

Baker Proposes Plan To Revive Cairo Talks Rejected By Israel

JERUSALEM (JTA) — U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has sent the foreign ministers of Israel and Egypt a five-point plan aimed at reviving Egyptian-brokered negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian delegations.

The move comes after Israel's Inner Cabinet deadlocked 6-6 along party lines in a vote on Egypt's invitation to host preliminary Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Cairo. A tie vote is by law a negative one.

The American plan, which was transmitted in writing recently, calls for Israeli-Palestinian talks in Cairo, based on Israel's May 14 plan for Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

It suggests consultations among Israel, Egypt and the United States over the composition of the Palestinian delegation to participate in such talks. And it specifically proposes that the foreign ministers of Israel and Egypt come to Washington, within two weeks, to meet with Baker on the matter.

In Washington, Israeli Embassy spokeswoman Ruth Yaron said recently that Israel is studying the Baker proposal and has not yet reached any formal position.

The American plan appears to be a response to calls from the Likud bloc to help Israel and Egypt reach agreement on the scope of and participants in preliminary negotiations in Cairo, first proposed last month by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

While the six Likud ministers in the Inner Cabinet formally voted against Mubarak's invitation, Likud is apparently unwilling to bear the

onus of obstructionism.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the Likud leader, reportedly cabled Washington after the vote to say that he did not want the peace initiative to die.

Shamir is due to meet at the White House with President Bush on Nov. 15 and apparently wants to ensure that there is still momentum in the peace process at that time.

Labor, whose six ministers supported the Egyptian invitation, indicated it would not break up the unity coalition government, pending new American efforts to keep the initiative alive.

Following the vote, Baker spoke by telephone to Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens of Likud and his Egyptian counterpart, Esmat Abdel Meguid.

The State Department would not reveal details of the conversations. But it now appears they were the first of a series of intensive diplomatic contacts over the weekend that resulted in the five-point Baker plan.

Baker said recently on NBC-TV's "Meet the Press" program that he had discussed "some specific language" that the two foreign ministers were considering.

"This is not a separate or competing proposal," he insisted. "What we are trying to do is to implement the basic Shamir election proposal.

"We are working with language to try to bridge the gap between Israelis, on the one side, and Palestinians on the other. And we will continue to work very hard to do that," he said.

But the secretary of state rejected suggestions that the United States play a more active role in the peace process. "We are very actively involved. But we are not involved by getting on an airplane and flying over to the Middle East," he made clear.

Shamir, in an interview recently with the Hebrew daily Ha'aretz, credited the United States with

being "very interested in promoting the peace initiative. They really want to help," he said.

But the prime minister added, "That does not mean that we have to accept everything that they say or think up."

The Baker plan seeks to overcome one of the thorniest issues blocking Likud's acceptance of the Egyptian proposal for Israeli-Palestinian talks in Cairo: the composition of the Palestinian delegation.

Likud will not countenance negotiating with a Palestinian delegation that includes anyone from outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip whom it considers would automatically be an agent of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Shamir reiterated in the Ha'aretz interview that Israel would accept American efforts to revive the peace initiative only the PLO has no role whatsoever in the proposed talks. He said the Egyptian proposal as it now stands "means a delegation set up by the PLO, and that contravenes the policy guidelines of our government."

While Shamir wants to avoid being painted as the obstacle to further progress in the peace process, he also is facing trouble from extremist elements of his party who oppose any approach to the Palestinians.

Hard-line Ministers Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Moda'i are urging Shamir and Arens to reject the Baker proposal. To further that end, they have called a meeting of their supporters in the Likud Central Committee to be held in Tel Aviv.

Moreover, the so-called "Eretz Yisrael Lobby" of Knesset members assembled in Jerusalem re-

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