

Barack Obama threatens to impose peace plan on Middle East

Barack Obama has warned Israel he will pave the way for an independent Palestinian state if the peace process remains deadlocked until the autumn.

By Adrian Blomfield in Jerusalem
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The US president is proposing to hand control of the Middle East peace process to the international community unless there is a breakthrough in the next few months, Israeli officials have said.

Mr Obama has formulated a secret plan with leading European allies to convene an international peace conference by the end of the year, according to Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper.



Barack Obama is eager to gain international recognition for the creation of a Palestinian state.
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The move would fulfil one of Israel's deepest fears by effectively stripping the Jewish state of its power to dictate the course of talks.

The conference would attempt to end decades of Israeli-Palestinian conflict by pressing both sides to accept difficult compromises on issues ranging from the future of millions of Palestinian refugees to the **status of Jerusalem**.

Mr Obama is also eager to gain **international** recognition for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Officials in the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, have voiced their dismay in recent weeks over reports that **Mr Obama was planning an effective takeover of negotiations by imposing his own peace deal on the two sides**.

Such a step, they said, would undermine indirect peace talks, brokered by the US, that could begin as early as next month.

Mr Obama has strenuously denied considering such an idea, but observers have said it is likely the US president would have developed it as a contingency plan.

Since taking office last year, the Mr Obama's efforts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal have faltered badly. Trust between the two sides has all but evaporated in a row over Mr Netanyahu's Jewish settlement policy in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which also triggered a noxious row between Israel and the United States.

Although both the Israelis and Palestinians have indicated their willingness to resume talks, suspicions linger and negotiations will not be held face to face.

Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli diplomat close to the Obamad administration, said it seemed plausible that officials in Washington would consider taking matters into their own hands.

"An international conference involving the EU, China and Russia is more of a recipe for chaos than a practical political blueprint," he said. "But anything is better than the status quo."

Fearing that it will deprive them of ownership of the peace process, the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are both likely to oppose a conference.

"The idea that you can have instant peace like instant coffee is an illusion," said an Israeli official.

"If you enforce a time limit and then introduce an imposed solution if they don't succeed after a period, then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: you're going to guarantee the talks won't succeed."

According to *Haaretz*, the conference would be convened under the auspices of the Quartet for Middle East peace, whose membership comprises the United States, the EU, the UN and Russia.

It would mark the first time in 17 years of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that the United States had handed control of the peace process to the international community.

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