

US Rebukes Israel's Netanyahu on Mideast Policy

The White House on Wednesday scolded Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu following his re-election victory for abandoning his commitment to negotiate for a Palestinian state and for what it called “divisive” campaign rhetoric toward Israel’s minority Arab voters.

Even as President Barack Obama’s administration congratulated Netanyahu for his party’s decisive win, the White House signaled its deep disagreements – and thorny relationship – with Netanyahu will persist on issues ranging from Middle East peacemaking to Iran nuclear diplomacy.

In a hard-right shift in the final days of campaigning, Netanyahu backtracked on his support for eventual creation of a Palestinian state – the cornerstone of more than two decades of peace efforts – and promised to continue building Jewish settlements on occupied land.

Such policies could put him on a new collision course with the Obama administration. Some Obama aides had privately left little doubt during the Israeli election campaign of their preference for Netanyahu’s center-left challenger, Isaac Herzog.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest reaffirmed Obama’s commitment to a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict and said that based on Netanyahu’s comments, “the United States will evaluate our approach to this situation moving forward.”

Netanyahu’s insistence that there will be no Palestinian state while he holds office, seen as a maneuver to mobilize his right-wing base, angered the Palestinians and drew criticism from the United Nations and European governments. Chances for

restarting long-stalled peace moves already had been low.

U.S. lawmakers were divided on Netanyahu's hardened stance.

"It was remarkable to back-track so significantly on a two-state solution," said Democratic U.S. Senator Chris Murphy, adding it could make Washington's effort to mediate more difficult.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said he hoped the United States and Israel would see the election as "an opportunity to start over." But he said: "A two-state solution is impossible as long as Hamas exists and runs Gaza."

DEEP CONCERN

Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One, Earnest said the administration would communicate its concern directly to the Israeli government over rhetoric used by Netanyahu's campaign.

Netanyahu charged on election day in Israel that left-wingers were trying to get Arab-Israeli voters out "in droves" to sway the election against him. "The United States and this administration is deeply concerned about rhetoric that seeks to marginalize Arab-Israeli citizens," Earnest said.

Arabs comprise about 20 percent of Israel's population of eight million and have long complained about discrimination. They emerged from Tuesday's vote as the third largest party.

Two weeks ago Netanyahu defied Obama with a politically divisive speech to Congress attacking nuclear talks with Iran. Earnest predicted that Netanyahu's re-election would have no "material impact" on the sensitive Iran negotiations.

Secretary of State John Kerry called Netanyahu on Wednesday to congratulate him. Obama will follow suit "in coming days," Earnest said. He said that after previous elections Obama had waited a similar amount of time, holding off until Netanyahu

was formally given the go-ahead to form a coalition.

Although Netanyahu must still put together a coalition, his victory all but guarantees Israel's president will give him the first opportunity to form a government.

Administration officials had privately signaled their hopes for an election outcome more in sync with Obama's agenda, especially with an end-of-March deadline looming for a framework nuclear deal in negotiations between Tehran and world powers.

But they, and lawmakers, said ties were strong enough to transcend their leaders' differences.

"Who cares if they don't like each other?" asked U.S. Representative Eliot Engel, the top Democrat on the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee.

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