

Netanyahu defies Washington on settlements

Chris Marsden
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There was no report on the meeting Tuesday between US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Neither was an official handshake staged, let alone a press conference.

It was not until Wednesday that a terse statement was released by the White House, explaining that there remain disagreements with Israel and that the US was seeking “clarification” of plans to build homes in occupied East Jerusalem. The White House confirmed that the meeting with Obama was interrupted after 90 minutes at Netanyahu’s request, so he could consult with officials—indicating that some form of demand had been made of him.

Netanyahu delayed his departure for Israel in order to meet the US Middle East peace envoy, George Mitchell. But it is clear that he has again rebuffed demands that Israel end settlement construction.

The talks came following two weeks of public disagreements between Washington and Tel Aviv, following the March 9 announcement that Israel will build 1,600 new apartments in the Ramat Shlomo area of mainly Arab East Jerusalem, which was annexed from Jordan in 1967 and which the Palestinians claim as the capital of a future state.

The move threatens to worsen already explosive conflicts on the West Bank. The rededication of a synagogue in Jerusalem’s Old City was denounced by the Palestinians as part of an effort to destroy the Al Aqsa Mosque and rebuild the Jewish Temple Mount.

Hundreds of Palestinian protesters have fought with Israeli forces, and areas of the West Bank have been declared “closed military zones.” Hamas declared a “day of rage” over Al Aqsa on March 16, while Fatah’s military wing, the Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade, demanded that the Palestinian Authority allow it to resume the armed struggle against “attempts to judaize Jerusalem.” Students in Egypt also staged protests.

The Ramat Shlomo announcement was provocative, timed to coincide with US Vice-President Joseph Biden’s

visit to discuss a resumption of peace talks with Israeli President Shimon Peres. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Obama’s senior adviser David Axelrod accused Israel of “insulting” the United States.

In the run-up to the Obama-Netanyahu meeting, however, it was Washington that made the most strenuous efforts to restore normal relations, while Netanyahu insisted that no compromise was possible on settlement construction. Before he met with Obama, Netanyahu spoke to Clinton privately, and both attended the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington on Monday.

Clinton urged Israel to freeze settlement construction, engage in substantive talks with the Palestinians, withdraw its forces from the West Bank, and release some Palestinian prisoners. Netanyahu again rejected a settlement freeze.

But speaking before AIPAC, Clinton denied that US-Israeli relations were in crisis, stressing the “close, unshakeable bond” between the two states and America’s “rock solid, unwavering, enduring” support for Israel’s national security.

Netanyahu welcomed Clinton’s “warm remarks,” but declared that “Jerusalem is not a settlement. It is our capital.” He would continue to follow an Israeli policy that had been consistent ever since the 1967 Six Day War, knowing that Israel would continue to enjoy US support, “from one president to the next, from one Congress to the next.”

Sections of the international press claimed that Obama was finally preparing to curb Israel and even toying with the idea of bringing down Netanyahu’s unstable coalition and engineering its replacement by a Kadima-led coalition. In the *Guardian*, Jonathan Freedland noted, “The last time the US put such a serious squeeze on Israel was nearly 20 years ago, when the first George Bush threatened to withhold \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel if settlement building did not stop. That led eventually to the removal of the stubborn Yitzhak Shamir as prime minister and his replacement by the peace-

seeking Yitzhak Rabin.”

But the arguments used to back up such claims—centring on Washington’s desire to preserve and strengthen its interests in the Middle East—also militate against such a head-on confrontation with Israel.

Since its establishment, and particularly following its victory over Egypt, Syria and Jordan in 1967, Israel has functioned as both a regional power and America’s key Middle East ally. It receives massive economic, military and diplomatic support from the US, without which it could not survive. But whereas its interests generally coincide with those of Washington—in combating threats to America’s interests either from the Arab states or, more importantly, the Arab masses—they are not identical. At times this makes for fraught relations.

The source of recent tensions lies in America’s striving to restore its influence in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion and, in particular, its efforts to build a coalition of Arab states—including Egypt and Saudi Arabia—supportive of its drive to curb Iran.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of the US Central Command, stated bluntly that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict posed a threat to US interests, fomenting “anti-American sentiment” and aiding Al Qaeda. Insufficient progress towards a comprehensive Middle East peace “presented distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests,” he said.

However, maintaining close relations with Israel remains a key component of America’s Middle East strategy. The Obama administration is angry that Netanyahu’s unrestrained settlement construction has undermined its efforts to repair the damage done by the Bush administration and present the US as an honest broker in the Israel-Palestine conflict. But in the recent past, it was the US that backed down when Israel refused to toe the line.

Last September, the Obama administration demanded that Israel halt all settlement construction in the West Bank and Netanyahu refused. The US accepted Netanyahu’s spurious pledge to “limit” settlement construction, with Clinton famously praising this as an “unprecedented” concession.

Washington’s generally placatory stance towards Israel is not merely an external question. Israel enjoys substantial political support within American ruling circles. Netanyahu and Likud, moreover, have close ties with the Republicans. Obama and the Democrats fear being branded by the political opposition as insufficiently

supportive of Israel.

Israel’s hard-line stance towards the Palestinians, Lebanon, Syria and Iran finds its echo in Congress amongst both Republicans and Democrats. Following his appearance at AIPAC, Netanyahu addressed Congress. He received a bipartisan vote of confidence, with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declaring, “In Congress we speak with one voice on the subject of Israel.”

At this point, the Obama administration is focusing its efforts on seeking ever-more stringent sanctions against Iran, while offering “comprehensive diplomatic contacts and dialogue.” Should this fail, however, a military strike against Tehran is possible and Israel would necessarily be involved.

Scotland’s *Sunday Herald* last weekend reported that the US was moving 387 bunker-buster bombs to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean in preparation for such an attack on Iran. Dan Plesch, director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) at the University of London, described US plans as “gearing up totally for the destruction of Iran” by hitting “10,000 targets in Iran in a few hours.”

Netanyahu stressed the threat from Iran throughout his Washington visit, telling AIPAC that Israel expected the international community to deal decisively with Tehran and prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons. The *Sunday Times* also reported Netanyahu’s intention to ask the US to provide Israel with the bunker-buster bombs required by Israel to attack Iran’s underground nuclear-enrichment installations.

The Middle East is being destabilised not only as a result of Netanyahu’s offensive against the Palestinians in pursuit of a “Greater Israel.” More fundamentally, Israel’s actions are exposing the falsity of America’s claim to be a friend of the Palestinians and highlighting the reality of Washington’s predatory designs on Iran and the entire region.

This is creating the conditions for an explosion of anger amongst the Arab masses that will not be confined to the West Bank and Gaza.

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