

# WebMemo



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## The Obama–Netanyahu Meeting: Closer Cooperation Needed

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When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with President Barack Obama on Tuesday, they will discuss policy questions related to the precarious situation in Gaza, the stalemated Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations, the growing Iranian threat, and other issues. But the main purpose of the summit will be to build better personal relations between the two leaders, restore mutual trust at the highest levels of their governments, and lay the foundation for closer cooperation in the future. No significant progress is possible on peace negotiations, or on stabilizing Israel’s volatile neighborhood, without a strong and effective Israeli–American partnership.

**Issue: The Gaza Blockade.** The simmering crisis in Gaza, dominated by the Islamist extremist Hamas regime, is likely to be the most immediate question that needs to be resolved. The clash provoked by Turkish Islamist militants aboard the “Free Gaza” flotilla last month has undermined international support for Israel’s naval blockade of Gaza. The two leaders should coordinate their policies to ease the restrictions on the flow of goods into Gaza without compromising Israel’s legitimate security needs.

Hamas, which transformed Gaza into a base for terrorism after it seized power in a bloody coup in 2007, cannot be trusted to indefinitely maintain the current informal ceasefire. To facilitate the transfer of supplies into Gaza, the Palestinian Authority should be given control of the crossing points on the Palestinian side of the border, perhaps with the assistance of international monitors. Extensive pre-

cautions must be taken to prevent Hamas from smuggling in arms, including sophisticated Iranian-supplied rockets, which would enable Hamas to resume its strategy of hiding among Palestinian civilians to launch rocket attacks against Israel.

President Obama should publicly support the Israeli investigation of the Gaza flotilla incident and pledge to block the U.N. from mounting an investigation that would inevitably devolve into a one-sided propaganda exercise, such as the U.N.’s Goldstone Commission, which investigated Israel’s counterterrorist campaign against Hamas in Gaza.

**Issue: Stalled Peace Negotiations.** The two leaders should also harmonize their policies on resuming the stalled peace negotiations with the Palestinians. For President Obama, peace is best achieved through unconditionally engaging adversaries, encouraging them to recognize and advance mutual interests, and promoting negotiations to facilitate compromise on every issue. For Benjamin Netanyahu, who has seen several peace negotiations collapse with disastrous consequences, peace must be built on the bedrock of security, achieved through careful negotiations with partners who can and will deliver on their commitments.

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Netanyahu's government knows that there is no Palestinian leader who is now willing and able to deliver peace, while the Obama Administration glosses over this inconvenient truth. Even if Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who currently refuses to meet Israelis in direct talks, could somehow reach an acceptable final status agreement with Israel, he cannot guarantee that such an agreement will end the conflict— Hamas is well-positioned to explode any peace agreement that Abbas signs by unleashing another round of rocket terrorism. Until Hamas is defeated and discredited, there can be no genuine peace.

Palestinian terrorist attacks, not Israeli settlements, are the chief barriers to peace. Many Israeli settlements are located in areas that could eventually be folded into Israel in exchange for equal amounts of Israeli territory transferred to Palestinian control, if and when borders are agreed upon in a final settlement. Yet when the Obama Administration sought to revive the comatose peace process, it made a settlement freeze the centerpiece of its strategy. Netanyahu's government agreed to a temporary freeze of settlements in the West Bank but balked at halting housing construction in east Jerusalem, which is claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians. It was unwise for the Obama Administration to push for a settlement freeze in Jerusalem in the absence of a permanent peace settlement that included iron-clad provisions ensuring Israel's security against terrorist attacks.

The Administration's primary focus on the settlements guaranteed friction with Israel's center-right government and hardened the Palestinian negotiating position, because Abbas could not be seen as less opposed to settlements than the United States. Despite the fact that Palestinians had negotiated for many years without gaining such a settlement freeze, Abbas has now made such a freeze a condition for resuming talks. As long as this emphasis on halting construction in Jerusalem continues, there is

likely to be little progress on negotiations because the Palestinians will sit back and let Washington extract concessions from Israel without feeling any need to reciprocate with concessions of their own.

Regarding the Jerusalem issue, Netanyahu's government stands on firm political ground. Most Israelis are unwilling to surrender more territory, much less control over east Jerusalem, unless they are sure that it will not be transformed into a base for terrorism, as Gaza was used by Hamas after Israel's 2005 pullout. Given this reality, it was unwise and counterproductive to pick a fight with a close ally on an issue that will do little to advance peace negotiations. The Administration should recalibrate its policy on settlements and press Abbas to moderate his demands to allow the resumption of direct talks before the Israeli moratorium on settlement building in the West Bank expires in September.

**The Looming Iranian Threat.** Obama and Netanyahu also need to discuss common approaches for dealing with the growing Iranian threat. The President should assure Netanyahu that he shares Israel's sense of urgency on the need to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program and boost Israel's defenses against Iran's ballistic missiles. Unless Obama outlines an effective strategy for ratcheting up sanctions outside the U.N. framework, Israel will be increasingly tempted to launch a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

**The Greater Threat.** Although Gaza and efforts to revive peace negotiations are pressing issues, in the long run the Obama–Netanyahu summit may be more important for setting a common course on Iran policy or risking the fallout of failing to do so.

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