



Middle East Spotlight

Relationships Matter

The most symbolic relationship in the U.S.-Israel alliance—the one between the U.S. president and Israeli prime minister—was on full display when President Barack Obama welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House. The meeting was a good start to a relationship that will shape the future of U.S. Middle East policy.

On the most urgent agenda item—the danger of Iran’s nuclear program—Obama reiterated that Iran must be prevented from developing a nuclear weapon and said that his administration’s policy of engagement with Tehran is not open-ended. Obama said he expected to know by the end of the year whether Iran was making “a good-faith effort to resolve differences” in talks aimed at ending its nuclear program.

“We’re not going to have talks forever,” Obama said. “We’re not going to create a situation in which the talks become an excuse for inaction while Iran proceeds with developing a nuclear—and deploying a nuclear weapon.” Most importantly, the president added that the United States is “not foreclosing a range of steps, including much stronger international sanctions, in assuring that Iran understands that we are serious.”

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, Netanyahu said that he wants to “start peace negotiations with the Palestinians...” and that he would like to “broaden the circle of peace to include others in the Arab world.” Obama agreed, calling on all Arab countries to support Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and to normalize their ties with Israel.

While the U.S. president and Israeli prime minister only meet in person occasionally, the two countries have established working groups where both parties can formulate policy strategies and privately voice any concerns and disagreements. One high-level working group will assess the progress of the Obama administration’s outreach to Iran. A separate group, led by U.S. envoy George Mitchell, will discuss issues related to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Tackling both of the major agenda items—Iran’s nuclear program and Arab-Israeli peace—will be difficult. Close U.S.-Israel cooperation will be essential if there is to be progress on both tracks. There are strong signs that will be the case: Netanyahu stated that he and Obama see “exactly eye to eye” on the need to move simultaneously on both fronts.

The successful Obama-Netanyahu meeting was a reminder that relationships matter. But it is also important to take a step back from the news cycle and note that the U.S.-Israel relationship is not held together by the two people at the top. The United States and Israel are united because people from both countries share a common worldview and a commitment to human liberty and peace.

Obama and Netanyahu showcased these shared values at the White House. Now the real work must begin.