

Mideast peace talks to continue despite growing tension

By Anna Griffin
Assistant State and National Editor

The highly publicized Middle East peace talks between Israel and the Arab states have failed to yield concrete results, despite several months of deliberation.

"Nothing is being accomplished," said James Noyse, a research fellow at the Hoover Institute in Stanford, California. "Every time it looks like we're on the road to peace, somebody gets

Analysis

described as a sign of protest.

Tuesday's session in Washington, D.C., would have begun the third meeting between the Israelis and the Arab states.

The U.S. State Department refused to comment on the postponement except to confirm the Arabs' tardiness.

"The Arab delegates just haven't shown up yet," said U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jan Mortimer. "We really are in no position to say why they are not here or when they will arrive."

The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously Monday to condemn the Israeli expulsion. The United States, abandoning a traditional pro-Israel stance, played a major role in drafting the condemnation resolution.

The first round of the peace conference began Oct. 30 after months of deliberation about where and when representatives from Israel and three Arab states — Jordan, Syria, Lebanon — would meet. The talks have been unproductive and consistently tense, especially with the inclusion of Palestinians in the Jordanian delegation.

Both sides hope to reach a solution regarding the occupied territories, particularly the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although Israel claimed the territories in 1967 after winning the Six Day War, the area still has a large Palestinian population. In recent years, Israel has been accused of persecuting the Palestinians, and both sides have participated in incidents of violence.

Most observers believe the U.N. resolution will convince the Arab delegates to arrive in Washington sometime before the end of the week.

"The resolution was a vote of confidence for (the Arab delegates)," Noyse said. "The U.N. did the right thing. ... They told the Israelis they can't play the bully and still have U.S. support."

Both sides' failure to reach a concrete agreement during the first two talks should be blamed on individual agendas, said Joe Stork, editor of the Middle East Report. Neither side seems willing to compromise, he said.

"Each state has its own problems," Stork said. "They all want their conditions met. That has been the problem in the Middle East for years."

Some experts question the Israeli government's dedication to the talks. The government of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir is more interested in maintaining control of the occupied territories, Stork said.

"The Israeli government is more content with the status quo," Stork said.

The dedication of each side to furthering its own agenda continues to present an obstacle for the United States, Stork said. The United States must play a greater role in the talks, Stork said.

"If the U.S. is just going to sit back, ... nothing much is going to happen," Stork said. "The primary lever the U.S. can pull is economic. All of the nations involved are suffering right now."

But Stork questioned the Bush administration's dedication to a lasting peace, noting that the president could lose support from Jewish voters if the United States is seen to be "abandoning" Israel.

"Bush is fearful of overcommitting himself to the Palestinians," Stork said. "(The Bush administration) is content to set up what I call the theater of negotiations because it makes them look good without being seen as too pro-peace."

Although government officials admitted the existence of the talks was an accomplishment in itself, Mortimer denied the claim that Bush's interest in the conference is purely political.

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