

# Netanyahu confirms US discussions on West Bank settlement annexations

**Jean Shaoul****16 February 2018**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday he was “maintaining a dialogue with the Americans” about a proposal to permanently annex Zionist settlements in the West Bank.

Josh Raffel, a White House spokesman on Israel-Palestine affairs, immediately denied the claim, saying, “Reports that the United States discussed with Israel an annexation plan for the West Bank are false. The United States and Israel have never discussed such a proposal, and the president’s focus remains squarely on his Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative.”

He warned that such a step would lead to tension and instability, and “destroy any international effort to save the peace process.”

Following a US request for clarification, Netanyahu’s spokesperson said, “Netanyahu updated the Americans on the initiatives being raised in the Knesset [Israel’s parliament] and the Americans expressed their unequivocal position that they are committed to advancing President Trump’s peace plan.”

Framed as a retreat to save Washington from political embarrassment in front of its Arab allies, the statement in fact made clear that Netanyahu told the truth about his discussions with the US.

Discussions in the cabinet centre on the Sovereignty Bill, proposed by his Likud party and his coalition partner Jewish Home, that calls for annexing the settlements in the West Bank, although many coalition members want to annex the entire West Bank.

Netanyahu had sought to stall the Bill, arguing that such a step had to be coordinated with Washington. Speaking at a coalition meeting, he said, “I can tell you that for a while now I’ve been talking about it with the Americans.” He added, “I’m guided by two principles in this issue ... optimal coordination with the Americans, whose relationship with us is a strategic asset for Israel

and the settlement movement; and the fact that it must be a government initiative rather than a private one because it would be a historic move.”

But this was the first time as prime minister that Netanyahu had publicly expressed support for annexing all or part of the West Bank, which has long been an aim of his Likud party, a position usually avoided in deference to his political masters in Washington. But facing the very real possibility of charges on two counts of corruption, with the police confirming on Tuesday that there was sufficient evidence to indict him for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in two separate cases and to show he had acted “against public interests,” he sought to placate the most right-wing elements of Israeli society by dangling the carrot of US approval for such a project.

Irrespective of the White House’s attempts to deny it, Trump’s manifest support for Israel and its expansionary policy at the expense of the Palestinians was made abundantly clear by his announcement that the US Embassy will shift to Jerusalem.

Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital demands permanent annexation of swathes of the West and will have been discussed with the US. And there is every reason to assume a tacit agreement has been reached on this—in furtherance of the US drive to war throughout the Middle East, particularly against Iran. It would be Israel’s natural reward for services rendered.

On Saturday, Israel—acting as Washington’s proxy—attacked 12 of Syria’s main air defence sites, which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) described as “Iranian targets.” The IDF said it had inflicted huge damage, in the “most significant attack” against Syria since the 1982 Lebanon war.

There is no question that the Trump administration gave prior approval to the attacks. US officials

denounced Iran as a threat to the region, while the White House declared support for “our staunch ally, Israel” and its right “to defend itself from the Iranian-backed Syrian and militia forces in southern Syria.”

As far as the US was concerned, Netanyahu’s only error was to overstep the mark by advertising so openly the Trump administration’s support for Israel’s settlement annexations. But Netanyahu and his coalition partners were nevertheless emboldened to do so precisely by Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

When Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas refused to meet Vice President Mike Pence during his visit to the Middle East three weeks ago, Trump attacked Abbas, saying, “They disrespected us a week ago by not allowing our great vice president to see them” and repeated his threat to cut US financial assistance to the Palestinians. “Money is not going to them unless they sit down and negotiate peace,” he said.

Trump has slashed funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in the Middle East by some \$65 million in a bid to bring the Palestinian leadership to the negotiating table with Israel on a US peace plan. Having already endorsed Israel’s position on Jerusalem, Trump’s “deal of the century” has been drafted by his envoys, son-in-law Jared Kushner and long-time legal adviser Jason Greenblatt, in cooperation with Netanyahu and is to be imposed on the Palestinians without any negotiations.

On Sunday, Trump said as much stating, “I don’t know frankly if we are going to even have talks. We will see what happens, but I think it is very foolish for the Palestinians and I also think it would be very foolish for the Israelis if they don’t make a deal. ... It’s our only opportunity and it will never happen after this.”

Widely trailed, the proposed deal will reject the Palestinians’ key demand, the right of return of the diaspora to their former homes. It will also allow Israel to incorporate the settlements—located in Area C, which accounts for 60 percent of the West Bank and is presently under Israel’s direct military control—while some East Jerusalem neighbourhoods would come under Palestinian rule.

Any Palestinian “state” will have limited sovereignty over approximately half of the West Bank. This

truncated entity of non-contiguous towns and villages would include the Gaza Strip and have its capital in Abu Dis, near Jerusalem. All this would be sugared with some economic assistance from the oil monarchies.

The Trump administration’s budget has also called for a reduction from \$146 million to \$84 million in the US contributions to the UN’s Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—established in 1978 to police the southern region of Israel’s northern neighbour.

Israel has started constructing a wall along the disputed border. At the same time, the Trump administration is seeking \$50 million to modernise the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as a counterweight to Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

The administration is seeking a 55 percent cut, from \$24.6 million to \$11.1 million, to the UN Disengagement Observer Force in the Golan Heights, most of which Israel seized in the 1967 war with its Arab neighbours.

The Arab regimes, which are eager to work with Israel and the US against Iran, will offer no real opposition to Trump’s support for Netanyahu’s suppression of the Palestinians or his designs on the West Bank settlements.



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