

# Obama and Netanyahu Are Facing a Turning Point

Contributed by HELENE COOPER, NYTimes  
Friday, 20 May 2011

WASHINGTON — As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel heads to the White House on Friday for the seventh meeting since President Obama took office, the two men are facing a turning point in a relationship that has never been warm.

By all accounts, they do not trust each other. President Obama has told aides and allies that he does not believe that Mr. Netanyahu will ever be willing to make the kind of big concessions that will lead to a peace deal.

For his part, Mr. Netanyahu has complained that Mr. Obama has pushed Israel too far — a point driven home during a furious phone call with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Thursday morning, just hours before Mr. Obama's speech, during which the prime minister reacted angrily to the president's plan to endorse Israel's pre-1967 borders for a future Palestinian state.

Mr. Obama did not back down. But the last-minute furor highlights the discord as they head into what one Israeli official described as a "train wreck" coming their way: a United Nations General Assembly vote on Palestinian statehood in September.

Mr. Netanyahu, his close associates say, desperately wants Mr. Obama to use the diplomatic muscle of the United States to protect Israel from the vote, not only by vetoing it in the Security Council, but also by leaning hard on America's European allies to get them to reject it as well.

Mr. Obama has indicated that he will certainly do the first. But it remains unclear how far Mr. Obama can go to persuade Britain, France and other American allies to join the United States in rejecting the move, particularly as long as Mr. Netanyahu continues to resist endorsing the pre-1967 lines.

From one of their first meetings, at the King David Hotel on July 23, 2008, when Mr. Obama, then the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, visited Israel, the two men have struck, at most, an intellectual bond. Mr. Netanyahu, as the leader of Israel's conservative Likud Party, was far more comfortable with the Republican Party in the United States than with Mr. Obama, the son of a Muslim man from Kenya whose introduction to the Arab-Israeli conflict was initially framed by discussions with pro-Palestinian academics.

"Their relationship is correct at best," said Judith Kipper, director of Middle East programs at the Institute of World Affairs. Mr. Netanyahu "likes the status quo, and he particularly identifies with conservative Republicans."

Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League and a friend of Mr. Netanyahu's, recalled that after the first meeting, Mr. Netanyahu walked out of the hotel and told him that he had been impressed with Mr. Obama's intellect, and that the American presidency "was his to lose."

But things went downhill soon after Mr. Obama took office and, within months, called for a halt in Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank. Mr. Netanyahu refused, handing the president his first foreign policy humiliation when Mr. Obama had to abandon the demand in the face of Israel's refusal to comply.

Compounding the problem, Mr. Netanyahu delivered a fiery speech to a pro-Israel lobbying group in Washington declaring that "Jerusalem isn't a settlement, it's our capital." A furious White House promptly denied him all the trappings of a presidential meeting with Mr. Obama the next day, refusing to allow photographers to take pictures of the two men in the Oval Office, as is usually the case for meetings with foreign leaders.

Things got so bad, Mr. Foxman recalled, that Mr. Netanyahu "told me, 'Abe, I need two hours just alone to talk to him.'" Late last year, Mr. Netanyahu got his two hours at the White House with Mr. Obama, a meeting which, both American and Israeli officials say, helped clear the air. "The relationship now is very cordial," a senior White House official said.

But the easing of tensions ended this spring when, Israeli and American officials said, Mr. Netanyahu got wind of Mr. Obama's plans to make a major address on the Middle East, and alerted Republican leaders that he would like to address a joint meeting of Congress. That move was widely interpreted as an attempt to get out in front of Mr. Obama, by

presenting an Israeli peace proposal that, while short of what the Palestinians want, would box in the president. House Speaker John A. Boehner issued the invitation, for late May.

So White House officials timed Mr. Obama's speech on Thursday to make sure he went first.

"You get so many reports that Bibi is playing politics in your backyard that eventually you've got to draw the conclusion that there's nothing there to work with with this guy," said Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator who is now a fellow with the New American Foundation, referring to Mr. Netanyahu by his nickname. Administration officials said that they were determined not to allow Mr. Netanyahu to get out in front of Mr. Obama.

In a statement after Mr. Obama's speech on Thursday, Mr. Netanyahu's office pointedly said that the prime minister would raise his concerns about Mr. Obama's language about the pre-1967 borders during Friday's meeting.

"While there were many points in the president's speech that we appreciate and welcome, there were other aspects, like the return to the 1967 borders, which depart from longstanding American policy, as well as Israeli policy, going back to 1967," Michael B. Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, said in an interview. "The prime minister will raise the issue with the president. As the president said, the United States and Israel are great friends, and friends have to be able to talk frankly to one another."

But both men will have to manage any additional irritation as they prepare for the United Nations vote that is headed their way, American and Israeli officials said. Neither side wants to see an overwhelmingly lopsided United Nations vote for Palestinian statehood, with Britain, France and Germany joining the rest of the world and isolating Israel further, with only the United States and a few others voting against it.

"I think the Europeans are sliding toward voting for Palestinian statehood because they don't see a peace strategy coming out," said David Makovsky, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

He said that the two leaders had to figure out a way to work together to stop a United Nations vote that could harm both the United States and Israel. "If they are incapable of being able to translate a common interest into a common strategy, then it's a very sad commentary on both countries," Mr. Makovsky said.

A version of this article appeared in print on May 20, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Turning Point For 2 Leaders Lacking Trust.

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