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## After GOP victory, emboldened Israel declares new building in East Jerusalem

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/1108/After-GOP-victory-emboldene...> [1]

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Israel has published plans to build about 1,300 new housing units in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, a move that highlights US-Israeli differences just as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in the United States to huddle with Obama administration officials.

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The Friday publication of the building plans, discovered today, was a surprise redux of Israel's approval of 1,600 new homes that torpedoed Vice President Joe Biden's March visit to Israel, angering the White House.

Then, as now, Israel played down its significance.

But coupled with Mr. Netanyahu's public call on Sunday for the US to create a "credible" threat of military force against Iran, the publicized building plans are seen by some analysts as a sign that Israel has been emboldened by last week's Republican victory in the midterm elections.

"This gives them more room to maneuver," says Meir Javedanfar, a Middle East analyst in Tel

Aviv. "Republicans back the Israeli government's stance on Iran and they are more accepting of Israel's West Bank strategy."

The visit to the US marks the first round of Middle East diplomacy since the midterms.

US 'deeply disappointed'

While a spokeswoman for Israel's Interior Ministry portrayed newspaper planning announcements from last Friday as a "technical" step, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat slammed Israel for "destroying the peace process," according to Agence France-Press.

Palestinians envision East Jerusalem, an area Israel captured in the 1967 war with its Arab neighbors, as the capital of their future state and see Israeli building there as precluding decisions that should be made at the peace table.

State Department Spokesman PJ Crowley said the US is "deeply disappointed" about the publicized building plans and that it is "counter-productive" to efforts to restart negotiations.

Since Israel embarrassed Mr. Biden in March, causing a major diplomatic stir, Israeli authorities had imposed a de-facto freeze on Jerusalem building in parallel with the 10-month moratorium on Israeli settlements in the West Bank that ended Sept. 26. The publication of plans to build 1,025 units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Homa and another 320 in the northwestern neighborhood of Ramot marked a break in that policy.

An Israeli spokesman denied the move would hurt the peace process.

"In every peace plan that has been put on the table over the last 20 years, the Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem remain part of Israel," says an Israeli official who declined to be identified. "Building in these new neighborhoods in no way contradicts the desire to move a way in peace toward a two-state solution."

Also on the US-Israeli agenda ... Iran

After meeting with Biden Sunday on the sidelines of the annual convention of American Jewish community federations in New Orleans, Netanyahu is now scheduled to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in New York.

Netanyahu and the Obama administration are looking to resolve differences over settlement building in the West Bank, which has prompted the Palestinians to boycott negotiations. While the US has called for Israel to extend the 10-month moratorium on building starts, Netanyahu has demurred so far.

The two sides will also be discussing a strategy on Iran.

Yoram Ettinger, a former Israeli attaché in Washington who supports a hard line on concessions to the Palestinians, says if Netanyahu meets with Republican Congress members it might be a sign that he plans to "leverage" the new political reality.

"Hopefully this will prompt Netanyahu to revert back to his classic self, and the statement on Iran might be a reflection of that," he says.

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