

Obama and Netanyahu: Storm Clouds Ahead?

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

A big confrontation is brewing between the United States and Israel's new government over the Palestine issue.

Since his first days in office, President Barack Obama has expressed clear support for speedy action toward the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Since then, he and his key advisers — Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and special envoy George Mitchell — have all quietly but firmly stayed the course in supporting that goal.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu strongly objects. He argues for starting with an "economic peace" for the Palestinians, and discussing sovereignty issues with them only much later — if at all. Though he has stopped short of saying an outright "No" to the Palestinian state idea, his advisers warn that he is adamantly opposed to the emergence of what he and they call "another Hamastan."

Thus far, this disagreement has not erupted into an open confrontation. Netanyahu has, after all, only been in office since Mar. 31. But it may well become more acute during May, when Netanyahu visits Washington.

Obama has also invited the leaders of Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to Washington at intervals throughout May and early June. Obama has already, this week, met with Jordan's King Abdullah II in the White House.

Serious, high-level fact-finding has also been undertaken by Mitchell, who recently completed a third round of "listening visits" to the Middle East.

Some Arab commentators have voiced impatience that, for all this "listening" and for all the rhetorical support the Obama team has given to an independent Palestinian state, they have taken little or no concrete action to achieve it. Several of these analysts also note that on more immediate — but still significant — issues of deep concern to the Palestinians, leading figures in and close to the administration have called on Israel to stop the commission of specific abuses, and Israel has defied those calls with apparent impunity.

That has been the case, they note, with Israel's ongoing demolition of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem, a policy that Clinton publicly called on Israel to suspend. And in Gaza, though powerful Democratic Senator John Kerry called on Israel to allow the passage of much-needed building materials into the Strip, Israel has still refused to do so.

One retired diplomat with long experience in the Middle East commented that episodes of defiance like those are harmful for U.S. diplomacy. "They send a message to Israeli hardliners that they can defy the U.S. and get away with it, while they signal to the Arabs

that the U.S. can easily be 'rolled' by the Israelis," he said. "Both ways it harms us."

In the short press conference he held with King Abdullah Tuesday, Obama signaled he may soon be ready to start ratcheting up the pressure on Netanyahu. "I agree that we can't talk forever, that at some point steps have to be taken so that people can see progress on the ground," he said. "And that will be something that we will expect to take place in the coming months."

He even indicated he might be preparing to link Israel's behavior on the peace process to the considerable amounts of financial, military, and political aid the U.S. gives to Israel, saying that what the U.S. can do, regarding Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking, is "create the conditions and the atmosphere and provide the help and the assistance that facilitates an agreement."

At present, just about all of the aid the U.S. gives Israel is completely delinked from Israel's performance on the peace process, and is often used by Israel to, for example, build new settlement infrastructure and then implement plans to defend the expanded settlements from Palestinian resistance. The aid Washington gives the PA is, by contrast, entirely linked to the PA's performance.

Thus far, most of the hardliners in Israel seem to assume it will be easy for the U.S. to continue to defy Obama.

Israel's deputy foreign minister (and former ambassador to the U.S.) Danny Ayalon even tried to lay down his own preconditions for the steps the U.S. must take — primarily, continuing to ratchet up the pressure with Iran — before Israel will even consider discussing the items on the U.S.'s peace agenda.

"It's like Ayalon doesn't quite understand which one of these countries is a superpower," the retired diplomat said.

Policies toward Iran have, certainly, become linked to policies toward Palestine in a number of complex ways. Hillary Clinton yesterday told a congressional panel that Israeli recalcitrance on the Palestine issue would make it much harder for the U.S. to win Arab support for continuing the confrontation with Iran.

Netanyahu, for his part, has hinted openly that he might be ready to launch a pre-emptive military strike against Iran — especially if he feels he is under pressure on the peace question. The well-informed Israeli journalist Aluf Benn noted, with some understatement, that this constituted a threat "to disrupt Obama's 'new order' in the region."

For now, both Obama and Netanyahu are still engaged in "pre-game sparring" and other preparations for the big confrontation between them that may well erupt next month.

For the past 16 years — including during Netanyahu's earlier term in office, 1996-99 — there has not been any big open rupture between Washington and Tel Aviv over the peace process or any other issue.

Throughout those years, successive Israeli prime ministers could always rely both on the support they had in the White House and on the deep funds of support Israel always had in Congress. Thus, if a president looked as if he might even be considering starting to apply pressure on Israel, the Israelis felt they could always rely on Congress to bring the White

House to heel.

But now, the level of support that Israel formerly always enjoyed in Congress, regardless of the content of its policies, has been significantly reduced.

Back in February, Massachusetts Democrat William Delahunt introduced a bill in the House of Representatives that congratulated Mitchell on his appointment and expressed clear support for the two-state solution. The bill now has 101 co-sponsors, and is slowly gathering yet more.

Obama, Clinton, and Mitchell all enjoy considerable support — and considerable political clout — in both houses of congress. The threesome also enjoys considerable support in the country as a whole, including in the Jewish community.

The American Jewish community is much more diverse that it once was. In recent years, several new Jewish organizations have emerged that have agendas that are both pro-Israel and pro-peace.

M.J. Rosenberg is the Washington policy director of one such group, the Israel Policy Forum.

“I guess Netanyahu is counting on pro-Israel organizations in America to line up behind him and not Obama,” Rosenberg wrote recently. “He is wrong.”

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