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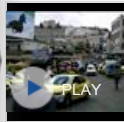
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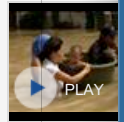


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# Panetta Warns of Israeli Isolation

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By JULIAN E. BARNES

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta warned Sunday that Israel was at risk of becoming isolated and more vulnerable if it did not take steps to repair ties with neighboring countries and restart negotiations with the Palestinians.



Israel welcomes efforts by international mediators to resume peace talks; with Palestinians calling for settlement halt before talks. Courtesy of Reuters.

The U.S. remains committed to helping Israel maintain its "qualitative military edge" in the Middle East, Mr. Panetta said. But he added that genuine security would not come through military hardware, but by returning to peace negotiations.

"The question you have to ask is: 'Is it enough to maintain a military edge if you are isolating yourself in the diplomatic arena?'" he said. "Real security can only be achieved by a strong diplomatic efforts as well as a strong

effort to protect your military strength."

Mr. Panetta commented while en route to Israel for a visit starting Monday. While there, he will try to restart direct negotiations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. He is scheduled to meet with both Israeli and Palestinian officials.

Mr. Panetta, the former CIA director and a onetime White House official, said the U.S. wants to give the Israelis confidence that they can "take risks for peace" and that they will have "room to negotiate."

Mr. Panetta is also scheduled to travel to Egypt to meet with officials there, and said he would try to help improve communications and cooperation between Cairo and Jerusalem.

Israel has strained to maintain ties to neighboring countries with which it once had strong working relationships. Turkey, which once had close bonds to Israel, has grown more distant over the issue of the Israeli naval blockade of Gaza. Israel's relations with Egypt have also deteriorated, culminating in a recent attack on the Israeli embassy by protestors in Cairo.

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Mr. Panetta said that the events of the Arab Spring made it critical for Israel to repair those frayed relationships, and suggested that the start of direct negotiations could be the kind of diplomatic overture that improves ties.

"It is pretty clear at this dramatic time in the Middle East when there have been so many changes that it is not a good situation for Israel to become increasingly isolated. And that is what has happened," Mr. Panetta said.

On Sunday, Israel again appeared to endorse, with qualifications, calls to resume direct negotiations with the Palestinians. Palestinian officials have said they will return to negotiations only after Israel promises to freeze settlement building. U.S. officials last week issued another rebuke to Israel for announcing plans for 1,100 units in southeast Jerusalem, a proposal condemned by Palestinians.

Mr. Panetta insisted the two sides risked nothing by resuming direct talks, and said that would be among the message he delivered in his meetings Monday. He said during negotiations no one would tell either side what they had to give up.

"In many ways they can protect their interests when they go into negotiations and at the same time open the door to finding a way to resolve the difficult issues that are there," Mr. Panetta said.

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