

Meetings with Israeli and Palestinian Prime Ministers

July 1, 2008

Jerusalem, Israel

After a month of weather-related disasters across my congressional district, it wasn't easy to board a plane to Israel for a long-planned series of diplomatic meetings, but the current negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and the rising threat of Iran and its agents in Hamas and Hezbollah convinced me that I should go.

My duties as the Ranking Republican on the Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs include regular briefings on the status of Israel and regional issues, but there is no substitute for a firsthand look.

Despite an ongoing crisis in Hamas-controlled Gaza, prisoner swaps with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the nuclear ambitions of Iran, the peace process that began last fall at the Annapolis Conference has been the primary topic of our discussions.

The Annapolis Conference was preceded by seven bloody years and it was met with skepticism and concern by many of Israel's allies in Congress, me included. As much as I long for peace in the Holy Land, the history of negotiations has shown that as Israel has offered peace, past Palestinian leaders have responded only with unreasonable demands and violence.

The hope of the President and U.S. State Department has been that the new Palestinian leadership would be different. And, while you haven't heard much about the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, we were informed by both sides that negotiations are taking place.

Our delegation of five congressmen met with numerous officials, including Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Salam Fayyad.

While both officials seemed earnest in their desire to achieve some peaceful solution, I left our meetings doubtful that the time is right.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Olmert is a resilient and forceful public figure. As I saw during our meeting prior to the Annapolis Conference, this Israeli Prime Minister believes strongly in the Annapolis process and he makes his case with an upbeat determination. He repeated that same presentation during our one-hour meeting in the Israeli cabinet room.

And yet, the government of Prime Minister Olmert came to power under Ariel Sharon by promoting the now failed 2005 policy of disengagement from Gaza. His government is also beset by widely publicized allegations of corruption and public disapproval following the disappointing outcome for the Israeli military in Lebanon in 2006. These factors also represent significant hurdles to achieving an agreement that would be in the interest of the state of Israel.

On the Palestinian side, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad comes across as soft-spoken and professional. However, Hamas is still in complete control of Gaza and, as I stated to Prime Minister Fayyad, Palestinian education and culture continue to promote anti-Semitic attitudes. The dominance of Hamas and the culture of hatred toward Israel represent immense barriers to even a well-intentioned effort by the Palestinian Authority.

As we prepare to lift off in a helicopter in Tel Aviv for a strategic tour of the entire state of Israel, I am not without hope. I pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for all the people of this ancient land.

As I said in 2007, "Significant progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process cannot be made at bayside press briefings in American cities. The real progress has to come on the ground in Israel, in the Palestinian territories, and in the hearts and minds of Israelis and Palestinians.

"Real progress will not come from additional acts that exchange the tangible security of Israel for intangible promises of future Palestinian action. Only genuine, thorough and recurring antiterror, pro-democratic actions should yield peace and eventual Palestinian statehood."

I remain convinced of two things. First, Israel is a small democracy and an ally of unique importance that must be defended. And second, any chance for a just and lasting peace must begin, first and foremost, with the interests of the Jewish state of Israel.

U.S. Rep. Mike Pence (IN-6)

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