

Netanyahu and the Blind Side

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Mar 11, 2010

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The New York Times convened an online panel of seven Middle East experts to discuss Israel's intention to expand housing units for Jews in East Jerusalem -- an announcement made during U.S. vice president Joe Biden's visit to that country. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow David Makovsky, director of the Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms). Read (<http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/10/israels-challenge-to-the-u-s/?scp=1&sq=makovsky&st=cse>) the entire discussion on the Times website.

Both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Interior Minister Eli Yishai have expressed regret that the announcement of 1,600 units in East Jerusalem occurred during Vice President Biden's visit.

While critics insist the move by Netanyahu was deliberately aimed at angering the Obama administration and doubt that Netanyahu was blindsided as he insists, such an accusation seems unlikely to be true.

It was widely known that the Biden mission was a fence-mending visit designed to improve U.S.-Israel relations after a period of friction in bilateral ties during the past year. Indeed, until the incident, Biden's comments have been pitch perfect for Israeli ears. His trip was intended to assure Israeli concerns about U.S. commitment to their security.

Moreover, it is also known that his trip was designed to deal with another area of crucial concern for Israel: the depth of the Obama administration's commitment to ensuring that Iran does not gain nuclear weapons capability. Along with the restarting of peace talks with the Palestinians, U.S.-Israel relations and Iran are the key themes of Biden's visit.

It would be suicidal for Netanyahu to seek to sabotage such a friendly visit given Israel's supreme interest in both of these issues. A deliberate move to undermine the Biden visit could fatally undermine Netanyahu's efforts to improve ties with the Obama administration. Even Netanyahu's biggest critics do not think he would act in a manner so counterproductive to Israel's own concept of the national interest.

But two lessons must be learned from this incident. It is the second time that the prime minister of Israel claims to have been blindsided by his own bureaucracy. The first time was last November, a week after Netanyahu had what he has called his best meeting with Obama, in which no aides were present. At the time, it was announced that 900 housing units would be built in the Gilo neighborhood of East (actually southern) Jerusalem.

Given the political sensitivities of building in Jerusalem, decision-making on this issue in the future must be concentrated in the prime minister's office. It is unthinkable that bureaucrats under the prime minister can make decisions that have a great impact on Israel, while the leader remains a bystander. The prime minister is accountable to the Israeli people, and therefore he must decide.

A second lesson is about Jerusalem itself. Even if Senator George Mitchell's efforts make serious strides on demarcating Israeli and Palestinian borders in the West Bank, it is unlikely that the status of Jerusalem will be agreed on tomorrow. As it stands, Mitchell has not been successful in winning acceptance of a housing freeze in East Jerusalem.

Therefore, something more practical is required: namely that Israelis and Palestinians reach a baseline agreement that neither party will expand into the neighborhoods of the other in East Jerusalem. This is more attainable than a freeze, and could avoid flashpoint incidents in the future. ❖

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