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Prime Minister Netanyahu Goes to Washington: How to Rebuild Trust

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Since the Obama administration took office, its relations with Israel have been characterized to no small measure by distrust and suspicion. In this context, the April 11, 2011 essay in the *Weekly Standard* by Elliott Abrams, a senior researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations who served as National Security Council Senior Director for Near East and North African Affairs under President George W. Bush is of particular interest. It reviews the sorry state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and in part focuses on the lack of trust between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. According to Abrams, the central cause for the Obama administration's failure to advance an agreement is the over emphasis it placed on the issue of Jewish settlements. The essay, which concludes that the absence of such trust damages the ability of the sides to adopt the bold, far reaching policies needed to advance the peace process, lays the main portion of blame at President Obama's doorstep.

Abrams also raised the broader issue of the administration's denial of strategic understandings between Israel and the United States with regard to the parameters of a permanent agreement. These understandings were made explicit in the April 14, 2004 letter by President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon. Two of the chief understandings were one, that Palestinian refugees would have no "right of return" to the State of Israel and that the realization of their rights would have to take place in the context of a Palestinian state, and two, that the demand for a return to the 1949 armistice lines (which in practical terms translates into the 1967 borders) is unrealistic given the existence of large Jewish settlement blocs on the West Bank.

However, says Abrams, these American commitments were "forgotten and abandoned" by President Obama's administration, which relates to them as a "some kind of private gesture by Bush in a personal note to Sharon." Furthermore, "this devaluation of solemn pledges among allies has been a huge Obama mistake, for it undermines the value not only of past American pledges but of his own future words as well and makes Israel far less likely to take risks for peace."

Abrams' assertions paint a comfortable picture for Israel but largely ignore the sense both within the administration and among certain political circles in Israel that blame for the lack of trust between Israel and the United States lies primarily with Netanyahu. Netanyahu's statements about a peace settlement are often deemed as characterized by ambiguity and internal contradictions that aim to mislead both the Palestinian Authority and the administration with vague declarations about commitment to peace and painful concessions – while in practice his objective is to gain time and preserve the status quo. In addition, he has handcuffed himself to a coalition that clearly will not allow him to initiate far-reaching political steps. However, according to either approach or political orientation, Netanyahu could have – and still can – initiate changes in the composition of the coalition so that he will have wider room to maneuver than he has at present.

The coming meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama will take place at a rare moment of grace for both leaders. The axis of evil headed by Iran and Syria is in the midst of a severe crisis and its power may be ebbing. Iran's enemies, first and foremost Israel and the United States, have apparently succeeded in affecting the progress of the Iranian nuclear project. Iran, preoccupied with difficult political and economic problems and deep internal divisions within its leadership, has no real response to this challenge. For its part, Syria finds itself on the brink of civil war and the regime in power is fighting for survival amidst increasing international isolation. Iran's allies, Hamas and Hizbollah, have sustained tough blows inflicted by Israel and are hesitant to engage in activity that might result in another extensive military confrontation. The success of the Iron Dome interception system greatly neutralizes the rocket threat by which the two organizations created a "balance of terror" vis-à-vis Israel.

Israel's scope of action against Hamas is now broader than before, as criticism of Israel's military responses, both internal and external, is much more tempered than in the past. In the inter-Arab arena, greater determination is evident among the so-called moderate states, headed by Saudi Arabia, to defy the Iranian threat. The military assistance lent by the Saudis to the regime in Bahrain, including in the form of troops, seems to have succeeded in putting down the rebellion. It is unclear whether Iran will succeed in meeting this new challenge.

On the internal political arena, both leaders are experiencing a period of stability and a sense of strength. The assassination of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and America's massive intervention against Libya and its leadership have erased the image of Obama as a spineless president that characterized him since he took office. His American public approval rating has increased, and at present it appears that his chances at a second term in the Oval Office are fairly good. Netanyahu's standing too is quite stable. Having put several embarrassing affairs behind him, his political position has stabilized and there seems to be no real threat to his coalition.

These circumstances would seem to allow the two leaders to make historical decisions vis-à-vis the political process, even if the region's current instability creates complex difficulties. However, a precondition is overcoming the distrust between the two. That alone can afford them the openness and audacity required for dramatic, far reaching moves in the direction of a final settlement. It is up to them.

In order to create a relationship of trust with the State of Israel, President Obama will have to persuade Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israeli public opinion that he is highly attentive to Israel's concerns and the serious risks Israel has to assume on the road to a peace agreement with the Palestinians. He will have to make it clear, publicly and unequivocally, that his administration will do everything in its power to ensure that Israel's national security, in the broadest sense of the term, is not compromised if it concludes political agreements with the Palestinians.

For his part, the prime minister will have to work hard to convince the American administration that he is truly willing to veer away from his ideological heritage and political power base in order to generate a dramatic historic shift in Israel's standing and relations with the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular. In this context, the prime minister will have to make it clear that he is willing at the appropriate stage of negotiations to give detailed public expression to his positions on the various issues of a permanent agreement – the borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem.

