President Barack Obama will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on November 9 after a long period of tension between the two leaders over the controversial nuclear deal with Iran. Netanyahu, who warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an existential threat to Israel, was highly critical of the risky agreement, which he lambasted for paving the way for an Iranian nuclear weapon.

The two leaders now need to reset their relationship in a constructive manner and forge a coordinated approach to key regional issues, such as containing Iran’s growing power, defeating terrorist threats, maintaining a favorable balance of power, and defusing rising Israeli–Palestinian tensions.

Clashing Worldviews

The two leaders have been divided not only by policy disagreements, but also by incompatible worldviews. President Obama came into office determined to end U.S. participation in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he sought diplomatic engagement with Iran to facilitate this withdrawal and to ease rising tensions over its nuclear program. Although Tehran did not help to end the wars—in fact, Tehran provided support to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Shiite militias fighting U.S. forces in Iraq—it was willing to accept the many concessions that the Administration offered in the nuclear deal in exchange for temporary Iranian concessions that can easily be reneged upon at Iran’s convenience.

President Obama puts his faith in diplomatic agreements, despite Iran’s long history of violating them, including those on the nuclear issue. He believes that his Iran nuclear deal will boost “moderate” Iranian leaders, despite the fact that sanctions relief will primarily benefit hardliners who control Iran’s economy, foreign policy, judiciary, legislature, and security organs.

Prime Minister Netanyahu regards Iran as the primary source of problems in the Middle East, not as part of an acceptable solution to those problems. He sees Iran extending its influence over Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen in close cooperation with Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. For Netanyahu, foreign policy must be based on security issues that reflect the balance of power. His foreign policy is grounded in defense considerations, not diplomatic agreements, which he has seen fail repeatedly in the Middle East.

Time to Repair and Strengthen Bilateral Relations

To help to repair the damage to bilateral relations caused by the Iran nuclear deal and to strengthen security cooperation, President Obama should:

Reassure Netanyahu that the U.S. will strictly monitor and enforce Iranian compliance with the nuclear agreement. The President should offer to work closely with Israel to monitor Iranian compliance, exchange intelligence on Iranian nuclear (and other) activities, and outline planned U.S. responses.
if Iran violates various commitments. The two leaders also should coordinate policies on pushing back against Iran’s hostile nonnuclear activities, including its illegal efforts to arm Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Harakat al-Sabireen (“Movement of the patient ones”), its new Palestinian surrogate terrorist group. In addition to intercepting and disrupting Iranian arms transfers to these terrorist groups, Washington should encourage greater cooperation among Israel, Egypt, and Jordan in combatting the Islamic State (ISIS), as well as encouraging a détente between Israel and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council that would allow Israel to play a role in blocking Iranian arms transfers to the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Enhance strategic cooperation with Israel. In addition to new security threats posed by the proliferation of terrorist groups in the chaos of the Arab Spring, Israel faces a growing military threat from Iran, which will be bolstered by roughly $100 billion in sanctions relief under the nuclear agreement. To offset the risks posed by these threats and to help maintain Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge against Iran and any combination of other adversaries, the President should seek to reach an agreement with Netanyahu on a new long-term plan for strategic cooperation.

A top agenda item will be negotiating a new 10-year plan for defense assistance. The current plan, negotiated in 2007, provided Israel with about $3 billion in security assistance annually and will expire in 2018. Jerusalem is seeking additional aid to finance the expansion of its missile defenses and to purchase additional F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, beyond the 14 that it already has ordered. President Obama should offer additional aid to finance the improvement and expansion of Israel’s Arrow and Iron Dome missile defense systems, as well as to coproduce the David’s Sling defense system, which fills the gap between the high-altitude capabilities of Arrow and the low-altitude capabilities of Iron Dome.

The White House also should offer Israel bunker-busting bombs to boost its deterrence of Iran, cyber technologies to defend against Iran’s growing offensive cyber capabilities, and tunnel detection and mapping technologies. Techniques developed to counter North Korea’s tunnel networks could help to neutralize the threat posed by Hamas tunnels under the Gaza border and Hezbollah tunnels under the Lebanese border. The two leaders also should discuss coordinating their responses to the challenges posed by ISIS and the growing Iranian and Russian military deployments in Syria.

Craft a cooperative approach to Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. Since October 1, at least 10 Israelis have been killed in knife attacks or other terrorist incidents, and at least 56 Palestinians have died in clashes with Israeli security forces, including 19 killed after attacking Israelis. This terrorist campaign has been incited by Palestinian leaders opposed to negotiations with Israel, including Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who tried to make a diplomatic end run around Israel by going to the United Nations in a failed effort to obtain Palestinian statehood without negotiating a peace agreement with Israel.

As the President discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan, conflicts cannot be ended unilaterally. The adversary gets a vote in determining when and how conflicts end. As long as Hamas controls Gaza and can launch another round of rocket terrorism (with many provided by Iran) and President Abbas refuses to rejoin negotiations with Israel without preconditions, then no progress toward a final settlement is possible. No Israeli government would risk withdrawing from the West Bank as long as there is a risk that it would be transformed into a base for terrorism, as Gaza was after the Israeli withdrawal in 2005. There already are enough failed states in the Middle East that are incubating Islamist terrorists without adding one more.

The United States needs a cautious and realistic diplomatic approach, not an attempt to impose a quick fix for an intractable problem that is not ripe for solution. President Obama has unnecessarily and repeatedly raised expectations for a final Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement and failed to satisfy those expectations. This mistake has been compounded by his misguided decision to apply one-sided pressure on Israel while giving the Palestinian Authority a free pass. This made a bad situation worse by leading Abbas to conclude that he did not need to negotiate with Israel because Washington would wring concessions out of Jerusalem. As a result, peace negotiations have already collapsed twice on Obama’s watch.

A more prudent and realistic approach is needed, not another rush to failure. The President should focus on calming the situation and calling for an end of Palestinian incitement. President Obama should make it clear that the U.S. and Israel stand united
against continued terrorism, which is the chief obstacle to Arab–Israeli peace. Distancing his Administration from Israel would only encourage further Palestinian efforts to seek unilateral statehood through the United Nations without first negotiating a peace agreement with Israel.

Focus on Common Interests

President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu need to make a fresh start after the bruising battle over the Iran nuclear deal. President Obama should make it clear that he views Netanyahu as a key strategic partner, not as a political enemy. History has shown that little progress can be made in Arab–Israeli negotiations or defeating regional security threats unless Washington and Jerusalem are closely aligned.

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