

Obama gives Israel carte blanche on settlement construction

Chris Marsden
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Tuesday's meeting in New York between Barack Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas was widely regarded as little more than a photo opportunity before it began, as well as something of a political embarrassment for the US president.

It was both these things. But it also confirmed the degree to which the Obama administration is prepared to back Netanyahu's settlement construction programme on the West Bank and East Jerusalem and to dictate terms to the Palestinians.

The weeks leading up to the tripartite meeting were dominated by Israeli announcements of a massive programme of housing construction involving 3,500 units on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, contravening the official US position for a settlement freeze.

But after repeated official statements of opposition and diplomatic visits by Middle East Envoy George Mitchell, Obama unceremoniously dumped the demand for a freeze.

Assembling an hour late following separate discussions with Netanyahu and Abbas, Obama spoke alone before engineering an awkward handshake for the cameras. Obama did his best to give an appearance of strength. There must be a "sense of urgency," he said. "Simply put, it is past time to talk about starting negotiations. It is time to move forward."

But this was window dressing for his statement praising Netanyahu for having "discussed important steps to restrain settlement activity." This, not a freeze, was now the basis for future negotiations. Mitchell would meet next week in Washington with teams sent by Netanyahu and Abbas, Obama said, after which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would report back to him by mid-October.

Obama also chastised the Arab regimes along lines welcome to Tel Aviv, stating that it remained "important for the Arab states to take concrete steps to promote peace."

Abbas was praised for the PA's "efforts on security," a euphemism for clamping down on opposition to Israel and hostilities directed against Hamas in Gaza. But Obama followed this with criticism for not doing more to stop

incitement and to "move forward on negotiations."

He insisted that both leaders show "flexibility and common sense and sense of compromise." This was a barely veiled repudiation of the PA's insistence on a halt to settlement building and discussions on the final status of East Jerusalem as the basis for negotiations, as formerly agreed on by the "Road Map" drawn up under President George W. Bush.

Abbas, whose attendance at the summit was widely denounced in the West Bank and Gaza, was effectively humiliated by Obama for his pains. To save face afterwards, he insisted that during the meeting he had "confirmed our positions and commitment to the Road Map and its implementations" and "also demanded that the Israeli side fulfil its commitments on settlements, including on natural growth," having "defined the occupied territories as the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem."

The renewal of negotiations "depends on a definition of the negotiating process," Abbas said, meaning that talks must be based "on recognising the need to withdraw to the 1967 borders."

Such declarations were rendered meaningless by Mitchell's statement following the meeting. He stated clearly that ending Israeli settlements on the West Bank was not a precondition for talks. He told the *Jerusalem Post*, "There are many obstacles. [Settlements] are one. It's not the only one. We are not identifying any issue as being a precondition or an impediment to negotiation."

Mitchell described the settlement freeze as one of several US "requests" directed to both sides. Making clear that even the provisions of the Road Map have been junked, he insisted that "neither side should hold out for the perfect formula."

Whatever Abbas's public posturing, he has no alternative but to seek to impose on an increasingly hostile Palestinian population whatever rotten compromise is on offer from Washington and Tel Aviv.

Herb Keinon, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, noted the interview given by Abbas to Jackson Diehl in the

Washington Post this summer, in which he had attempted to project a hard-line stance. Abbas had said then that “he could wait until the US pressure on Israel led to the collapse of the Netanyahu government,” Keinon noted.

Keinon writes that with no evidence of US pressure, let alone the collapse of Netanyahu’s government, Abbas’s “waiting game” paradoxically “also serves Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, as long as—and this is indeed taking place—the Palestinians continue institution-building: improving their ability to govern, improving their security apparatus with the help of US Lt.-Gen. Keith Dayton, and improving their economy.”

Keinon here clearly identifies the role that the PA is expected to play and is, in fact, already playing—that of a proxy police force acting under the direct instructions of the US and Israel.

The Israeli delegation could not restrain itself from crowing over the outcome of the summit. Following his discussions with Obama, when asked by reporters what was meant by “restraint,” Netanyahu replied, “Ask the Americans.”

The Palestinians had agreed “to renew the negotiations without preconditions,” he insisted. What was now being decided was only “how the discussions will be held, within what framework and how they will be characterised.”

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the far-right Ysrael Beiteinu said that the meeting had proved peace negotiations could resume without giving in to Palestinian preconditions. He told the press of his friendly exchanges with Abbas and chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat. He said that he expected the Palestinians to withdraw their petition to the International Criminal Court in The Hague regarding Israeli Defence Forces war crimes during Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli assault on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009.

Netanyahu’s religious party coalition allies, Shas, gave him fulsome support. Interior Minister and Shas Chairman Eli Yishai declared that the Palestinians’ “sole aim is to entrench themselves in harmful positions in order to improve, through conflict, agreements that they themselves have trampled on.... The prime minister’s steadfast perseverance removed another layer from the Palestinian mask.”

Likud Knesset members (MKs) praised Netanyahu and even his right-wing critics within the party—several of whom had visited a settlers’ protest tent against a settlement freeze in Jerusalem prior to the summit—professed satisfaction at its outcome.

MK Ofir Akunis said the summit “proves construction in

Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] will continue alongside the diplomatic talks.... It’s now clear that the international community has far more esteem for a strong government that insists on Israeli interests.”

MK Tzipi Hotovely boasted that “Israel doesn’t have to prove to the world anymore that it is willing to take steps for peace. We can say that we tried everything and we will no longer make any concessions.”

Haaretz’s diplomatic affair correspondent Akiva Eldar pronounced a damning verdict on the degree to which Obama’s agenda is now so openly dictated by Netanyahu, Likud and the Israeli far right. He asked, “So what if Obama says the time has come to move the peace process forward? His chatter make[s] as much an impression on Netanyahu as the threats issued by the Labour Party rebels. [Likud minister-without-portfolio] Benny Begin and Yesha settlement leader Pinhas Wallerstein scare him more than that lefty Obama and his few friends in Israel.”

But Obama’s apparent impotence before Netanyahu cannot be so easily dismissed. It is a reflection of the fact that he shares Israel’s agenda in large measure. His primary concern in seeking “final status” negotiations with the Palestinians is to help secure Arab support for a broader agenda for securing US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East, centred on efforts to curtail Iran’s role as a regional power.

Whereas, to this end, Obama would like Israel to make a few more concessions to the Palestinians, he requires above all Israel’s support as a steadfast regional ally in his conflict with Tehran. With the United Nations summit dominated by US demands for additional sanctions against Iran, Netanyahu told the media that Iran was also a major subject of his own discussions with Obama. “The Iranian issue overshadows everything,” he said.



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