

Netanyahu to Obama: 'Israel Wants Peace, Not a Piece of Paper'

Against the backdrop of a snowstorm that shut down Washington and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with U.S. President Barack Obama at the White House on Monday.

Before the meeting, Netanyahu said that the people of Israel expect him "to stand strong against criticism, against pressure, stand strong to secure the future of the one and only Jewish state."

In an interview with Bloomberg View columnist Jeffrey Goldberg published this weekend, Obama warned of a "bleak future" for Israel if a peace agreement with the Palestinians is not reached. At the White House on Monday, Obama had a less dire tone.

"It is still possible to create two states, a Jewish state of Israel and a state of Palestine, with people living side by side in peace and security," Obama said. "But it's difficult. It requires compromise on all sides."

"We do not have a closer friend or ally than Israel, and the bond between our two countries and our two peoples is unbreakable," Obama said.

Netanyahu thanked Obama for working closely with Israel on "critically important issues" during his time as president.

"We're deeply grateful for that," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu called on the Palestinians to recognize Israel as the Jewish state.

He said, "Mr. President, you rightly said that Israel, the Jewish state, is the realization of the Jewish people's self-determination in our ancestral homeland. So the Palestinians expect us to recognize a Palestinian state for the Palestinian people, a nation state for the Palestinian people. I think it's about time they recognize a nation state for the Jewish people. We've only been there for 4,000 years."

"In the Middle East, which is definitely the most turbulent and violent part of the earth, the only peace that will endure is a peace that we can defend," Netanyahu said.

"I know this flies in the face of conventional wisdom, but it's the truth," he continued. "What we all want fervently is peace. Not a piece [of] paper ... but a real peace, a peace that is anchored in mutual recognition of two nation states that recognize and respect one another, and solid security arrangements on the ground."

Netanyahu said he hoped Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas takes "Israel's genuine security needs" seriously.

"The 20 years that have passed since Israel entered the peace process have been marked by unprecedented steps that Israel has taken to advance peace," he said. "I mean, we vacated cities in Judea and Samaria. We left entirely Gaza. We've not only frozen settlements, we've uprooted entire settlements. We've released hundreds of terrorist prisoners, including dozens in recent months.

"And when you look at what we got in return, it's been scores of suicide bombings, thousands of rockets on our cities fired from the areas we vacated, and just incessant Palestinian incitement against Israel. So Israel has been doing its part, and I regret to say that the Palestinians haven't."

Speaking about the Iranian nuclear issue, Obama assured Netanyahu of his "absolute commitment to make sure that Iran

does not have a nuclear weapon.” Netanyahu called preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon “the greatest challenge” facing Israel and the U.S.

Most of Monday’s meeting took place behind closed doors, with only advisers in attendance. Netanyahu was accompanied by National Security Adviser Yossi Cohen. While Netanyahu called for Obama to put pressure on the Palestinians to make certain concessions, Obama wanted to know what Netanyahu was willing to compromise on. According to officials in Netanyahu’s entourage, Obama intends to push the peace talks forward by presenting an American compromise to Abbas when they meet at the White House later this month.

Earlier on Monday, Netanyahu met with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. Netanyahu also met with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Congress members.

Netanyahu will address the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference in Washington on Tuesday, before flying to Los Angeles.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, an Orthodox Jew considered to be one of Obama’s closest advisers, addressed the conference on Monday, saying, “The American-Israel relationship has not been a Democratic cause or a Republican cause; it has been an American cause.”

Opposition Leader MK Isaac Herzog (Labor) spoke at the conference on Monday and called on Netanyahu to “move boldly toward peace.”

Justice Minister Tzipi Livni (Hatnuah) also addressed the conference on Monday, but her speech was closed to the media.

On Monday night, Kerry told the conference that the U.S. “will not let the West Bank turn into another Gaza.”

“Israel’s security is our first priority,” Kerry said.

On Iran, Kerry said, "We will not permit Iran to obtain nuclear weapon. Period."

Kerry said that "no deal is better than a bad deal" with Iran and that the Obama administration would support imposing further sanctions on Iran if negotiations fail.

Speaking at the conference, U.S. Sen. John McCain criticized the Obama administration's response to the crisis in Ukraine. According to McCain, the current "feckless foreign policy" has led to nobody believing in America's strength.

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