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## **Briefing by Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell on the President's Trilateral Meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority**

### **George Mitchell**

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**MODERATOR:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for coming and thank you for waiting. And again, thanks to the Foreign Press Center and their staff for support today. I'd like to introduce Senator George Mitchell, the President's and Secretary of State's Special Envoy for the Middle East.

**MR. MITCHELL:** Thank you. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for any delay. The meetings and subsequent events went on longer than anticipated. I will begin with a brief statement, and then I'll be pleased to take your questions.

The President had direct and constructive meetings with both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, and then he held his first trilateral meeting with the two leaders. As the President said, this was an important moment.

Let me first give you some brief details. Each of the three meetings was about 40 minutes long. The tone was positive and determined. The President made clear his commitment to moving forward, and the leaders shared that commitment.

For the meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, the President was joined by Secretary Clinton, General Jones, Tom Donilon, and myself. For the trilateral meeting, the President was joined by Secretary Clinton, General Jones, and myself.

In their meetings, Prime Minister Netanyahu was joined by Foreign Minister Lieberman, Defense Minister Barak, and National Security Advisor Arad. President Abbas was joined by Secretary General Yasser Abed Rabbo, Negotiations Affairs Department Director Saeb Erekat, and Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki.

This was the first meeting between the Israelis and Palestinians at this level in nearly a year. Even nine months ago, such a meeting did not seem at all possible. Less than a week before President Obama took office, conflict was raging in Gaza and southern Israel, causing both – causing deep suffering on both sides.

Today, the atmosphere is different. Both parties share the goal of a two-state solution and comprehensive peace. And both parties seek the re-launch of negotiations as soon as possible, although there are differences between them on how to proceed.

The United States stands with them to help advance toward these objectives. We have made progress on security and economic opportunity, in particular, but we have much further to go. As the President said in his public comments, it is past time to talk about starting negotiations; all sides must summon the will to move forward; permanent status negotiations must begin soon.

The President told them that we cannot restart talks from scratch. That said, neither side should hold out for the perfect formula. Painful compromise by all will be necessary. This was a message that the President conveyed to each of the leaders in private as well.

We are now going to enter into an intensive yet brief period of discussions to re-launch negotiations. Our aim is clear: to finally succeed in achieving our shared goals and to end the cycle of conflict that has done so much harm. I will be meeting with my Israeli and Palestinian counterparts and with representatives of Arab states as well, and we will build on the work that was done today to encourage all parties to take responsibility for peace and to act on their commitments.

Let me add a personal comment before concluding. I believe that just as conflicts are created by human beings, they can be ended by human beings. With patience, determination, and dedication, our aim is to achieve a comprehensive peace in the region that will enable Israelis, Palestinians, and all of the region's peoples to share a secure, prosperous, and stable future. We knew this wasn't going to be easy. It's a mark of the President's deep personal and ongoing commitment to peace that he chose to participate directly at this juncture. As he said today, despite all of the obstacles, despite all of the history, despite all of the mistrust, we have to find a way forward. That's what we'll be focused on in the days ahead.

As in my prior briefing, I'd like to just read to you a couple of statements made by the President during the talks which I wrote down as he said them. "It's difficult to disentangle ourselves from history, but we must do so." "The only reason to hold office is to get things done." "We all must take risks for peace." "Peace between Israel and the Palestinians is critical for Israel's security and it's necessary for the Palestinians to realize their aspirations."

Thank you for your patience and your attention, and I'll be glad now to try to respond to any questions.

**MODERATOR:** (Inaudible) some questions. If you all would please state your name and your outlet. (Inaudible.)

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Raghida Dergham, al-Hayat. It seems that not only the media, but even we are told by some critics, even the prime minister of Israel had noted the language used when the President spoke about the settlements from quoting for a freeze to using the word "restrained." Is this a new policy that the United States has adopted that you now talk about restraint of activities on settlements?

And secondly, your gradual approach has been criticized rather sharply by a lot of people. Will you have now a new approach now that you practically – forgive the word – but you failed when you put the settlements first?

**MR. MITCHELL:** Right. Well, first let me say that there is no change in American policy. Our position is what it has been throughout. We believe that if the actions that we requested were taken, they would create the best opportunity to have a context in which the re-launch of negotiations could succeed.

We have never said that any one of the actions we requested was a precondition to negotiations. And we also never said that the actions we seek were ends in themselves. We have always made clear that our objective is re-launch of negotiations, and that the actions we requested were steps that would help create a context favorable to the successful completion of those negotiations.

I respect, obviously, your right to express your opinion regarding failure. Just as respectfully, I strongly disagree, and if I might, I'd like to make a few comments on that. Upon taking office, President Obama announced and demonstrated his personal commitment to a comprehensive

peace in the region. And he's given this issue a high priority. In the region, this was recognized as unique in recent history. No American president has ever stated it as a high priority at the very moment of his taking office. And we believe it's been widely welcomed as proactive and positive.

We engaged immediately with the Palestinian Authority, with the Arab states, and with the previous government of Israel. As soon as the current government took office in early April, we engaged with them as well. Our effort has been clear and repeatedly stated – to encourage all sides to create a positive context in which to re-launch meaningful negotiation toward a two-state solution.

In his speech at Bar-Ilan University on June 14<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed his support for that objective. President Abbas also supports that objective. So, all parties are in agreement about the central objective of our effort. Our work is focused on creating the conditions so the negotiations can succeed. Just as we believe that the actions we have requested are intended to achieve the objective of launching negotiations, we also believe that the launching of negotiations is not an end in itself, but it is a means to achieve a comprehensive peace.

So we take these one step at a time, in a logical fashion, all directed at comprehensive peace in the region. In recent weeks, Israel has removed some checkpoints and roadblocks and taken other steps to facilitate the greater movement of people and commerce on the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority, under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, has continued to significantly improve security, and has embarked on what I describe as its own version of an economic stimulus plan. The result of these and other factors has been steady and substantial improvement in personal security and in economic activity among Palestinians in the West Bank. In addition, we made good progress on a range of other issues, including economic growth, job development, the removal of unauthorized outposts, and several other related issues. We've also worked with the Arab states on our proposal to establish a regional or multilateral track to supplement and support the negotiations once launched. This will involve many states in the region coming together to address common challenges like water and energy. We will also encourage the Arab states to act individually, to strengthen commercial ties and trade with Israel, and to launch cultural and political exchanges with Israel.

So progress has been real and substantial, particularly measured against where things stood when President Obama took office in January. We've helped lay the groundwork for the difficult work ahead, but major differences remain. We have not achieved as much as we'd hoped, as fast as we'd want it. But we now need a determined and focused effort to resolve these differences and to re-launch negotiations toward a final settlement. And we want to do so with a sense of urgency and with a sense of purpose.

And I'll conclude this answer with a personal anecdote. In Northern Ireland, I chaired three separate sets of negotiations over a period of five years. The circumstances there are so different from those in the Middle East that I am always hesitant to draw lessons from one for the other. And I do not do so now except to address directly the point that you made. The main negotiations lasted nearly two years. And for every day of those two years in which there was public activity – and that was on most days – a reporter like you politely branded me a failure and said – no, I'm not taking it personally – said that we had failed. In a technical sense, if your objective is to get a peace agreement, until the moment you get it, you have failed. So the reporters were technically correct. But in reality, we had patience, we had determination, and we had the fortitude that grows from knowing you are doing the right thing. And we know that now.

So yes, we haven't gotten everything we wanted, we haven't gotten it as fast as we want it. But in conflict resolution, if one adopts the standard that one must always get 100 percent of what one seeks at every stage of the process, otherwise you're failure, well, then of course, there would never ever be a resolution of any conflict. Painful compromises are necessary for

everybody. So we are determined to proceed. We will not be deterred by – I don't want to say accusations, but criticisms, by descriptions of failure. We believe that we are doing the right thing. We believe we have made substantial progress and we intend to continue with full determination until there is comprehensive peace in the region.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) of Israel radio. Maybe later you can tell us about your success in baseball and steroids. (Laughter.) But you talked before about preconditions, lack of preconditions, and then you said you work hard to create the conditions to – so first of all, square that.

And secondly, the Israeli prime minister today said that the most important thing that happened is he has all along, according to him, wanted to re-launch the negotiations without precondition and now the Palestinians too have agreed to launching them without precondition (inaudible). From what I understand, they say – they are talking about obligations. Could you explain to us where it is from your vantage point?

**MR. MITCHELL:** Yes. There is a difference between a precondition which must be met before negotiations begin, and an effort to create a context or an atmosphere or conditions or circumstances in which the negotiations have the best chance to succeed. We favor the latter; we do not favor the former.

Secondly, we have had intensive discussions with the parties, not just on the steps that we ask be taken, to which most of the press attention has gone, but also on what are the terms of reference or the basis upon which the negotiations will resume. On those issues, there remain differences between the parties – how best to proceed. They have different points of view. And there will be further discussion necessary for us to try to get agreement between them on how best to proceed, how to enter negotiations in a manner that creates the most likely prospect for them to succeed.

**QUESTION:** Is there a renewal or not –

**MR. MITCHELL:** What's that?

**QUESTION:** Is there a renewal of negotiations or not?

**MR. MITCHELL:** We are not announcing today the re-launch of negotiations at a specific date certain. We will continue our discussions in an intensive and focused way in the next few days in an effort to obtain agreement on the basis on which those negotiations will resume so that there is a reasonable prospect for success once they start.

I want to repeat that because this is an important point. We do not favor more negotiations for the sake of negotiations. We do not believe in an endless, unlimited, unfocused process. We believe that the purpose of negotiations is to get a result, a positive result. We want more peace and less process. And so we are trying to launch – re-launch negotiations at the earliest possible time, but under circumstances in which there is a reasonable basis to believe that they can be successful.

**QUESTION:** Thanks very much. Bronwen Maddox from the *Times* in London. If Israel doesn't stop building in the West Bank to your satisfaction, should it expect to lose some of the support it's enjoyed from the U.S.?

**MR. MITCHELL:** That's a matter that – obviously, the Government of Israel makes decisions on its own future. From our standpoint, we have asked that certain actions be taken in the belief that, if taken, they would create the most favorable context for resuming negotiations and reaching agreement. We have never said that the requests that we make are preconditions to getting into negotiations. And so each side will have to make a determination as to how far it is prepared to proceed, both with respect to the point that you raised and all of the other points that are under discussion, of which there are many. Now, I don't know. Did you see my previous press conference that I just gave to the U.S. press? Well –

**QUESTION:** Sadly not. It was not – it was not for want of asking, but –

**MR. MITCHELL:** What's that?

**QUESTION:** Not for want of asking, but no.

**MR. MITCHELL:** Not for want of asking. Okay. Well, I'm sorry. I didn't know that. But let me recount a story that I told. And believe me, I mean no offense to any of you ladies and gentlemen here. I was the Senate majority leader, and we had a period in which we debated and took action on a number of very controversial subjects. And I thought, proudly, that we had resolved most of them and that we were doing very well.

And then appeared, on the front page of *The Washington Post*, a major story which concentrated entirely on the few areas of disagreement and branded our effort a failure. And I asked the reporter, in a polite but complaining way, about the story. And he said to me – I've never forgotten the words – "Senator," he said, "you will never see a headline that says 2 million commuters made it safely to work today. But if one car crashes and a couple of people are killed, that will be the headline. That's the way the world works," he said.

I accept that. That's the way the world works. The questions and the coverage focus on the disagreements. But I also know that the way the world works is that progress is made through slow and steady effort – often not controversial, therefore, often not newsworthy. And we have covered a lot of ground in a very – with a very favorable result. So we're going to proceed and do the best we can. The consequences of decisions made by the Israelis, of course, are judgments that they will have to make. And the same is true, of course, of the Palestinians.

**QUESTION:** Ayman Mohyeldin with Al Jazeera English. Senator, I wanted to ask you if you can tell us about some of these differences that you say continue to exist that are not allowing for this atmosphere, and when do you expect these differences to be resolved? I mean, what are – how are you specifically trying to tackle these differences?

**MR. MITCHELL:** They relate to – I'll just be general in my response. They relate to terms of reference – where do you begin negotiations in relation to past efforts, what subjects are going to be covered, how are they to be identified, in what order do you begin, what sequence will therefore follow, a whole – almost any imaginable issue that you could think of that affects both the process and the substance of negotiations.

We're going to tackle them the same way that we have until now. We're going to meet with the parties. We're going to seek to determine what is necessary to bridge their differences, to close the gaps. We will, where appropriate, suggest language, suggest decisions. And there will be a genuine back and forth, which we've had now over many months on other subjects.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR. MITCHELL:** Well, I'm not quite sure I follow you. By definition, I can only talk about one issue at a time, so I have a list of them and I talk about one and then I talk about another and then I talk about the other.

**QUESTION:** But I mean, in terms of reference that you're talking about and trying – when – I'm assuming that what you are referring to are some of the core issues of this conflict and where to pick up on these issues where they had previously left off. So are you addressing these issues one by one – settlements, Jerusalem, refugees – or are you addressing them all at the same time?

**MR. MITCHELL:** We have discussions that range across all issues. We have discussions that are focused on one issue. We have discussions that mention two. There is not a rigid mechanism in conflict resolution by which one can proceed, as the question seems to suggest. You address the issues in a way that makes common sense and, above all, that is best calculated to achieve the desired result.

**MODERATOR:** This will have to be our last question (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Senator, you said that it's --

**MODERATOR:** Can you identify your outlet, please?

**QUESTION:** Emile Baroudi. I'm with Dubai TV.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** You said that one of the main points or the major differences – where to begin, what subjects, how to identify them, et cetera – that’s pretty much from scratch. I mean, you know, they are not even agreeing on –

**MR. MITCHELL:** I just said the President said we’re not going to begin from scratch.

**QUESTION:** Yes. But if they don’t agree on what they are going to negotiate about, where to start, what to cover –

**MR. MITCHELL:** So – but you see, the implication of your question is that we should accept, as final, the parties’ first words, that when they say something and they disagree, well, we should accept that as final and walk away. We have the exact opposite point of view. Where there are differences, we seek to resolve them. And that’s what we’re going to do over the next few weeks.

**QUESTION:** It’s a lot of issues.

**MR. MITCHELL:** We’re going to try to resolve those differences. I mean, I’m asked over and over again – and it’s understandable. A public figure stands up and says this is my position. A public figure in the United States stands up and says this is my position. So the question is: Well, how can you possibly succeed based on those positions? That assumes that nobody ever changes their positions, that nobody ever compromises, that there is never a reasonable, principled basis on which people can come together even though they began from different points. And I don’t accept that method of description. I mean, that’s just a reality. We --

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) point of reference. You said (inaudible) confused us --

**MR. MITCHELL:** Oh, I’m very sorry if I confused you. I’ve been trying very hard to clarify things. Yeah. So maybe I’d better stop because I guess you’re getting more confused the longer I talk.

(Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** Can you say a word about the Lebanese track and the Syrian one?

**MR. MITCHELL:** We believe that comprehensive peace in the region means Israel and Palestine, Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, and full normalized relations between Israel and all of its neighbors in the region. And we regard the entire objective as an important part of what we are doing. We are focused today on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But that is not the exclusive focus, and we are devoting energy and effort to trying to move the process forward on other tracks as well, including those that I mentioned.

**MODERATOR:** Thanks very much. Thank you very much.

**QUESTION:** What about the right of return?

**MODERATOR:** Unfortunately, we’re out of time. Thank you.