

Why the Israeli PM Wants to Avoid US Election

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday he had declined a proposed meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama in order to steer clear of the U.S. presidential election campaign, as Vice President Joe Biden began a two-day visit to Israel.

While candidates in the Republican and Democratic primaries have been vying to assert their credentials as friends of Israel, Obama is not up for re-election in November, having served two terms.

It was the latest episode in a fraught relationship between the right-wing Israeli leader and the Democratic U.S. president that has yet to recover from deep differences over last year's international nuclear deal with Israel's foe Iran.

Around the time of Biden's arrival, an American tourist was stabbed to death a few kilometers away on a boardwalk in Tel Aviv in the most serious of a wave of Palestinian attacks throughout Israel, a stark reminder of the current paralysis in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, which Obama tried to revive earlier in his tenure.

The White House said on Monday it had been "surprised" to learn first from Israeli media that Netanyahu had decided against coming to a conference of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC in Washington on March 20, and to see a suggestion in some reports that Obama's unavailability had been one of the reasons.

It said Netanyahu had been offered a March 18 meeting with Obama, ahead of the president's landmark visit to Cuba on March 21 and 22.

Notice Given

Zeev Elkin, an Israeli cabinet minister close to Netanyahu, countered that Israeli ambassador Ron Dermer had given the White House advance warning the trip might not happen.

Netanyahu's office cited the U.S. election campaign in saying he would not travel to Washington for the AIPAC event, and voiced appreciation for Obama's willingness to host him.

Biden, whose 2010 visit to Israel was marred by acrimony over a Jewish settlement plan announced during his trip, met former Israeli president Shimon Peres and was due to hold talks on Wednesday with Netanyahu in Jerusalem and with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the occupied West Bank.

Biden planned to speak with Israeli leaders about a new memorandum of understanding being negotiated for U.S. defense aid to Israel, according to one U.S. congressional aide.

The aide said Biden was handling the negotiations because relations between Obama and Netanyahu were so sour that the vice president was seen as the only member of the administration who could finish off the deal.

In 2012, Netanyahu hosted Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney in Israel in what many Democrats saw as a bid to undermine Obama's attempt to secure a second term. Israel denied meddling.

With a wave of Palestinian street attacks now five months old, U.S. officials have said no peace breakthrough is expected during Biden's visit.

(Additional reporting by Dan Williams; Editing by Kevin Liffey)

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