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Making shalom at the White House

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Netanyahu has a new opportunity when he comes to Washington: To take Ehud Barak's counsel to bring with him a 'daring and assertive political initiative.'

Talkbacks (12)

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu bought his ticket to Washington next weekend with a revised Gaza blockade policy that won kudos from its coauthors, President Barack Obama and Quartet special Mideast envoy Tony Blair.

But before Netanyahu arrives, the king of Saudi Arabia will drop by the Oval Office to discuss the peace process almost exactly a year after he flatly rebuffed a request from Obama – who'd made a special trip to Riyadh – for steps to encourage Israeli flexibility in peace talks. King Abdullah said he'd done enough by publishing a Saudi peace plan he's done nothing to advance and instead demanded Obama pressure Israel to endorse it. This week he may tell Obama to lean harder on Israel or he'll withdraw the offer.

Let's hope that this time Obama reminds him that Saudi Arabia needs the American security umbrella (remember the first Gulf War?) a lot more than we need its oil. And that peace between Israel and its neighbors is vital to the security of Saudi Arabia, which faces the threat of a nuclear Iran across the Gulf.

IRAN TOPS Netanyahu's agenda as Israelis worry the West is spinning its wheels while the ayatollahs are spinning their centrifuges and turning out highly enriched uranium.

Sanctions are fine, but so far ineffective. After years of threats by the Bush and Obama administrations that we will not permit Iran to build nukes, the truth is Iran is closer than ever and no one has a peaceful way to stop it.

The peace process heads Obama's to-do list and he will be looking for Netanyahu to take the advice of his partner and defense minister, Ehud Barak, who urged him to take to Washington a "daring and assertive political initiative."

But that's not Bibi's style. In revising the Gaza blockade, as with endorsing the twostate solution and instituting a (partial) settlement freeze, he ultimately did the right thing but only after exhausting every alternative, and then he wonders why he didn't get the credit he felt he deserved.

A guy with an MBA from MIT should know better.

He has a new opportunity when he comes to Washington next month to take Ehud Barak's counsel. Israel's – and Netanyahu's – international stature is as low as it has been in many years; he has an chance to reverse the slide and become a historic peacemaker, not an epic obstrucater.

A big advantage of an Israeli initiative is that it won't be written in the White House, at the UN, in Ramallah or in Riyadh. There's an axiom on Capitol Hill that the advantage goes to whoever writes the first draft.

After a year of trading sharp elbow jabs, Obama and Netanyahu figured out they could achieve more with a less confrontational approach and by working out their difference in private instead of the public arena.

Their July 6 meeting has been dubbed the kiss-and-make-up session, complete with photo-op and news conference.

NETANYAHU AND Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas are both convinced the other one is not serious, but neither one has shown the courage to call the other's bluff.

The test will come in moving from indirect talks to face-to-face negotiations.

Both Obama and Netanyahu want that to happen quickly but Abbas, who makes no secret that he would prefer Obama do his negotiating for him, is holding out. He's dropped his original demand for a total settlement freeze and is insisting on "substantive progress" in the current phase, something he'll want Obama to certify to give him cover back home for dropping his old demands.

Obama has several reasons to want direct talks to begin by October. Abbas's mandate from his brethren for negotiations expires this fall at about the same time as Netanyahu's 10-month partial moratorium on settlement construction. Obama wants both to continue.

Much of the improvement in relations could vanish if Netanyahu allows the mayor of Jerusalem to go ahead with the demolition of 22 Arab homes to make way for a tourism center near the Old City.

US support for Israel is an issue in some House and Senate races this fall, and progress on the peace front could help Democrats in fund-raising and vote-getting, and allow Obama to show his policies are working and good for Israel.

Netanyahu is expected to invite Obama to visit, and the president is thinking of going in October,

possibly to kick off the face-to-face talks, and to take his case for peace directly to the Israeli people. It is a trip long overdue.

Next month's Oval Office meeting will set the stage for what could be a more productive relationship between wary US and Israeli leaders; the earlier US-Saudi encounter will hopefully bolster a regional climate that, until now, has seen the Saudis contribute little more than pious lip service.

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