

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2446
May 15, 2009

The Obama–Netanyahu Meeting: Finding Common Ground

James Phillips

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets President Barack Obama at the White House on May 18, two major issues will dominate their agenda:

1. How to revive stagnant Arab–Israeli peace negotiations; and
2. How to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons.

On both issues, the hawkish Netanyahu and the liberal Obama are likely to have major differences of opinion. But these differences can and will be bridged—if the Obama Administration takes a patient approach to resolving the complex and vexing issues related to the Arab–Israeli conflict and focuses on the more pressing issue of Iran’s drive for nuclear weapons. After all, the worst possible outcome for U.S. policy would be to rush to failure by mounting a premature push for Arab–Israeli peace when conditions are not ripe for a negotiated resolution, while engaging Iran in a risky diplomatic dialogue that could allow Tehran to buy time to reach its nuclear goal.

Giving Peace a Chance. Prime Minister Netanyahu arrives in Washington after Jordan’s King Abdullah and before Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who meets Obama on May 26 and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on May 28. After this flurry of high-level meetings, the Obama Administration, in coordination with the other members of the Quartet (Russia, the EU, and the United Nations), is expected to unveil a new framework for future Arab–Israeli peace talks.

As it fashions its peace plan, the Obama Administration must be realistic and reject the siren song of advocates calling for rapid progress toward a risky comprehensive settlement that would undermine Israeli security with few safeguards against continued Palestinian terrorism.

The simple truth is that the current situation is not ripe for a successful diplomatic push for peace—as demonstrated by the stalemated negotiations following the 2007 Annapolis conference. Palestinians remain bitterly divided, polarized by a bloody power struggle between the radical Islamists of Hamas and the discredited Palestinian Authority of President Abbas, which was defeated by Hamas in the 2006 elections and expelled from Gaza by a Hamas coup in 2007.

Hamas, which is armed and supported by Iran, rejects the possibility of a genuine peace with Israel and is well-positioned, in collaboration with Hezbollah (another Iranian-supported terrorist group, which fought a 34-day war with Israel in 2006), to torpedo any peace agreement. Any Palestinian state created in the near future would soon be taken over by Hamas, supported by Iran. This situation provides ample support for Netanyahu’s con-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2446.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

tention that there can be little progress toward a genuine peace until Iran has been defanged.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's refusal to endorse a two-state solution mandating Palestinian statehood is also understandable under current circumstances. It would be suicidal for Israel to permit Hamas to gain control over expanded territory, given the group's history of transforming Gaza into a base for launching indiscriminate rocket attacks (including many provided by Iran) against Israeli civilians after Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. Until Hamas has been discredited and defeated or chooses to abandon its hate-filled ideology—which is extremely unlikely—a two-state solution would be a formula for endless conflict, not a genuine peace.

Developing a Common Understanding. At their first meeting, President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu should begin to develop a common understanding of how to approach negotiations that seek to reconcile Israel's security needs with Palestinian demands for statehood.

This means that there must be ironclad guarantees that a Palestinian state would not become a terrorist entity. That will be impossible as long as Hamas, which remains implacably committed to destroying Israel, retains its stranglehold on Gaza and continues to threaten the weak Palestinian Authority.

Rather than press Netanyahu to accept a Palestinian state that would soon become a terrorist stronghold, President Obama should focus on securing the international cooperation necessary to break Hamas's stranglehold on power. This would entail continuing efforts to isolate Hamas, denying it foreign support and Iranian arms, and building up the economy of the West Bank to underscore the benefits of accepting the possibility of peaceful coexistence with Israel. Only after Hamas is deposed will conditions be ripe for the development of a new Palestinian leadership—one that is willing and able to negotiate a sustainable peace with Israel.

The Obama Administration should maintain the Bush Administration's position that Palestinian statehood is possible only after responsible Palestinian leaders emerge to:

- Halt terrorism,
- Uproot the terrorist infrastructure,

- End incitement against Israelis, and
- Make a credible commitment to peaceful coexistence with Israel.

Instead of seeking to burst through the diplomatic logjam by promising the immediate establishment of a Palestinian state, Washington should establish a framework for step-by-step negotiations that will help to build trust between Israelis and Palestinians. Such trust will be essential as both sides wrestle with thorny final status issues such as borders, security arrangements, the status of East Jerusalem, the status of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and the future of Palestinian refugees.

These issues will require protracted negotiations. Taking risky diplomatic shortcuts that would establish a Palestinian state before its leaders are capable of preventing it from reverting to terrorism will only weaken the long-term prospects for a sustainable peace.

Defusing Iran's Ticking Time Bomb. Iran's nuclear program is the most urgent issue for Israel and should be for the U.S. as well—given that the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism could soon acquire the world's most terrifying weapon. Time is running out on U.S. efforts to halt Iran's drive for nuclear weapons. Iran is reportedly making rapid progress and could very well obtain a nuclear weapon in the next year or two.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is concerned that the Obama Administration will paint itself into a corner by entering into endless diplomatic talks that allow Tehran to "run out the clock" while it finishes work on a nuclear weapon. A key issue for Monday's meeting, therefore, will be setting an acceptable timeframe for any such talks, including the fixing of a hard deadline for concrete results, after which there will be a reevaluation of the U.S. engagement strategy.

Given the bellicose statements of Iranian leaders, Iran's long history of supporting terrorism, and Iran's lavish support for Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel is understandably concerned about the expanded threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. The Obama Administration reportedly dispatched CIA Director Leon Panetta recently to warn the new Israeli government against surprising Washington with a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear program.

The Netanyahu government is likely to refrain from launching such a strike as long as there is a hope that Iran can be diplomatically diverted from its nuclear goal. But if the Obama Administration's diplomatic efforts fail to dissuade Iran from continuing on its nuclear path, then Netanyahu, a former commando, is unlikely to shrink from bold action to defend Israel from an existential threat.

Preventing the emergence of an Iranian nuclear threat—rather than kick-starting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that will take years to bear fruit—

should be the highest immediate priority for building a peaceful Middle East. Consequently, the Iranian nuclear threat is the most urgent issue on which Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama should focus in their upcoming meeting.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.