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The Obama-Netanyahu Meeting: Assessment and Implications

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With smiles, compliments, and a strong dose of hospitality, President Obama did his best to provide a dramatically improved backdrop for U.S.-Israeli relations during Binyamin Netanyahu's July 6 visit to the White House, compared to the climate that greeted the Israeli prime minister upon his strained April visit. This included strikingly specific commitments on key issues important to Israeli security. Netanyahu, in turn, responded with generous and deferential praise for U.S. leadership on the broad array of Middle East policy issues. Given the near-term political and policy imperatives of both leaders, the result was a meeting doomed to succeed. Lurking behind the warmth and banter, however, remain tactical obstacles on how to proceed in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations as well as strategic uncertainty about how each side views the other's regional priorities.

From Domestic Politics to Strategic Interest

It is a mistake to argue, as have many observers, that Tuesday's meeting was a defeat for Obama or a victory for Netanyahu. In fact, both leaders came to the event with a political imperative to change the public image of their relationship.

On one side, Netanyahu seems to have understood that Israeli voters view management of the relationship with Washington as one of their prime minister's principal responsibilities, holding him accountable for maintaining warm and productive ties even with an administration that, in the view of many, might not reciprocate. On the other side, Obama seems to have recognized that the punitive spirit that added fuel to the fire of mini-crises in May 2009 and March 2010 ran counter to the deep well of popular support for strong U.S.-Israeli relations in the American heartland, in key parts of the Democratic Party, and on Capitol Hill, garnering him little political advantage in the process.

No less important for both leaders was repairing the strategic implications of public discord. For Israel, the appearance of distance from Washington is a blow to Israeli deterrence, welcome news for its adversaries, and an invitation for some friendly nations (e.g., in Europe) to distance themselves from Israel even further. For America, shabby treatment of one ally is a signal for others to take cover; even U.S. allies who are not friends of Israel, such as some Arab states, surely looked on with concern at how Washington seemed to be treating what is widely viewed as its closest partner in the Middle East. The result, therefore, was Tuesday's reclamation effort.

Beyond the Handshakes

Apart from the atmospherics, which were themselves the main headline, the two leaders made several significant pieces of news in their meeting:

Timing of direct talks. President Obama said he hoped that the inauguration of direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, replacing the current indirect "proximity" talks, would occur "well before" the end-of-September expiration of Israel's moratorium on West Bank settlement construction. Such talks would, as the president put

it, "create a climate in which everybody feels a greater investment in success." This is diplo-speak for suggesting that although the original rationale for the moratorium was to satisfy an unpalatable U.S. demand, the opening of direct talks should give the Israelis a more sustainable and acceptable rationale to extend the moratorium.

Although Netanyahu promised his own "concrete steps" -- most likely in terms of movement and access in the West Bank and augmented powers for the widely praised progress of Palestinian security forces -- the net result was an added dose of pressure on Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who has so far been equivocal on the transition to direct talks. In a practical sense, however, it is unclear how much real pressure is being exerted; in the end, Abbas's appeal to Palestinians rests on providing an end to occupation through diplomacy, which could only happen through direct talks anyway.

Far more uncertain is whether the mere formality of convening direct talks -- meetings that the Palestinians are likely to make sure are sterile, so as to compel the United States to play the role of active mediator as early as possible -- will be enough to create inside Israel a climate conducive to extending the moratorium. Given that Israeli governments had, for the entire period from the Oslo Accords until the Obama inauguration, held direct talks with Palestinians without such a moratorium, some around Netanyahu will argue that Israel should not pay in settlement coin for something that should happen in the normal order of diplomacy. Resolving that issue will be a major test of Netanyahu's leadership.

Nuclear issues. In his post-meeting statement, President Obama articulated in stunning clarity the U.S. acceptance of Israel's policy of nuclear opacity (i.e., neither confirming nor denying its possession of nuclear weapons) and what is effectively the "Israeli exemption" to membership in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime: "We strongly believe that, given its size, its history, the region that it's in, and the threats that are leveled against us -- against it, that Israel has unique security requirements. It's got to be able to respond to threats or any combination of threats in the region. And that's why we remain unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security. And the United States will never ask Israel to take any steps that would undermine their security interests."

In the official report of the leaders' working lunch, the White House spokesman gave further substance to this commitment with respect to the convening of an international conference on creating a Middle East nuclear-free zone, as envisioned in the NPT final document. Indeed, Obama specifically promised Netanyahu that "the conference will only take place if all countries feel confident that they can attend, and that any efforts to single out Israel will make the prospects of convening such a conference unlikely." That so much of their time was taken up with nuclear policy matters -- and that so much of this was made public -- was a result of the utter shock felt within Israel's security establishment upon Washington's acquiescence to the NPT document. That shock was on two levels: first, that the United States would accede to the document after leading Israel to believe it would stand firm against both singling out Israel as a nonadherent and calling for the international disarmament conference; and second, that the Obama administration's global interests (in this case, in nonproliferation) would trump special relations with Israel, a pattern Israel fears may repeat itself on other issues.

American pledges of support. Lost in the swirl of conviviality were two specific pledges of American support to Israel that could have real-world consequences very soon. According to the official readout of the White House lunch, "the President told the Prime Minister he recognizes that Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats, and that only Israel can determine its security needs. The President pledged to continue U.S. efforts to combat all international attempts to challenge the legitimacy of the State of Israel."

The first commitment -- reiterating the independence of Israeli security decisions -- has implications on a wide range of pressing issues, from preventing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons to the possible deployment of international forces tasked with implementing a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement (as proposed by Abbas and reportedly supported by senior Obama administration officials). The second commitment --

combating delegitimization of Israel -- is a live issue at various UN forums, including the pending decision by the UN secretary-general to establish his own inquiry into the Gaza flotilla incident. Other efforts in this vein could occur once Turkey assumes the presidency of the Security Council in September. With terms like "always," "any," "only," and "all," President Obama set high standards for himself with these commitments -- standards that are much easier to judge than the looser language about there being "no space" between Washington and Israel on matters of security, a phrase from recent exchanges that was evidently not part of this meeting's lexicon.

Conclusion

This new "era of good feelings" on the bilateral front does not, by itself, resolve thorny problems that will confront the two parties in September. Still, it is almost certainly a necessary, if not sufficient, factor in defusing those coming minefields and will likely define the relationship at least through November. That is when the results of U.S. midterm elections will have their inevitable impact on how the Obama administration orders its domestic and foreign policy priorities for the second half of this presidential term, and on how foreign capitals view the strength and tenacity of the American president.

Indeed, if any issue hovered over the Obama-Netanyahu tete-a-tete, it was the question of prioritization. For Netanyahu, the issue seems clear: as he said at the outset of his public remarks at the White House, "The greatest new threat on the horizon, the single most dominant issue for many of us, is the prospect that Iran would acquire nuclear weapons," and the rest of his comments flowed from that opening statement. These words suggest that Iran is, without doubt, the most important issue for Israeli security, though not necessarily the most urgent; Netanyahu did not imply that decisions on assessing the efficacy of sanctions need to be made very soon, nor that decisions on preventive military action are imminent. In practice, U.S. officials will look for whether Israel's prioritization of the Iran threat has an impact on how the Israeli government approaches other issues.

In contrast, Obama's recounting of his discussion with Netanyahu began with Gaza, moved to Iran, went back to the peace process and then ended with a statement on the NPT. It was, the president said, an "excellent" exchange -- not "cordial," "constructive," or "frank," but "excellent." Still, he offered no real clue as to which of those four issues mattered most. Some may be more urgent than others, but it is unclear which one he believes is most important -- in other words, which one will top his Middle East policy agenda after November. The real task of U.S.-Israeli relations in the weeks ahead is to build on Tuesday's success to align the two leaders' strategic priorities in advance of that critical decision.

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