

Israeli Defense Minister Hopes Trump Backs Settlements



Tel Aviv, November 19 (RHC)-- Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman proposed Israel should strike a deal with the U.S. President-elect under which it would freeze building in the more isolated of its West Bank settlements while ramping up construction in the major settlement blocs.

"If the new administration agrees to that we should grab it with both hands," Israeli army radio quoted him as saying. "It's maybe not electorally popular but it's the right thing to do."

Haaretz reported that the defense minister wants a word-to-word agreement similar to the correspondence between then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and then-U.S. President George Bush in April 2004. In a written letter between the two, "Sharon committed Israel to the two-state solution and to restrain settlement construction — especially outside the major settlement blocs," the Israeli newspaper reported.

Responding to Sharon's offer, Bush said Washington would push to include settlement blocs within Israel's borders in a future peace agreement. The Jewish settlements are being built on Israeli-occupied lands, which is illegal under international law.

But this idea was certainly not popular with Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, which leans heavily on settler support. "The defense

minister's statement harms the Israeli interest and is not acceptable to the government," she said in comments broadcast on public radio.

Local media reported also that Lieberman said Trump's aides were urging right-wing Israeli politicians to curb their public rejoicing at his election as U.S. president. "I hope that we have enough sense to stop the jubilation and public enthusiasm," Haaretz Daily quoted Lieberman, of the nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, as saying. "It is undoubtedly damaging."

"It is important to form the teams for a discreet dialogue between ourselves and the United States and not to make public statements such as that we have heard from the minister."

The English-language Jerusalem Post's Herb Keinon quoted Liberman in a tweet as saying "Israel has received messages from Trump transition team to 'tone down' their post-election enthusiasm & act with more humility," after the military chief gave an off-camera briefing to Israeli diplomatic correspondents.

Trump is seen as likely leading to a far more favorable policy toward Israel, though many analysts have cautioned that his thinking remains unclear and he has proven himself to be unpredictable. Netanyahu himself Sunday called on ministers to refrain from commenting on Trump's presidency after some said his presidential election win would put an end to Palestinian aspirations for an independent state.

Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who heads the religious nationalist Jewish Home party, said last week that "the era of a Palestinian state is over" now that "friend of Israel" Trump is in the White House.

Israel is concerned that President Barack Obama may seek a U.N. resolution on its conflict with the Palestinians that the Jewish state opposes, before he leaves office on January 20.

The far-right Israeli government has seen the Obama administration as hostile after it repeatedly criticized Israeli settlement building in the occupied West Bank over the past few years, despite the administration taking no concrete action.

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