

## Political

**update:**– Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu dismantles illegal outpost on returning from his first meeting with US President Obama – 21 May

### Key points:

- Israeli police evacuate and dismantle an illegal West Bank outpost a day after the US repeats calls for a total settlement construction freeze
  - Netanyahu calls for peace talks with the Palestinians to start immediately; Obama calls for a two state solution
  - The two leaders agree that Iran’s nuclear intentions must be challenged but differ on the need for a US diplomacy deadline
- 

### Latest developments

- Israeli police demolished the illegal West Bank settlement outpost of Maoz Esther on Thursday (21 May), three days after US President Barack Obama called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to halt settlement activity. The police did not encounter any violence whilst removing the 40 settlers.
- The Israeli prime minister and US president met in Washington DC on Monday (18 May) to discuss the Middle East peace process and the threat posed by Iran’s illegal nuclear programme. This was the pair’s first meeting since each took office.
- Discussing the peace process in the press conference that followed the meeting, Netanyahu said that he wanted to start peace negotiations with the Palestinians “immediately.” He did not explicitly support a two state solution, but did say that the Palestinians should “govern themselves.” Obama was keen to stress that the goal of the peace process should be a two state solution.
- Obama also challenged Netanyahu on the issue of West Bank settlements, saying that he wanted to see commitments to freeze settlement building made under the 2003 Roadmap and 2007 Annapolis process fulfilled. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton further clarified this point with the pre-release of an Al-Jazeera TV interview transcript on Wednesday (20 May), saying “we want to see a stop to settlement construction, additions, natural growth - any kind of settlement activity.”
- It is this call for urgent action that may have encouraged Thursday’s (21 May) outpost evacuation.
- Obama and Netanyahu agreed on Monday (18 May) to set up a number of bilateral working groups on the peace process, including one to cover the issue of settlements.
- Since Obama and Netanyahu’s meeting, elements of a proposed US peace plan have appeared in a number of Israeli newspapers. It was reported on Wednesday (20 May) that whilst Obama is striving for the creation of an

independent Palestinian state, he is in agreement with Netanyahu that it should be demilitarised. He also reportedly wants Jerusalem's Old City to be internationalised, Palestinians to give up their 'right of return' to Israel and the Arab world to pursue a gradual normalisation of relations with Israel prior to the signing of a full peace agreement. Obama is expected to announce greater detail of his plans for the Middle East in Cairo on 4 June.

- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is scheduled to meet Obama in Washington on 28 May. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who had planned to meet with Obama on 26 May, has cancelled his visit due to the death of his grandson.
- During their meeting in Washington, Netanyahu made clear to Obama that the Iranian threat is Israel's biggest concern. He also argued that dealing with the Iranian problem would make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict easier to solve, since both Hamas and Hezbollah, which oppose the peace process, receive Iranian funding and military support. Upon returning to Israel on Wednesday (20 May), Netanyahu reiterated that Iran poses a threat to the stability of the whole region and therefore the ability of the region to make peace with Israel:

"There has never been a time when Arabs and Israelis see a common threat the way we see it today. And we also see the need to join together in working towards peace while simultaneously defending ourselves." (20/05/09)

- In their joint press conference, Obama agreed that "Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon would not only be a threat to Israel and to the United States," but would also destabilise the region. Whilst refusing to impose a definitive deadline on engagement attempts with Iran, as Netanyahu argued for, Obama said he would like to see progress by the end of the year and would consider "much stronger international sanctions" if engagement attempts failed. Obama also declared that "when it comes to my policies towards Israel and the Middle East... Israel's security is paramount."

## **Background**

- Unnamed US officials told Israel's Haaretz newspaper on Friday (8 May) that Obama's proposals for the peace process will incorporate suggestions made by former foreign minister Tzipi Livni regarding the involvement of the Arab world. The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which Obama's plan draws upon, offers Israel normal relations with the Arab world in return for a Palestinian state.
- During Benjamin Netanyahu's recent election campaign, the Likud leader refused to support any form of Palestinian self rule, preferring to discuss economic measures in the West Bank that would allow Israel to maintain continued security control over borders. However, one of the conditions stipulated by the Israeli Labor party on joining the Likud-led coalition in March was that Netanyahu commit to honour all previous agreements signed by Israel. This includes the Road Map of 2003, which centres on the eventual creation of a Palestinian state.
- Barack Obama has repeatedly stressed that peace in the Middle East is a priority for his administration. This is in contrast to his two immediate predecessors, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who focused on the Middle East only in the latter stages of their presidencies. One of Obama's first appointments was choosing former Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy

for Middle East Peace. Mitchell, who was instrumental in bringing peace to Northern Ireland, has already embarked upon several extensive tours of the region, meeting with officials in Israel, the Palestinian territories, North Africa and the Gulf.

- Although Netanyahu's first term as Israeli prime minister, 1996-1999, was characterised by a hard-line approach to peace negotiations, he did make progress by instigating the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank city of Hebron in 1997. In addition, in 1998, Netanyahu signed the Wye River Accords with former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, which aimed to transfer additional West Bank land to Palestinian control. However, since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, the Wye River's understandings remain un-implemented.