



Political

update:– US President’s Special Envoy for Middle East Peace visits the region – 29 January

Key points:

- US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, Senator George Mitchell, says a sustainable ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza is “critical”
- Israeli leaders say an end to Hamas rocket attacks on Israel and weapons smuggling is key to a lasting ceasefire; Israel to respond to all Hamas’ violations
- Israel says Gaza border crossings to remain closed to all but humanitarian aid until kidnapped Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, is released
- US President calls for Israelis and Palestinians to return to peace negotiations
- Israeli diplomats to visit London to discuss British Naval assistance for the prevention of weapons smuggling

Latest developments

- Senator George Mitchell, US President Barack Obama’s newly appointed Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, visited Israel and Egypt on Wednesday (28 January). In a statement to the Israeli media, Mitchell said that consolidating the Gaza ceasefire was “of critical importance,” and called for an end to the hostilities; an end to arms smuggling; and the reopening of Gaza’s crossings, on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access between Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA).
- In Israel, Mitchell held a joint meeting on Wednesday (28 January) with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (Kadima), Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni (Kadima) and Defense Minister Ehud Barak (Labor). The Ministers told Mitchell that the stability of Israel’s ceasefire with Hamas in Gaza would rely on a complete halt to rocket and mortar attacks against Israel and an end to weapons smuggling into Gaza. They also said that Israel would respond to every Hamas violation of the ceasefire, be they rocket attacks, strikes along the Gaza-Israel border or smuggling through tunnels from Egypt into Gaza.
- Prime Minister Olmert told Mitchell that the border crossings into the Gaza Strip would not be reopened for more than humanitarian aid until Hamas release Gilad Shalit from captivity, an Israeli soldier kidnapped from Israel into Gaza in June 2006. Noam Shalit, Gilad’s father, said on Tuesday (27 January) that French President Nicolas Sarkozy had confirmed to him that his son was still alive following conversations Sarkozy had held with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Gilad Shalit has dual Israeli-French citizenship.
- Olmert also told Mitchell that it was important that the Gaza conflict helped the PA to “get a foot in the door in Gaza.”

- Israel's Haaretz newspaper reported that Mitchell told Israeli officials that the new US administration was committed to the 2004 letter from US President George Bush, to the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, stating that Palestinian refugees would not return to Israel and that the border between Israel and the PA would take into consideration "facts on the ground," meaning large settlement blocs would remain in Israel. Mitchell also said that the US is committed to Israel's security and to the Roadmap.
- After Mitchell's meetings in Israel, an unnamed government source in Jerusalem said that it was understood that President Obama expects Israel and the PA to renew diplomatic talks as soon as the Israeli general election on 10 February has taken place. The source said that the US administration is "very serious about the Palestinian issue," and wants to "accelerate the process" as much as possible.
- Mitchell also met with Israeli President Shimon Peres on Wednesday (28 January). After their meeting Peres told reporters:

"I assure you, there is no contradiction between the stances of the United States and Israel. Both the United States and Israel want peace and believe that we must fight against terror, chiefly Hamas and Iran. We must fight terrorism and simultaneously advance peace. Israel will not allow Hamas to destroy the chances for peace, and we will work to cultivate the goodwill that is necessary to conclude a peace agreement with the Palestinians." (28/01/09)

- In Egypt, Mitchell met with President Hosni Mubarak. At a news conference with the Egyptian leader in Cairo, Mitchell said:

"It is of critical importance that the ceasefire be extended and consolidated, and we support Egypt's continuing efforts in that regard. The United States is committed to vigorously pursuing lasting peace and stability in the region" (28/01/09)

- Mitchell is meeting PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah, the West Bank, on Thursday (29 January). Afterwards he will travel to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Britain and France.
- The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has created a special team to tackle Hamas' arms smuggling, headed by Yaakov Hadas, MFA Deputy Director-General of the Middle East and Peace Process Division. Hadas arrived in London on Thursday (29 January), to discuss the British proposal to deploy naval vessels to monitor the smuggling routes to the Gaza Strip, as well as the exchange of intelligence regarding smuggling.

Background

- Senator George Mitchell was previously appointed as the head of an international commission tasked to assess the causes of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (Palestinian uprising). The Mitchell Report, published in May 2001, produced a series of recommendations for transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict including: a resumption of peace negotiations; the freezing of settlement construction; the lifting of economic restraints in Gaza and the West Bank; and that the PA prevent terrorist attacks on Israelis. The recommendations were not implemented by either the Israelis or Palestinians.
- Mitchell was also instrumental in brokering and implementing the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, including the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.
- The days before Mitchell's visit were marked by a number of Hamas violations of the truce with Israel, which the Israeli military responded to. These attacks and counter-

attacks have continued since Mitchell's departure and led Israeli Defense Minister Barak to postpone a visit to Washington, originally scheduled for Wednesday (28 January) evening:

- A bomb placed on the Gaza-Israel border, at the Kissufim crossing, by Palestinian militants killed an Israeli soldier and wounded three others on Tuesday (27 January). A Palestinian farmer was killed in the ensuing cross-border gun battle. Israel retaliated on the same day with an airstrike, injuring a Hamas militant in the town of Khan Younis, Gaza. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) also struck a number of Hamas' weapons smuggling tunnels from Egypt into Gaza on Wednesday (28 January) morning.
 - Palestinian militants of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades fired a rocket from Gaza into a kibbutz in southern Israel on Wednesday (28 January) evening. The IAF responded by destroying a weapons manufacturing site in southern Gaza. There were no reports of any injuries from these incidents.
 - Palestinian militants fired another rocket into Israel on Thursday (29 January). No injuries were reported. Israel responded with an airstrike on a vehicle in Khan Younis on Thursday (29 January), injuring eight people. The strike targeted 25-year-old Mahmoud Hamdan Samiri, a member of the Global Jihad militant group, responsible for Tuesday's bombing of the Kissufim crossing. Samiri was also involved in the detonation of another explosive device at the Kissufim crossing in March 2008, killing two IDF soldiers.
- US President Obama conducted an interview for Al Arabiya TV, broadcast on Tuesday (27 January), in which he set out the US' approach to the Middle East. He said:

"Ultimately, we cannot tell either the Israelis or the Palestinians what's best for them. They're going to have to make some decisions. But I do believe that the moment is ripe for both sides to realize that the path that they are on is one that is not going to result in prosperity and security for their people. And that instead, it's time to return to the negotiating table."(27/1/09)

- Prior to Mitchell's visit to the Middle East, Hilary Clinton used her first press conference as US Secretary of State to condemn Hamas rocket attacks on Israel and its involvement in the Kissufim bombing:

"We support Israel's right to self-defense... The rocket barrages which are getting closer and closer to populated areas cannot go unanswered.... It is regrettable that the Hamas leadership apparently believes that it is in their interest to provoke the right of self-defense instead of building a better future for the people of Gaza" (27/01/09)

- Israel, Egypt and the PA agreed a number of arrangements in 2005 to keep Gaza's border crossings with Israel and Egypt open. These arrangements rely on PA forces operating the crossings on the Gazan side of the border. All PA forces were expelled from Gaza in June 2007 by Hamas when it carried out a violent coup in the territory.
- The last ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which ran from 19 June 2008 to 19 December 2008, was undermined by Hamas' use of smuggling tunnels under the Egypt-Gaza border to build up stockpiles of advanced weaponry. According to the Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC), Hamas used the ceasefire and its tunnels to accumulate Grad-Katyusha rockets from Iran and anti-tank weapons from Hezbollah. Both of these weapons were used extensively in the recent conflict.