.

"I am telling you that all of us, including Saudi Arabia, including Egypt, are deeply disappointed ... with the results, with the fact that Israel can get away with anything without any firm stand that this cannot be done," Moussa told reporters on Monday in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, where Clinton is to meet Arab foreign ministers.

Asked if U.S. President Barack Obama's initiative to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process had failed, he said: "I am really afraid that we are about to see a failure."

"But I still wait until we have our meetings and decide what we are going to do. But failure is in the atmosphere all over."

Clinton met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday in Abu Dhabi before heading to Israel to talk to Netanyahu.

In Morocco, she was to hold a bilateral meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal as well as group meetings with Gulf Arab ministers and officials from Egypt, Jordan and Iraq on the sidelines of a Morocco development conference.

She was also due to meet Morocco's King Mohammed at one of his palaces in the desert city of Ouarzazate.

Palestinians have already reacted angrily to Clinton's comments and called for a "unified Palestinian-Arab position" on the stalled peace process.

U.S. officials sought to downplay Clinton's statement in Jerusalem, repeating that Washington had serious issues with Israel's settlement policy but believed that the most important thing now was to get negotiations going.

But they underscored a shift in U.S. policy that began in September, when U.S. President Barack Obama himself called only for "restraint" in Israeli settlement activity rather than the "freeze" he had earlier demanded.

Netanyahu has proposed limiting building for now to some 3,000 settler homes already approved by Israel in the West Bank. He does not regard building in occupied East Jerusalem, annexed in defiance of international opposition, as settlement.

Palestinians have accused Washington of pressuring them to accommodate Israeli intransigence, effectively shutting the door to future talks.

"The negotiations are in a state of paralysis, and the result of Israel's intransigence and America's back-pedaling is that there is no hope of negotiations on the horizon," Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rdainah said on Sunday.

Abbas faces intense domestic pressure from Hamas Islamists who control the Gaza Strip, and any compromise on settlements could hurt him politically in a run-up to Palestinian elections he has scheduled for Jan. 24. Hamas has rejected holding a vote.

Some 500,000 Israelis live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem alongside 2.8 million Palestinians. Israel captured the territories in a 1967 war with its Arab neighbours. Palestinians say settlements could deny them a viable state.

