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Netanyahu: "What the hell do they want from me?"

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in Foreign Policy - May 28, 2009 - 12:00am

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Last night, shortly after U.S. Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** told [2] journalists that the Obama administration "wants to see a stop to settlements -- not some settlements, not outposts, not natural growth exceptions," Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** called a confidante. Referring to Clinton's call for a settlement freeze, Netanyahu groused, "What the hell do they want from me?" according to his associate, who added, "I gathered that he heard some bad vibes in his meetings with [U.S.] congressional delegations this week."

In the 10 days since Netanyahu and President **Barack Obama** held a meeting at the White House, the Obama administration has made clear in public and private meetings with Israeli officials that it intends to hold a firm line on Obama's call to stop Israeli settlements. According to many observers in Washington and Israel, the Israeli prime minister, looking for loopholes and hidden agreements that have often existed in the past with Washington, has been flummoxed by an unusually united line that has come not just from Obama White House and the secretary of state, but also from pro-Israel congressmen and women who have come through Israel for meetings with him over Memorial Day recess. To Netanyahu's dismay, Obama doesn't appear to have a hidden policy. It is what he said it was.

"This is a sea change for Netanyahu," a former senior Clinton administration official who worked on Middle East issues said. The official said that the basis of the Obama White House's resolve is the conviction that it is in the United States' as well as Israel's interest to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "We have significant, existential threats that Israel faces from Iran and that the U.S. faces from this region. It is in our mutual interest to end this conflict, and to begin to build new regional alliances."

Netanyahu needed to engage Obama directly, the former official said. "Now that he has done so, and also sent a team of advisors to meet [special envoy to the Middle East **George Mitchell**, he has very clearly received a message: 'I meant what I said on settlements. No natural growth. No elasticity. There will be a clear settlement freeze.'" (Netanyahu sent a team of advisors including minister for intelligence Dan Meridor for meetings with Mitchell in London Monday.)

"Over the past 15 years, settlements have gone from being seen in Washington as an irritant,

to the dominant issue," says Georgetown University Middle East expert **Daniel Byman**. He pointed out that key figures in the Obama administration -- Mitchell, who headed the Mitchell Commission, which recommended a halt to settlements; national security advisor Gen. **Jim Jones** -- see the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, home to some 290,000 people, as a key obstacle to getting a peace settlement. "I don't think the logic is hidden," Byman said.

It's not just the administration that's delivering Netanyahu that message, however. Whereas in the past Israeli leaders have sometimes eased pressure from Washington on the settlements issue by going to members of Congress, this time, observers in Washington and Israel say, key pro-Israel allies in Congress have been largely reinforcing the Obama team's message to Netanyahu. What changed? "Members of Congress have more willing to follow the leadership of the administration ... because [they] believe it is in our national security interest to move toward ending the conflict and that it is not a zero sum for Israel," the former senior Clinton administration official said.

"Netanyahu and [Israeli Foreign Minister **Avigdor**] **Lieberman** are probing, looking for areas they can get space *gratis* from the United States," says **Hussein Ibish**, a senior fellow at the American Task Force for Palestine. "And they are not finding it."

How did Obama seem to close the usual backdoors and loopholes, at least so far?

"We've been watching the move in Congress, especially among certain high profile Jewish American members -- people like Representative **Gary Ackerman**, Representative **Robert Wexler**, and Representative **Howard Berman**," Ibish said. "What has occurred -- and this has been greatly intensified by the election of Obama: There has been a growing sense of members of Congress who are well-informed on foreign policy ... that peace is essential to the American national interest and the Israeli national interest. And there's been a growing sense that the possibility of a two-state agreement is time-limited and that things like the settlements are incompatible with the goal of creating two states."

The changed dynamic in Washington has impressed Palestinian audiences. At a breakfast yesterday morning with Palestinian American policy hands near Pentagon City, Palestinian Authority President **Mahmoud Abbas** said that he was extremely impressed with the Obama administration's resolve on policies that it sees as crucial for getting out of the current status quo -- after years of drift that have seen Jewish settlements expand to almost 300,000 people on land the Palestinians envision as part of a future Palestinian state.

Abbas had a private meeting with Obama at the White House this afternoon, followed by an expanded meeting in the Oval Office with Obama, White House chief of staff **Rahm Emanuel**, Clinton, and other U.S. officials. "We are a stalwart ally of Israel and it is in our interests to assure that Israel is safe and secure," Obama said in a joint press conference with Abbas after the meeting. "It is our belief that the best way to achieve that is to create the conditions on the ground and set the stage for a Palestinian state as well."

"And so what I told Prime Minister Netanyahu was that each party has obligations under the road map," Obama continued. "On the Israeli side those obligations include stopping settlements. They include making sure that there is a viable potential Palestinian state. On the Palestinian side it's going to be important and necessary to continue to take the security steps on the West Bank that President Abbas has already begun to take, working with General Dayton. We've seen great progress in terms of security in the West Bank. Those security steps need to continue because Israel has to have some confidence that security in the West

Bank is in place in order for us to advance this process."

Even one veteran Washington peacemaker who had grown skeptical that Washington can overcome obstacles to get substantive progress on Middle East peace admitted to being impressed by the Obama team's resolve. "What I'm beginning to see is that the Obama administration may be less concerned with actually getting to negotiations and an agreement and more interested in setting new rules and rearranging the furniture," said **Aaron David Miller** of the Woodrow Wilson Institute. "They may have concluded that they can't get to a real two state solution with this prime minister [Netanyahu]. Maybe they want a new one? And the best way to raise the odds of that is to demonstrate that he can't manage Israel's most important relationship: with the U.S."

Echoing language from the Bush administration's debate about policy to Iran, behavior change vs. regime change, Miller said the Obama administration's stance demanded "behavior change for sure" on the settlements issue. "If they keep pushing as the Secretary [Clinton] was last night, who knows about the other," he said. "The danger of course is that they raise the level on the settlements issue and then back off, leaving the emperor(ess) with no clothes. And this would make America look really bad."

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