

CNSNews.com

Palestinian President Abbas Pushing Pan-Arab Peace With Israel

Thursday, May 28, 2009

By Steven R. Hurst, Associated Press

Washington (AP) - The Palestinian president will be pushing President Barack Obama on Thursday to facilitate peace with Israel through a larger solution to the Middle East conflict.

Top Palestinian officials traveling with President Mahmoud Abbas said he was working to repackage a 2002 Saudi Arabian plan that called for exchange of Arab land occupied by Israel in the 1967 war for normalized relations with Arab countries.

Obama's meeting with Abbas is the third of four key sessions the administration had planned as the president tries to reinvigorate the push for Middle East peace, an accord that has eluded American leaders, the Israelis and their Arab neighbors for more than a half-century.

Obama has made brokering peace in that region a top priority but has found new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a recalcitrant partner. Netanyahu was in Washington last week.

Jordan's King Abdullah II opened the round of visits by Middle East leaders on April 21. Talks with President Hosni Mubarak, originally scheduled for Tuesday, were postponed after the unexpected death of the Egyptian leader's grandson. The two leaders now plan to meet June 4 in Cairo, where Obama plans to deliver a major speech to the Muslim world. On his way to Egypt, Obama plans to meet next Wednesday in Saudi Arabia with King Abdullah.

Netanyahu so far has refused to acknowledge past Israeli commitments to an independent Palestinian state. Beyond that he has given no positive response to Obama's demand that Israel stop building or expanding settlements on land that Palestinians claim as part of a future state of their own.

Apparently realizing the difficulties he faces on a bilateral basis with Israel, Abbas will be trying to sell -- with the help of Jordan's Abdullah, Egypt's Mubarak and Saudi Arabia's Abdullah -- a more ambitious peace plan that would include benefits to Israel and the larger Arab world.

Obama has appeared open to that approach, one that experts believe can be expanded and built upon given the growing fear of Iran that is shared by Israel and the Arabs.

Arab diplomats said earlier this month that the U.S. had asked the 22-member Arab League to amend the 2002 Saudi initiative so that it would be more palatable to Israel.

"What we are discussing today is a combined approach of bringing together Arabs, Europeans and the United States as a team to create the circumstances over the next several months that allow Israelis and Palestinians to sit at the table, but also with Lebanese, Syrians and Arab nations," Jordan's Abdullah said at the time during a

conference in Berlin.

All that suggests that Abbas would get a sympathetic hearing from Obama, with some exceptions.

The Palestinian leader is very weak politically, having lost control of the Gaza Strip in a violent takeover by the militant Hamas organization. Abbas also has been unable to remove or diminish the number of Israeli checkpoints that badly interrupt life for Palestinians in the West Bank, a fact that hurts his standing in the territory he still controls.

He has made little progress in improving his own security forces against militants in the West Bank still bent on the destruction of Israel. Corruption is rampant.

What's more, the Saudi plan, no matter how it is repackaged, still would require that Israel give back land that it has held for more than 40 years. Netanyahu seems disinclined to do that in return for a peace with the Palestinians, and Israel has not bitten on the larger Arab deal in the seven years it has been on the table, despite the promise of a larger peace throughout the Arab world.

(Copyright 2008 Associated Press. All Rights Reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.)

All original CNSNews.com material, copyright 1998-2009 Cybercast News Service.