

# THE JERUSALEM POST

## Will settler-Palestinian business forum get rare U.S. aid?

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A gathering of Palestinians, settler business people and Americans gathered at a tense moment for the Israeli-Palestinian relations.

A joint settler-Palestinian business forum hopes that it can be one of the recipients of the meager US government funds for such projects in the West Bank.

“There is congressional funding that was just made available,” US Senator James Lankford (R-OK) told The Jerusalem Post on Thursday. “The regulations have not been written for it yet, but it allows our [US] aid dollars to be used for this, and that was not so in the past.”

He spoke with the Post on the sidelines of the Israeli-Palestinian International Economic Forum at Jerusalem’s King David Hotel.

The unusual gathering of Palestinian and settler business people, as well as Americans, including [US Ambassador David Friedman](#) and Lankford, comes at a tense time in the trilateral relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Relations between the US and the Palestinian Authority are nonexistent. The US has cut most of its funding to the PA. In the past, it was one of the largest donors to the Palestinians, providing some half a billion dollars a year.

The PA in turn has rejected the less than \$100 million that remained of that funding, including for humanitarian projects and Palestinian security services. The Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act that went into effect last month would make the PA liable for hefty financial payments in

terrorism-related cases in US courts if it were to accept such aid.

Legislation making its way through Capitol Hill could allow for \$50m. to \$100m. to be given to business ventures in the West Bank and Gaza in a way that bypasses the act.

While the focus is Palestinian ventures, the Judea and Samaria Chamber of Commerce located in the Ariel settlement is eligible because it is a joint venture with individual Palestinian businessmen.

Co-founder Avi Zimmerman said that the unique settler-Palestinian partnership had potentially made them eligible for the former USAID program, which was scrapped last month.

In this climate with few opportunities for cooperation, Israeli-Palestinian public meetings are rare. Friedman told the gathering that he was encouraged to see Israelis and Palestinians sitting together.

He knocked the 1993 Oslo Accords and said his hand was open to the Palestinian people.

“To all the Palestinian friends who are here, the US is with you, the people of the US are with you, the president of the US is with you,” Friedman said.

He spoke of his support for the grassroots initiative which brings together settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank in joint business ventures, which was started last year.

“To my Israeli friends, I say the same,” Friedman said. “We are all with you, together to support you in new out-of-the-box thinking – to build a safe and more prosperous world for Israelis and Palestinians alike.”

But on Thursday, Friedman’s comments made it seem as if settlers, who are often portrayed as a stumbling block to the peace process, are now leading the way in an arena with few opportunities for joint cooperation.

“There is far more that unites us than divides us,” Friedman said, adding that in the Bible, Isaac and Ishmael reconciled their differences. “Obviously, we should do no less,” he added.

Initiatives like the economic one he discussed are not a substitute for a political resolution to the conflict, he said, adding that the political process is more complex.

“To hold the Palestinians hostage to a political solution, when humanitarian and business efforts are right in front of us, is a grave mistake and a grave disservice to the Palestinian people,” Friedman said.

“We all recall the Oslo Accords of 1993. There was an increase in terrorism four-fold. Why? Because pieces of paper do not make peace. Relationships make peace. Investments make peace. That is the kind of peace that is enduring.”

He said that the political process will continue, and that the US is hopeful that there will likewise be progress on the political front. But a delay in political progress should not mean a delay in assistance to the “Jews and Palestinians in Judea and Samaria,” the ambassador said.

“The Palestinian people deserve better,” he added. “Enough of the endless political bickering that has brought nothing but misery. Let us work together for all our people. Let us make real peace with each other.”

Palestinian businessman Ashraf Jabari of Hebron, who is a co-founder of the chamber, spoke to the gathering – first in Arabic and then in Hebrew – about the importance of ties with Israelis.

“The average American has no idea that Palestinians work with Israelis and that countless Palestinians want to work with Israelis,” he said.

Palestinians, however, are fearful to express this in public, Jabari said.

“I want to send a message to all the Palestinian people who want to continue in the way of peace,” he said, explaining that he wants to work toward a strong economy.

The event was sponsored by the American NGO US Israel Education Association, which has been heavily involved in promoting and supporting the chamber.

