

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, July 21, 2009 5:37 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: Ex-U.S. Diplomat Talks With Hamas

Per our conversation

From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Tuesday, July 21, 2009 5:17 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: Ex-U.S. Diplomat Talks With Hamas

Ex-U.S. Diplomat Talks With Hamas

Officials of Islamist Group See an Opening, but Washington Says Nothing's Changed

By Howard Schneider and Glenn Kessler
 Washington Post Foreign Service
 Thursday, July 16, 2009

JERUSALEM, July 15 -- To Hamas officials Bassem Naim and Mahmoud al-Zahar, a recent meeting in Switzerland with a former senior U.S. diplomat represented an opening in relations with the Obama administration, and a path to easing the Islamist group's isolation.

"I hope it will be the beginning of addressing some of the mistakes of the last three years," Naim said of his talks with Thomas R. Pickering, a former undersecretary of state and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. "This was a first meeting to investigate the positions in general terms of both parties without any commitment on any side."

U.S. officials say they see the previously undisclosed June meeting between Pickering and the two senior Hamas officials differently. They said Pickering had not been asked to approach Hamas and had no official standing; U.S. officials learned of the meeting only afterward. Policy toward the Islamist group, they said, remains what it was under President George W. Bush: that Hamas is a terrorist organization with which the United States will not even sanction a meeting.

Before Hamas can participate in peace talks, "we have made it clear, both publicly and privately, through all kinds of pronouncements, that we would expect Hamas to recognize Israel and renounce violence and agree to abide by prior agreements," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Wednesday in Washington.

Still, the Pickering meeting took place in the context of Obama administration efforts to reach out to forces in the Middle East that were shunned under Bush. It was held in between President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo, in which he acknowledged popular support for Hamas among Palestinians, and a June 25 speech by Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, in which Meshal said the armed movement was ready to deal with the international community in order to reach an agreement with Israel. Pickering, co-chair of the nonprofit International Crisis Group, would not comment.

As the Obama administration's Middle East diplomacy intensifies -- with U.S. officials jetting to capitals such as Damascus that were off limits at the end of the Bush administration, and offering dialogue with Iran -- Hamas remains one of the most significant outliers.

Hamas is, at once, a political party, a paramilitary group that targets Israeli civilians and troops, a provider of charitable services, and a religious organization. The group seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 in a clash with the Fatah movement of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The authority continues to hold sway in the West Bank.

Even as Obama pushes for a renewal of talks between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, there is no clear plan for how to address the presence of an organization that won 2006 Palestinian legislative elections but does not recognize Israel and remains committed to armed insurrection against the Jewish state.

Israeli officials say that since their offensive in Gaza ended earlier this year, they have been focused on preventing Hamas from rearming itself with smuggled or homemade weapons. Beyond that, U.S. and Israeli strategy rests on a hope that improving the economy and security in the West Bank will undercut popular support for Hamas and strengthen Palestinian moderates.

"If we can energize that process, it will do more to delegitimize Hamas than anything else," said Netanyahu spokesman Mark Regev.

The International Monetary Fund reported Wednesday that recent changes in Israel's network of checkpoints, as well as improvements in security, have put the West Bank economy on track for growth of as much as 7 percent this year. Gaza's economy remains under an Israeli blockade, with unemployment estimated at 40 percent or more.

In an interview after touring the West Bank this week, special Middle East envoy Tony Blair said that, if current trends continue, Hamas would soon "have a choice" as Gaza's 1.5 million residents slip further behind Palestinians in the West Bank.

A recent lull in rocket fire and other attacks, coupled with Meshal's speech and a visit to Gaza by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, has led to speculation that Hamas is trying to earn a place at the negotiating table. Others argue that the group is simply pausing to rearm and will never accept the conditions laid out by the United States and others -- including a renunciation of violence and acceptance of earlier Palestinian agreements acknowledging Israel.

Yuval Diskin, head of Israel's internal security organization, Shin Bet, said at a closed briefing in May that he saw practically no chance of a political compromise and that Israel would ultimately have to overthrow Hamas in Gaza, according to an account of his comments provided by someone who attended the briefing.

Meshal's speech, delivered from Damascus, the Syrian capital, was considered an overture to Obama. "The purpose of the speech was to convince the West that Hamas is a partner for dialogue," retired Israeli Brig. Gen. Shlomo Brom, director of the Israeli-Palestinian Relations Program at Tel Aviv University, wrote in a recent paper. "The speech will make it easier for elements in Western Europe and within Obama's administration that support dialogue with Hamas to advance their position."

But U.S. and Israeli officials say they see little substantive change in Meshal's position. Meshal and other Hamas officials have said that hostilities might end for a decade or more through an extended truce, but that they are not interested in reconciling with Israel over the long term.

"There is a recognition that Israel exists," said Omar Abdel-Razeq, who was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council from Hamas in 2006 and was recently released from Israeli prison. "The recognition of its right to exist is another matter. I don't think time lies on the Israeli side. What if the balance of power shifts?"

Kessler reported from Washington. Special correspondent Samuel Sockol in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

Nora Toiv
Office of the Secretary
202-647-8633