

Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel After Bilateral Meeting

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, it's a pleasure to welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu back to the Oval Office. I think I've had the pleasure of hosting him more often than just about any other world leader, and hopefully this will provide just some small measure of repayment for the wonderful visit that I had in Israel this spring. And I want to thank him and his family and his entire team for the tremendous hospitality that we had when we were there.

The Prime Minister and I were just talking about the fact these are hectic times, and nowhere is that more true, obviously, than in the Middle East. And so we had an opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion about a range of issues.

I commended him for entering into good-faith negotiations with the Palestinian Authority in discussing how we can resolve what has been, obviously, one of the biggest challenges for a very long time in the region. And both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas have assigned outstanding negotiators. They have been engaging in serious conversations. And our goal continues to be to help facilitate -- not dictate, but facilitate -- the kinds of genuine negotiations that will result in two states living side-by-side in peace and security.

And we have a limited amount of time to achieve that goal, and I appreciate the Prime Minister's courage in being willing to step forward on behalf of that goal.

We had an opportunity to discuss the situation in Syria. Obviously, we have a broad set of strategic concerns in Syria. We are both pleased that there is the possibility of finally getting chemical weapons stockpiles out of Syria. But I think we both share a deep concern that we have to be able to verify and enforce what has now been agreed to at the United Nations. Chemical weapons inside of Syria obviously have threatened Syrian civilians, but over the long term also pose a threat to Israel. And we want to make sure that we get those indiscriminate, horrible weapons out of there.

And so we are consulting with the international community on these issues, and I shared with the Prime Minister our belief that we have to move with speed and dispatch in actually making sure that the agreement that was arrived at in the United Nations is followed through on.

In addition, we have the larger question of how to deal with the civil war that's taking place in Syria. And given Israel's significant interest in the spillover effects of activities there, we will be consulting very closely with them.

We had an opportunity to discuss Egypt, and I shared with him what I said at the United Nations just a week ago, which is that we continue to have concerns about what has happened in Egypt, but we also are committed to a constructive relationship with Egypt, in part because of the important role that the Camp David Accords and the Egypt-Israeli peace serve not only for the stability and security of both those countries, but also for security in the region and U.S. security.

So we will continue to work with the Egyptian government, although urging them and pushing them in a direction that is more inclusive and that meets the basic goals of those who originally sought for more freedom and more democracy in that country.

And we had an opportunity, obviously, to discuss Iran. Both the Prime Minister and I agree, since I came into office, that it is imperative that Iran not possess a nuclear weapon. That is important for American security; it is important for Israeli security; it's important for world security, because we do not want to trigger a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world. And given the statements and actions from the Iranian regime in the past -- the threats against Israel, the acts against Israel -- it is absolutely clear that words are not sufficient, that we have to have actions that give the international community confidence that, in fact, they are meeting their international obligations fully, and that they are not in a position to have a nuclear weapon.

What I also shared with the Prime Minister is that, because of the extraordinary sanctions that we have been able to put in place over the last several years, the Iranians are now prepared, it appears, to negotiate. We have to test diplomacy. We have to see if, in fact, they are serious about their willingness to abide by international norms and international law and international requirements and resolutions. And we in good faith will approach them, indicating that it is our preference to resolve these issues diplomatically.

But we enter into these negotiations very clear-eyed. They will not be easy. And anything that we do will require the highest standards of verification in order for us to provide the sort of sanctions relief that I think they are looking for.

So we will be in close consultation with Israel and our other friends and allies in the region during this process, and our hope is that we can resolve this diplomatically. But as President of the United States, I've said before and I will repeat that we take no options off the table, including military options, in terms of making sure that we do not have nuclear weapons in Iran that would destabilize the region and potentially threaten the United States of America.

In all of this, our unshakeable bond with the Israeli people is stronger than ever. Our commitment to Israel's security is stronger than ever. And we are very much looking forward to continuing to work with our friends in Israel to make sure that the U.S. security interests are met, Israel's security interests are met, but hopefully that we can also bring about greater peace and greater stability in a region that has been racked with violence and tensions for far too long.

And I appreciate the Prime Minister's views. He is always candid, and we're always able to have not only a good working relationship at the prime ministerial level, but also because of the outstanding work that our staffs do.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, welcome.

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Mr. President, thank you for welcoming me and my delegation on what I know is a very busy day for you in Washington today.

There are many things on your plate, but I know that you know and the American people know that there is no better ally -- more reliable, more stable, more democratic -- other than Israel in a very raw, dangerous place. So I welcome the opportunity that we're having to discuss how we work closely together to address the enormous challenges that face both of us. And I think of those, the most important challenge is preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

I appreciate deeply the fact that you have made clear that you remain committed to this goal. I also appreciate the statement you made that Iran's conciliatory words have to be matched by real actions -- transparent, verifiable, meaningful actions.

Iran is committed to Israel's destruction. So for Israel, the ultimate test of a future agreement with Iran is whether or not Iran dismantles its military nuclear program. We have a saying in Hebrew, we call it *mivchan hatotza'a* -- you would say it in English, what's the bottom line? And the bottom line, again, is that Iran fully dismantles its military nuclear program.

In this regard, I want to express my appreciation to you for the enormous work that's been done to have a sanctions regime in place to thwart Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. I believe that it's the combination of a credible military threat

and the pressure of those sanctions that has brought Iran to the negotiating table.

I also believe that if diplomacy is to work, those pressures must be kept in place. And I think that they should not be lessened until there is verifiable success. And, in fact, it is Israel's firm belief that if Iran continues to advance its nuclear program during negotiations, the sanctions should be strengthened. It's the combination, I believe, that has guided your policy and our policy so far, that is good credible military threat and strong sanctions I think is still the only formula that can get a peaceful resolution of this problem.

Mr. President, we discussed many of these, but I want to use this opportunity to thank you, Secretary of State Kerry and others in your administration for helping to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians. I remain committed to that peace. And I hope that our efforts -- our common efforts -- would lead to a secure and lasting peace.

We know that for peace to endure, it must be based on Israel's capacity to defend itself, by itself. And I hope that we can achieve an historic transformation that will give a better future for us and our Palestinian neighbors, and, who knows, one day with our other neighbors as well.

So I want to thank you again for your hospitality, for your efforts, and it's very, very good to see you again.

Q Mr. President, are you resigned to a government shutdown at this point? And given how close we are to the midnight deadline, have you had any conversations with Speaker Boehner over the past few days?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I am not at all resigned. And I'll have a chance to obviously speak more to this. I'm going to have a Cabinet meeting this afternoon and may have some further thoughts for the press as the day goes on. But the bottom line is that the Senate has passed a bill that keeps the government open, does not have a lot of extraneous issues to it, that allows us then to negotiate a longer-term budget and address a range of other issues, but that ensures that we're not shutting down the government and we're not shutting down the economy at a time when a lot of families out there are just getting some traction and digging themselves out of the hole that we've had as a consequence of the financial crisis.

I've said before, Congress has two responsibilities: Pass a budget, pay the bills. And I am not only open to but eager to have negotiations around a long-term budget that makes sure that we're investing in middle-class families, helping the economy grow, giving people who are working hard a leg up, and greater security and stability and deals with some of our long-term challenges in terms of debt and deficits.

But the only way to do that is for everybody to sit down in good faith without threatening to harm women and veterans and children with a government shutdown, and certainly we can't have any kind of meaningful negotiations under the cloud of potential default, the first in U.S. history.

There's not a world leader, if you took a poll, who would say that it would be responsible or consistent with America's leadership in the world for us not to pay our bills. We are the foundation of the world economy and the world financial system. And our currency is the reserve currency of the world. We don't mess with that. And we certainly don't allow domestic policy differences on issues that are unrelated to the budget to endanger not only our economy but the world economy. So I suspect that I will speaking to the leaders today, tomorrow, and the next day.

But there's a pretty straightforward solution to this. If you set aside the short-term politics and you look at the long term here, what it simply requires is everybody to act responsibly and do what's right for the American people.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

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12:54 P.M. EDT