

Settlement Snafu

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The embarrassment over Israel's announcement of 1,600 new housing units during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit has been elevated to an outright controversy with the public rebuke issued by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. On Thursday, Biden affirmed that the U.S.-Israel relationship is "impervious to any shifts in either country," and that "[n]o matter what challenges we face, this bond will endure."

Just a day later, however, according to State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, Clinton told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by phone that "the Israeli government needed to demonstrate not just through words, but through specific actions, that they are committed to this relationship [italics added] and to the peace process." The secretary proceeded to amplify her rebuke through a series of TV interviews.

The United States is justifiably upset over the incident. But its alliance with Israel is crucial for both sides. An Israel that is weakened in its relationship with the United States will not be strong enough to take risks for peace.

Moreover, the United States looks bad when a statement by its own vice president on Thursday is being put into serious question by the State Department spokesman on Friday.

Fortunately, the U.S.-Israel relationship still has a solid core. There have been almost a dozen separate high-level visits to each country in just the last two months, as the two countries are cooperating extremely closely in their efforts to prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. The United States also stood with Israel in resisting the unbalanced Goldstone report on Gaza. The two countries also engaged in a massive military exercise together recently.

President Barack Obama has reason to be upset by this episode, which must seem like *deja vu*. After what Netanyahu described as his best meeting yet with Obama last November, the prime minister was blindsided by an announcement from his own bureaucracy regarding the construction of 900 new units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo.

After this embarrassment, senior U.S. officials say Netanyahu pledged that there would not be any more surprises for the prime minister's office, or for the Obama administration. Netanyahu promised to create a mechanism to avoid such mishaps. During the previous Ehud Olmert government, the prime minister had a parliamentary representative keeping track of settlement decisions in order to prevent such a miscommunication. Apparently for

the current government, this mechanism was either not established or it did not work. It is hard to know which is worse. If there was no mechanism, the Israelis are guilty of duplicity. If there was a mechanism that failed to function, it is ineptitude.

It seems Clinton's actions were driven in part by the belief that a strong statement is required to avoid Arab backsliding on the eve of envoy George Mitchell's visit. However, there is also the danger that this harsh response will make Palestinians and Arab states more likely to escalate their demands now, and in the future. The United States should be wary of the cautionary tale provided by the Obama administration's call in 2009 for a strict settlement freeze. This step ended up not mollifying, but rather boxing in, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas has given two interviews, to Der Spiegel and Asharq al-Awsat, in which he has made clear that the U.S. position forced him to take a maximalist position, so he was not outflanked by Washington. The net impact has been that direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians have still not resumed since the start of the Obama administration.

This does not mean that Israel should be left off the hook. Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai, who bears responsibility for the announcement of 1,600 units in East Jerusalem at the time of Biden's visit, should be replaced.

Yishai is a central figure in Israel. In Israel, the interior minister is in charge of national allocations to local governments. In other words, he is indispensable to every mayor. This is how Yishai's party, Shas, built its power base in the 1980s. Key municipal changes usually require his ministry's involvement.

Yishai is also one of seven ministers who meet in Netanyahu's office and form the inner political circle called the "ha'shvi'ia" -- or, simply, "the seven." It is hard to believe that Yishai was not aware of the announcement about the new neighborhood. He most probably did not seek to sabotage the Biden visit, but he was either indifferent or simply did not connect the dots. This is not much better.

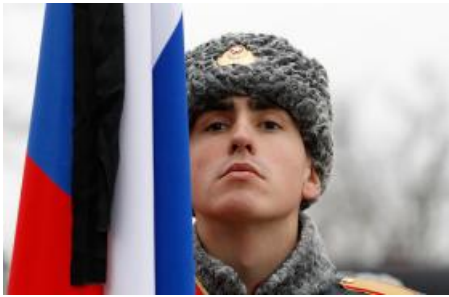
Replacing Yishai would send a message in the Israeli political world that U.S.-Israel relations are more important than domestic politics. While Netanyahu will want to avoid a coalition crisis with his ally, Shas, this could be avoided if the prime minister confers directly with the party's spiritual head, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, to find another Shas figure to assume the position of interior minister.

Yishai's departure would demonstrate that Israel recognizes that it cannot take the United States for granted. This move will also prove to Washington that its concerns are being taken seriously. However, strengthening the bilateral relationship requires a mutual effort by both sides. From the U.S. side, Clinton should seek redress by insisting on specific changes to Israeli behavior without bringing into question the very contours of the U.S. relationship with Israel, which Biden, and Obama himself, have sought to deepen.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65). ❖

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