

Web Memo



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Prime Minister Olmert's Washington Marathon

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Today Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert makes his inaugural visit to the White House as Israel's top leader. High on the agenda will be discussions about Olmert's plan for Israeli withdrawal from much of the West Bank, the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories, the stalled peace process, and the Iranian nuclear issue. Olmert will address a joint session of Congress, a rare honor accorded only to America's closest allies. Most importantly, Olmert will seek to cement a close working relationship with President Bush, whom he has met only once before. Whether or not that effort is successful, expect no major agreements to arise from this visit.

Olmert will present to President Bush his "convergence" plan for the West Bank: the possible Israeli evacuation of more than 60,000 settlers from 72 settlements and the surrender of Israeli claims to more than 90 percent of the West Bank. Prime Minister Olmert has declared his intention to fix Israel's permanent borders in the next four years, with or without the agreement of the Palestinians.

This planned disengagement from the West Bank will be much more difficult, painful, and risky for Israelis than Ariel Sharon's 2005 disengagement from Gaza. Prime Minister

Olmert seeks the removal of nearly eight times more Israeli settlers from territory in the biblical heartland of Jewish history. Olmert expects little cooperation from the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority and hopes that the Bush Administration will embrace his withdrawal plan as it did Sharon's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, recognize Israel's prospective new borders, and help finance the withdrawal and relocation of settlers, estimated to cost more than ten billion dollars.

The Israeli prime minister is unlikely to secure the Bush Administration's full support for any of these objectives. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was seen by many Palestinians and other Arabs as a vindication of terrorist tactics. Palestinian terrorists fire rockets out of Gaza daily and will attempt to do the same from the West Bank, which is much closer to Israel's population centers. A unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank would leave a political and security vacuum that would be filled by Hamas and other terrorist groups that

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would threaten not only Israel, but the United States, Jordan, and Egypt.

Jordan already has cracked down on Hamas, arresting more than 20 of its members after discovering a cache of Iranian-supplied weapons smuggled from Syria on April 18. Jordan's King Abdullah, a key Arab ally, recently wrote to President Bush to express opposition to Prime Minister Olmert's unilateral withdrawal plan, which he fears would leave Jordan even more exposed to subversion of its population, which is more than half Palestinian.

The Bush Administration also is unlikely to recognize a unilaterally established Israeli border because it conflicts with President Bush's vision of a two-state solution set by negotiations acceptable to both sides. Extensive American financing of the withdrawal is unlikely because of the continuing high costs of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the recovery from Hurricane Katrina, which sank Sharon's hopes for American subsidies for his Gaza withdrawal.

"There will be no maps and there will be no exchange of letters," said National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley recently, seeking to lower expectations for the summit and implying that U.S. support for Olmert's withdrawal plan will not be forthcoming. The Bush Administration will press Olmert to explore negotiations with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, a bitter rival of Hamas who was elected in 2005 on a platform calling for peace negotiations with Israel. Olmert dismissed Abbas as a "powerless" leader who had little credibility in negotiations, but Washington is determined to broker talks between Abbas and Olmert so that any Israeli withdrawal would benefit Abbas, not Hamas.

The Bush Administration is concerned about the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian

territories and seeks to isolate and slash international aid to Hamas-controlled institutions while averting a humanitarian disaster for the Palestinian people, which would only harden Palestinians against peace with Israel. It should develop plans with Israel and international donors to provide humanitarian support for Palestinians through non-governmental organizations and possibly through Palestinian institutions controlled by President Abbas, if Abbas demonstrates a greater willingness to combat terrorism.

The Iranian nuclear weapons program also will be a priority issue on the bilateral agenda. Prime Minister Olmert told CNN in a May 21 interview that his focus was not when Iran builds a nuclear weapon, but rather when it acquires the knowledge needed to manufacture one. "This technological threshold is very close," he stated. "It can be measured in months rather than years." Olmert is likely to stress this point in talks with Administration officials and in his address to Congress.

In addition to a strong appreciation of the Iranian threat, both Bush and Olmert share a passion for jogging. Whether that will be enough to cement that kind of close relationship that Olmert seeks with the President and that the President previously enjoyed with Prime Minister Sharon is unclear. But in terms of practical effects over the final two-and-a-half years of the Bush presidency, their relationship coming out of today's meeting will likely determine to a large degree whether they run the Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic course as champions of competing policies or as cooperative partners.

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