

# The Obama-Netanyahu Meeting:

## Analysis and Assessment

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### Brief Analysis

**T**his week's White House meeting between President Barack Obama and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu was both uneventful and momentous -- and because of this, its ramifications are likely to ripple throughout U.S. and Middle East politics far into the future.

#### Unmet Expectations of Conflict

The party most upset by the outcome of the Oval Office tete-a-tete was surely the press corps -- both U.S. and Israeli -- which had seemed eager to see these two savvy, confident politicians locking horns. In fact, both Obama and Netanyahu were effusively warm toward each other in public, with the former extolling their "extraordinarily productive" 105-minute private discussion and the latter calling his host a "great" leader no fewer than four times (and this, just over 100 days into his presidency!)

Indeed, each leader dismissed with brief remarks disputes that existed largely in the imaginations of newspaper columnists and bloggers. By committing himself to "simultaneous and parallel" pursuit of Arab-Israeli peacemaking and efforts to prevent Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, Netanyahu resolved a thorny chicken-and-egg dispute over which comes first. And by recognizing the legitimacy of Israel's "existential" fears regarding Iranian nuclear ambitions, Obama recognized implicitly the principle that Israel has the right to take any action necessary to prevent those fears from becoming reality. Having speedily dispensed with potential philosophical confrontations in their relationship, the two leaders were able to focus on practical matters.

#### What They Said and What They Did Not

The two leaders made quite a bit of news on different aspects of the Arab-Israeli peace process, including early hints of a new U.S. peace initiative and the resurrection of the 2003 Quartet Roadmap as a reference for Israeli-Palestinian accountability. There was very little public discussion, however, of how to resolve the most serious obstacle to progress in Israeli-Palestinian talks: the structural division between a Hamas-led Gaza and a Palestinian Authority (PA)-led West Bank. And there was no public discussion at all of the Syrian peace track.

A regional initiative. The new innovation the Obama administration seems ready to inject into Arab-Israeli

peacemaking is the transformation of the Saudi-inspired Arab Peace Initiative (API) into an operational plan that could incentivize progress on the bilateral track through action on the regional front. From the outset, the API was more an abstract statement of intent (summarized as "all Arab states would make peace with Israel once Israel resolved all issues with Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese") than an active plan to help the core parties make progress in those negotiations. As current and former Washington Institute fellows David Makovsky and Dennis Ross have argued for years, the terseness of the API underscored the need for an "Arab Roadmap" to parallel the bilateral Roadmap. Reports that Obama's Middle East envoy George Mitchell has asked Arab states to consider small confidence-building measures that would proceed in tandem with steps by Israel, such as granting overflight rights to Israeli civilian aircraft, are examples of what the administration evidently has in mind to start this process.

The relevance of a "23-state solution" approach, as it was termed recently by British foreign secretary David Miliband, to promoting the "two-state solution" will depend on whether the Arab contribution to peacemaking is connected to political realities. In the early Oslo era, Israelis were smitten with the idea of economic conferences in Casablanca and water desalination projects with Oman. Today, in the jaded era of suicide bombers, Qassam rockets, and the Hamas coup in Gaza, Israelis are far more concerned with basic security matters than with peripheral political achievements. If Arab states can contribute on that front -- by taking unprecedented action to cripple Hamas, strengthening the Palestinian Authority, and working with Israel to prevent smuggling of weapons, money, and technology to anti-peace elements -- then a regional initiative has a real chance of bolstering peace prospects. The same is true of Arab states providing a diplomatic umbrella for Palestinians to make historic compromises on key issues of refugees and Jerusalem. However, a warmed-over repeat of the Madrid-era regional track of negotiations or the injection of small-bore, reversible normalization steps is unlikely to produce any more progress on the core diplomacy than did the first effort a decade-and-a-half ago.

Return to the Roadmap. A second key element of the Obama-Netanyahu exchange was, effectively, the resurrection of the Roadmap as a point of reference for progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Here, the president referred specifically to the phase-one requirements to which each side committed itself: for the Palestinians, action on security, counterterrorism, and incitement; for the Israelis, action on settlement activity. Most observers read a looming crisis with a Likud-led Israeli government into the president's statement that "settlements must stop." In fact, chances of this are less likely than they seem. Unless Netanyahu opts for a Har-Homa-type poke in the eye to Obama, U.S.-Israeli differences over settlement activity revolve around Israeli government support for "natural growth" in existing built-up areas within settlements. Discussions on this can be arcane but contentious; still, the two sides have figured out ways to manage such disagreements in the past and can readily do so again if they want to. Israel is likely to avoid a clash on this topic, precisely because it welcomes a return to the Roadmap, as signaled in the very first statements made by new Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman when he came to office two months ago. That is because the Roadmap offers a sequence of performance-based peacemaking steps more amenable to Israel's governing coalition.

Will the Roadmap be the touchstone of U.S. efforts on Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking? The president was ambiguous, and the prime minister, by affirming his Annapolis-style willingness to immediately restart political talks with the Palestinians, was as well. Interestingly, President Obama referred to both the Roadmap and Annapolis in the same sentence -- despite the fact that they reflect different concepts in peacemaking. The former, one should recall, sets out a very specific timetable of action, in which any diplomatic engagement comes after the two parties fulfill preliminary requirements; by contrast, Annapolis was premised on a major Israeli concession -- Israel's willingness to proceed directly to negotiations on the permanent-status arrangement without progress by the two parties on phase-one obligations. (Annapolis did include the idea that implementation of any agreement would await fulfillment of Roadmap obligations.) Still, no matter how much the language is parsed, the Roadmap and Annapolis represent differing models of diplomacy -- and before long this contrast is likely to make itself felt.

In this regard, the difference between Obama's use of the "two-state solution" formula and Netanyahu's reference to living "side by side" in "security and peace" with Palestinians who will not have "a handful of powers that could endanger the state of Israel" is more rhetorical than substantive. What is more significant is their potential divergence over the Roadmap and Annapolis models of peacemaking.

A strategy for the PA-Hamas split. At least in terms of their public exchange, the elephant in the room vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was the absence of any common strategy for dealing with the division between Hamas-controlled Gaza and the PA-led West Bank. Despite the flurry of activity on regional peacemaking, the structural impediment to peace is the persistence of Hamas rule in Gaza and the threat that Hamas poses to PA governance in the West Bank. Without a solution to this problem, diplomatic progress between Israel and the PA has no chance; after all, the odds are nil that Israel will contemplate territorial withdrawal in the West Bank without ironclad certainty that the Gaza episode will not be repeated. There are hopeful signs on the ground, especially the progress of Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton's train-and-equip mission for Palestinian security forces, but so far this has only produced 1,500 troops spread out throughout the West Bank. The president's comments about the importance of permitting humanitarian goods into Gaza notwithstanding, no clear sign emerged that he and his Israeli counterpart reached agreement on a strategy for dealing with the PA-Hamas rift: Do they support or oppose a Palestinian unity government, as advocated by some Arab states? Do they support a Palestinian election in early 2010 as a way to bolster PA president Mahmoud Abbas or oppose it because of the risk that Hamas may win again? Do they support or oppose building up forces loyal to Abbas for an eventual effort to retake Gaza from Hamas? Reaching early agreement on these questions is critical.

Ignoring Syria. Nothing rattles the Syrian leaders more than evidence of their irrelevance, and they received a salutary dose of that when the word "Syria" was not mentioned in the leaders' public comments. The Bashar al-Asad regime was already smarting over George Mitchell's failure to visit Damascus to this point. Whether by design or happenstance, the two leaders' lack of public referral to the Syrian track suggests at least two things about Obama: he does not appear to view progress on this track as even approaching the emotive importance of progress on the Palestinian track for improving U.S. relations with Muslim states and peoples, nor does he appear to view progress on the Syria track as the key to a "strategic realignment" that would weaken Iran and make it more ready to compromise. None of this is to suggest that the president will not be eager to pursue diplomatic opportunities if they arise -- indeed, Netanyahu announced on his arrival back in Israel that he is willing to open talks with Syria "without preconditions" -- but Obama certainly gave no hint on Monday that he believes Syria holds the key to progress on the critical issues of peace and war in the region.

The Main Headline: Iran

While all these important themes emerged from the leaders' meeting, the main headline concerned Iran -- namely, the president's statement that he rejected an "artificial" deadline for U.S.-Iranian negotiations but that the United States would be in a position to judge whether talks were proceeding in "good faith" by the end of 2009. What makes this date -- six months after Iran's presidential election -- less artificial than any other is not clear; if reputable news outlets like the Wall Street Journal are to be believed, this date is two to three months later than the deadline for reassessing talks with Iran that senior officials had briefed to journalists just a couple of weeks ago. It is also not clear whether the United States -- and, more importantly, its current and potential partners in Europe, Russia, China, India, and the Persian Gulf -- will be ready at year's end to implement the "crippling" sanctions on Iran that Secretary of State Clinton foreshadowed in her Senate testimony last month or whether the international community must first await the judgment about Iran's good faith, with any imposition of sanctions coming later. In either case, it is clear that the Obama administration has wagered that a strategy of "carrots first, sticks later" will achieve better results than a strategy of "bigger carrots, bigger sticks." Perhaps the administration, having concluded that its

partners had no stomach for stiffening sanctions now, simply decided to make the best of a bad situation.

Regardless, both Tehran and Jerusalem are likely to interpret the president's announcement in a similar light -- that for at least the next six months, Iran's centrifuges will almost surely continue to spin and Iran will incur no significant additional cost for this action. Decisions on what to do about this situation will be made in 2010.

However logical in terms of what the diplomatic traffic will bear with our allies, this timetable increases the chances of a collision between the United States and Israel in 2010 -- a collision that has the potential to be even more damaging to U.S.-Israeli relations than the face-off over Suez a half-century ago. Assuming the carrots-first strategy does not bear fruit by year's end, the collision would be borne of an Israeli assessment that the time available to compel, through sanctions, a real change in Iranian nuclear activity is running out and that the time for more direct preventive action is at hand. Even defining when it would be "too late" for more coercive diplomacy to work will be a point of disagreement -- on Monday, President Obama referred narrowly to preventing Iran from "obtaining a nuclear weapon," whereas Prime Minister Netanyahu said that "the worst danger we face is that Iran would develop nuclear military capabilities." The difference between actually having a weapon (Obama's red line) and achieving the capability to develop one (Netanyahu's red line) is stark.

A collision on Iran policy is neither certain nor foreordained; the two sides have ample time to work out a common strategy and division of labor to address this problem. Perhaps the administration's strategy will reap dividends this year; if not, perhaps the administration will invest as much energy and power in compelling Iran to change course in 2010 as it is in enticing them to do so in 2009. But given the enormous equities at stake and the fundamental differences in perception between a small state that sees its national existence in peril and a global superpower that sees this issue as one among several urgent problems to address, great care must be taken in both Washington and Jerusalem to prevent this divergence from metastasizing into the worst crisis in the six decades of U.S.-Israeli relations.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, author of [The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror \(templateC04.php?CID=65\)](#) (2004) and host of Dakhil Washington ("Inside Washington"), a public affairs talk show on al-Hurra satellite television. His comments do not necessarily reflect those of al-Hurra. ❖

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