

Are Obama and Netanyahu Destined to Clash?

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

May 15, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

On Monday, May 18, U.S. president Barack Obama will host Israeli prime minister and Likud leader Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu at the White House for their first meeting since the new Israeli government was formed six weeks ago. Some observers predict that, sooner or later, the two are bound to collide; however, a candid exchange of their priorities could build trust and avoid a clash.

The Collision Narrative

Recent public statements and history, both, suggest the possibility of collision. Historically, two of the last three Likud leaders got off to a poor start in their first Oval Office meetings with the U.S. president and the relationships never fully recovered. When Yitzhak Shamir first met with George H.W. Bush in April 1989, the president said he had a problem with Jewish settlements. Shamir's responded that settlements were an internal Israeli matter, followed by: "Don't worry, they won't be a problem." Bush took this to mean that Shamir would not expand settlements, and consequently felt aggrieved when expansion did continue. Their relationship remained frosty. In a similar vein, after the first White House meeting between Bill Clinton and Netanyahu during his previous tenure in 1996, Clinton told gathered aides after a very confident Bibi left the room: "He thinks he is the superpower." Their ensuing relationship proved to be very rocky.

At the rhetorical level, the United States and Israel have been engaging in verbal ping-pong. Three examples come to mind: First, in the coalition negotiations leading to the formation of his government, Netanyahu refused to say that his government's policy guidelines would be based on a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Meanwhile senior U.S. officials say publicly that the only way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a two-state solution. Second, new Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman referred to the 2007 Annapolis peace conference, which sought to define the contours of an agreement and create a basis for Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations, as invalid. Yet President Obama said in an Ankara speech that Annapolis was a basis for moving forward. Third, when Israel stated that its ability to move ahead on the Palestinian issue depended on U.S. progress on Iran, a U.S. official responded that success in Iran hinged on progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace. Each side invoked their own form of linkage.

Two-state Solution and Linkage

To American officials and observers, Netanyahu's reluctance to embrace the two-state solution has been an irritant

because it suggests relitigating the past. The Middle East Quartet Roadmap, adopted by the Israeli government by a 12-7 vote on May 25, 2003 -- although with reservations -- says at the very outset that it is "a performance-based roadmap toward a permanent two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Even Lieberman, who voted against the roadmap at the time, says it binds Israel today. Not rehashing the past is critical, because the United States seeks to ensure that the Quartet conditions remain valid, including the proviso that Hamas accept past Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

Senior Israeli officials hint that Netanyahu may tell Obama privately that he accepts the two-state solution if accompanied by the same restrictions on Palestinian sovereignty -- such as nonmilitarization -- that Labor and Kadima leaders espouse, but will not do so publicly for fear that it would create a perception of domestic weakness so soon after his election. However, Netanyahu may find it is advantageous to defuse the issue by making a statement backing the two-state solution now, since there could be domestic political fallout if he makes such a statement only after a rising international chorus in the coming months. On a related note, Netanyahu will likely find support in the United States for his belief that a goal of negotiations should be recognition by all parties of a Palestinian state as the Palestinian homeland just as Israel is the Jewish homeland. Vice President Biden made a speech mentioning Israel as a "secure Jewish state" just two weeks ago.

A public debate over the issue of linkage, namely, whether Iran is the key to resolving the Palestinian issue or vice versa, should be avoided. The Iran and the Palestinian issues need to be addressed in parallel, without administration assertions of linkage. Top Arab officials quietly admit that their inability to be forceful on the Iran issue are unrelated to Israel: Arab fears of Iran are sincere and not a favor to Israel. Even the acerbic head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, no fan of Israel, made it clear publicly this week that these are distinct issues. Moreover, given that Iran has threatened the existence of Israel, it is problematic to say that U.S. efforts to curb Iran are conditional. It runs counter to President Obama's repeated public commitment to Israel's security.

For its part, Israel cannot put its peace efforts on hold either. To the contrary, it needs to address the Palestinian issue, given the demographic challenges that it faces.

Trust Building

So, even assuming the two leaders exhibit outward smiles and project friendship at their press conference on Monday, is the Obama-Bibi relationship headed for trouble? Not necessarily, but the two sides must work hard to build trust. Underlying the anxiety on both sides is a fear that each is not truly committed to addressing the other's top priority. Netanyahu believes that history has called on him to be in power at this time to prevent another Holocaust. He has said this in private to his senior aides, not just to the public. Therefore, Netanyahu wants to know what Obama will do if U.S.-Iranian diplomacy fails and Iran continues its march toward nuclear weapons. It is facile to believe that Netanyahu would press Obama to attack Iran in the event that diplomacy fails. Many other options exist, ranging from increased sanctions to an Israeli military strike. Nonetheless, at a time when the United States is seeking to maximize its leverage before engaging with Iran, Netanyahu will likely be angered that some senior U.S. officials have publicly -- rather than privately -- warned Israel about attacking Iran. He will worry about what Iran will glean from such public messaging by the Obama administration.

For Obama's part, he will want to hear clearly from Netanyahu his plans for the Palestinians. How will Israel's approach to the Palestinians work if Israel does not curb settlement activity? Obama will appreciate a recent public statement by Netanyahu that economic progress is insufficient, and that such improvement must be accompanied by political progress. Moving forward on this issue is important to Obama, who sees it as evocative -- albeit not linked to resolutions of other conflicts -- in a region where he is seeking to improve U.S. standing. To that end, Obama is likely to tell Netanyahu about U.S. efforts to have Arab states take preliminary steps toward Israel as it moves toward the Palestinians by curbing settlement activity.

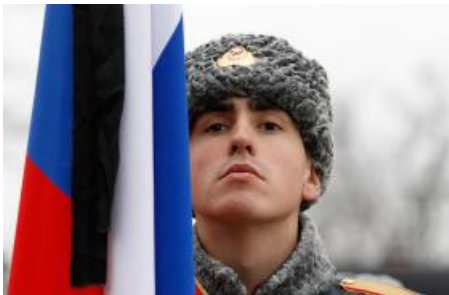
Conclusion

If the two leaders' priorities are not tackled head on, there could be trouble ahead. Given the past problems between the two countries, there is no substitute for Obama and Netanyahu emptying the room and beginning a very candid discussion of bottom lines. Netanyahu aides insist that this is not the 1990s and that he is willing to be more forthcoming on Palestinian issues if he is convinced that Iran, the paymaster of Hamas and Hezbollah, will not pose a nuclear threat to Israel. Yet, vagueness of intentions will only feed mistrust. In short, Netanyahu needs to be explicit about which direction he is headed on the Palestinian issue, and Obama needs to level with Netanyahu on how he views U.S. policy toward Iran in the event that diplomacy fails. Trust building harbors no shortcuts: each side needs to share his bottom line. And is this lies the hope for a relationship that stays on track, without derailment.

David Makovsky is a Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of its Project on the Middle East Peace Process. He is coauthor, with Dennis Ross, of the forthcoming title "Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East" (Viking/Penguin). ❖

Policy #1517

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)