

Netanyahu snubs Obama over 1967 border remark

By Bill Van Auken
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Following a 90-minute White House meeting Friday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu categorically repudiated the call made by President Barack Obama for Israeli-Palestinian talks based loosely on pre-1967 borders.

In his rambling address on the “Arab spring” Thursday, Obama made cursory reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that echoed the stand taken by US presidents over the past half century in slavishly defending Israel.

In the one remark that has been seized upon by the right-wing Likud party in Israel as well as by Republicans in the US, Obama proposed a resumption of negotiations towards the establishment of a truncated and powerless Palestinian state. “The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states,” he said.

The remark merely reiterated the position held by both the Clinton and Bush administrations in US-brokered “peace talks” going back more than two decades. Moreover, the reference to “swaps” cleared the way for Israel to lay claim to the large swathes of the occupied West Bank that have been seized for illegal Zionist settlements.

Nonetheless, the Netanyahu government furiously objected to the inclusion of any reference to the “1967 lines” i.e., the borders that existed before the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the Sinai Peninsula.

According to press reports, Netanyahu personally telephoned Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to demand that the phrase be removed from the speech, triggering a debate within Obama’s staff that led the speech to be postponed for some 35 minutes. That the speech was vetted with the Netanyahu government speaks volumes about the US-Israeli relationship.

Before leaving Israel, Netanyahu denounced Obama’s proposal, claiming that it reneged on the position taken by the Bush administration that given “new realities on the ground” it was unrealistic to expect a “full and complete” return to the pre-1967 borders. He also reiterated his demand

that the Palestinians recognize Israel as “the nation state of the Jewish people”—setting up Arabs within its borders for a new round of ethnic cleansing—as a condition for any settlement.

In reality, Obama’s speech did not depart in substance from Bush’s position. Moreover, he made no condemnation of Israeli settlements, much less a demand that the Zionist land grab be called to a halt. Needless to say, there was not a word of criticism of the continuing Israeli attacks on Palestinians, including its killing of 16 unarmed demonstrators and wounding over of 100 more during protests on Israel’s borders last Sunday.

The firestorm whipped up over his turn of phrase was aimed in large measure at Netanyahu’s base among the fanatical West Bank settlers and the semi-fascistic Israeli right.

Leading Republicans, including contenders for the party’s presidential nomination, sounded the same theme. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, for example, accused Obama of having “thrown Israel under the bus” and “undermined its ability to negotiate peace.” House Republican Majority Leader Eric Cantor said that Obama’s proposal “undermines our special relationship with Israel and weakens our ally’s ability to defend itself.”

In remarks to the media after their private talks, Obama was conciliatory, stressing his administration’s agreement with the Israeli government over a wide range of issues, while Netanyahu lost little time in rejecting any talks based on the 1967 borders, while making belligerent demands upon the Palestinians.

It was widely reported Friday that Obama’s “Arab spring” speech was met with disdain throughout the Arab world. Netanyahu’s denunciations could have served some political purpose in providing the US administration with political cover in the Arab world, but Obama’s remarks following his meeting with the Israeli prime minister can only have deepened the suspicion and contempt felt by masses of people in the Middle East and North Africa towards Washington’s policies.

Obama strongly suggested that the US and the Israeli state are pursuing a common strategy for dealing with the revolutionary upheavals that have shaken the region. He and Netanyahu had discussed “what has been happening in places like Egypt and Syria and how they affect the interests and security of the United States and Israel,” Obama said.

Pointing to the counterrevolutionary axis formed by US imperialism and Israel throughout the region, Obama stressed that “it’s going to be important for the United States and Israel to consult closely as we see developments unfold.” He also said that the two states “continue to share our deep concerns about Iran,” a country that Israeli officials have repeatedly threatened with military attack.

On the issue of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Obama glossed over the controversy, refraining from any repetition of the offending reference to 1967, indicating that it was merely a matter of semantics. “Obviously, there are some differences between us in the precise formulations, and that’s going to happen between friends,” he said. “But what we are in complete accord about is that a true peace can only occur if the ultimate resolution allows Israel to defend itself against threats, and that Israel’s security will remain paramount in US evaluations of any prospective peace deal.”

There was no reference whatsoever as to what Palestinians must be allowed in order to achieve a “true peace.” Instead, the US president echoed Israel’s position that the recently concluded alliance between Fatah and Hamas essentially precluded any negotiations.

Netanyahu, employing the traditional gangster rhetoric of the Israeli right, said that “the Palestinians will have to accept some basic realities,” including no return to the 1967 border, continued Israeli military occupation along the Jordan and no right of return for Palestinian refugees. He also ruled out any negotiations with a Palestinian entity that included Hamas, which he provocatively described as “the Palestinian version of al-Qaeda.”

As with all of his administration’s policies, Obama will unquestionably tailor any initiative relating to Israeli-Palestinian talks to the demands of the Republican right, which, like much of the Democratic Party, is in lock step with the right-wing faction led by Likud, a party supported by fewer than a quarter of Israeli voters.

In a genuflection to this faction, which constitutes even a smaller minority among American Jews, Obama will deliver a speech to the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the right-wing Zionist lobby, on Sunday.

The Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmoud Abbas condemned Netanyahu’s reaction to Obama’s speech, calling it “an official declaration that he is not ready to engage in a real peace based on justice and international

legitimacy.”

Neither for that matter, is the US administration. Like the Zionist regime in Israel, it finds itself increasingly threatened by revolutionary upheavals in the Arab world and facing growing challenges from its economic rivals in Europe and Asia for hegemony over the Middle East and North Africa and their strategic energy reserves.

While the bourgeois Palestinian leadership headed by Abbas has signaled its willingness to cede virtually all of the historic demands of the Palestinian people in return for a bantustan-style state, even that is not seriously on offer.

On the eve of Netanyahu’s trip to Washington, Israel’s Interior Ministry Planning Committee approved the construction of 1,500 more housing units for illegal settlements on occupied territory in and around Jerusalem, establishing new “facts on the ground”.

And on the same day that the Israeli prime minister was meeting with Obama, Israeli troops opened fire on Palestinian demonstrators in the Gaza Strip, leaving at least three wounded by gunfire and many others suffering the effects of tear gas inhalation.

The demonstration, which was described as a “March of Anger, Return to Palestine,” was called for by a Facebook group calling itself “Third Palestinian Intifada”, which called on Palestinians and others in the occupied territories and the countries surrounding Israel to renew the demonstrations on its borders for the rights of Palestinians.

Whatever new concessions Netanyahu wrings out of the Obama administration or imposes upon the discredited leaders of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, Israel will not be spared the revolutionary upheavals that are sweeping the region.

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