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Israel to build more homes in East Jerusalem

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Reporting from Jerusalem ? Setting the stage for another potential clash with the Obama administration, Israel said Monday that it would build an additional 1,300 homes on disputed land in East Jerusalem.

The announcement came as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was visiting the United States to meet with administration officials in an attempt to revive stalled peace talks with the Palestinians. He met Sunday with Vice President Joe Biden and is scheduled to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, both of whom have urged Netanyahu to restrain from new construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in order to draw Palestinians back to the negotiating table.

The latest approval for new construction, including about 980 homes in the Jewish housing project of Har Homa and 320 in the Ramot development, marks the largest proposed expansion in East Jerusalem since March, when Israel announced that it would build 1,600 units in Ramat Shlomo. All three projects are to be built on land seized by Israel during the 1967 Middle East War.

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The March announcement, made during a visit by Biden to Israel, was seen by the administration as a serious diplomatic slight and set off months of tensions between the U.S. and the Jewish state. Until recently, Netanyahu's government had quietly refrained from expanding in East Jerusalem, in an apparent concession to the administration.

"But this sends a clear message that the self-restraint that characterized the past seven, eight months is over," said Daniel Seidemann, a Jerusalem expert and settlement critic.

He said Netanyahu might be reacting to last week's U.S election, which was widely seen as a defeat for Obama.

"There's an element of skirmishing going on," Seidemann said. "Everyone is trying to test the limits of how far they can go."

Monday's announcement followed the approval last month of 238 new units in another part of East Jerusalem.

Palestinians condemned the expansion and said it would make it more difficult to resume U.S.-sponsored peace talks.

"We had hoped that Mr. Netanyahu would go to the States to tell Mr. Biden and Mrs. Clinton that he would stop such things and resume talks," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said. "Instead he said to all of us his choice is settlements, not peace. The derailment of the talks is now confirmed."

Philip J. Crowley, the chief State Department spokesman, said the United States was "deeply disappointed by the announcement of advanced planning for new housing units in sensitive areas of East Jerusalem. It is counterproductive to our efforts to resume direct negotiations between the parties."

Israeli officials said the newly approved units would be in areas that are expected to be annexed by Israel under any future peace deal.

"Building in those neighborhoods in no way contradicts with the desire for peace and a two-state plan," said an official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the construction.

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