

KU prof still sees obstacles to peace

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Too many obstacles remain in the path of a plan for Palestinian self-rule to declare peace in the Middle East, a Kansas University political scientist said today.

"Is this the first step in creating a lasting peace, or is it an attempt to diffuse efforts to gain a more thorough resolution?" said Deborah Gerner, KU associate professor.

Palestinian Liberation Organization and Israeli officials said an agreement could be signed this week in Washington. Under the autonomy plan, Israel would give Palestinians self-rule over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Jericho.

Gerner hadn't expected movement in peace talks among Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians,

Lebanese and Jordanians after 22 months of stalemate.

"Clearly, it's a big surprise to almost everyone," said Gerner, who spent the summer in the Cairo, Egypt.

Gerner said Palestinian and Israeli hard-liners will attempt to block an agreement.

"There are very outspoken critics on both sides," she said. "There are a large number of Israelis and Palestinians who feel that their minimal demands are not being met by this agreement."

She said Palestinians remain openly hostile to the peace process because they fear negotiations could prevent them from securing a homeland.

A large number of Israelis believe that giving up any territory is strategically unwise and religiously inappropriate, she said.

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Gerner said history has shown that peace settlements can't endure if they're too one-sided.

"In the end, you have to have what a majority feel is a just peace or it won't be sustainable," she said.

U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher's involvement in negotiations helped bring Israeli and Palestinian negotiators closer together, she said.

Gerner said Yasser Arafat, who helped negotiate the plan, was willing to budge because he thinks an agreement could legitimize his position as PLO leader.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin likely acknowledged the PLO represented moderate Palestinian sentiment and would be easier to deal with than more radical Palestinian groups, she said.

"There is the Israeli government perception that if they did not soon come up with progress in the peace talks that the principal Palestinian negotiators would lose credibility and then no agreement would be possible

down the road," she said.

Gerner said it made sense for Israel to give up Gaza. Israelis have had difficulty restraining Palestinians there and the area holds no strong religious importance, she said.