

## Does he really want a deal?

*Binyamin Netanyahu comes to talk to Barack Obama.*

The more he can talk about the wider region, the less he need focus on the narrow, awkward issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That, at any rate, is a perennial suspicion about Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's once-again prime minister, which he will try to allay when he arrives in Washington for his first meeting, on May 18th, with Barack Obama.

He will want to talk to the president at length, say Mr Netanyahu's people, about Iran's nuclear ambitions, the most pressing and dangerous problem in the eyes of Israel's government. Mr Netanyahu discerns "an unprecedented convergence" of interests between Israel and moderate states in the region in the face of a perceived threat from Iran and Hizbullah, the well-armed Shia political movement Iran sponsors in Lebanon. But the Israeli prime minister says this is "irrespective" of his willingness, indeed his desire, to proceed with "parallel" talks with the Palestinians. He would, of course, discuss those talks too with Mr Obama.

He will also want to discuss new ideas apparently evolving in Washington about a broad regional rapprochement. King Abdullah of Jordan, a recent guest at the White House, speaks of "a 57-state solution" between Israel and the entire Muslim world, embracing the full membership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Mr Netanyahu says this "dovetails" with his own public statements and private urgings that leading regional governments should be more active in diplomacy aimed at making peace with Israel. He apparently made the same point to Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, at the resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh on May 11th. But he is said to acknowledge a need to make progress directly with the Palestinians.

But how? Israeli officials leave that vague, hinting that Mr Netanyahu may unfurl a new plan in Mr Obama's presence and then show it to the world. He denies a report that he sought to meet the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, but was rebuffed. In any event, the two leaders will not have met before each presents his case at the White House; negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel have, in effect, been suspended since the previous Israeli government of Ehud Olmert left office on April 1st.

The Palestinians want Israel's new government to accept a two-state solution, to stop building settlements and to resume the talks where they were left off. Mr Netanyahu says he wants to talk—but "without preconditions". His officials say that no government need accept the negotiating positions of its predecessor unless they were enshrined in a signed agreement, which they were not.

In contrast, senior people in Mr Obama's team have been loudly insisting, in a string of statements intended to soften Mr Netanyahu up before his White House encounter, on the need for a two-state solution and for settlement building to stop. "You're not going to like my saying this," the vice-president, Joseph Biden, told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a powerful lobby, at its convention in Washington earlier this month. Israel should "not build more settlements, [it should] dismantle existing outposts and allow Palestinians freedom of movement ...and access to economic opportunity."

Mr Netanyahu's men claim this was not a scolding: the vice-president spoke of "more" settlements and Mr Netanyahu's government says it will merely permit the expansion of existing ones rather than build "more". His government, like its predecessor, says it will indeed take down "illegal" outposts, meaning those that have not been sanctioned even by Israel's government; its predecessor's promise to do so was honoured mainly in the breach.

Such semantic bobbing and weaving may remind Mr Obama's team, especially those in it who once worked for President Bill Clinton, of Mr Netanyahu's fraught previous term as prime minister, from 1996 to 1999. "That SOB doesn't want a deal," growled Mr Clinton at a particularly frustrating juncture in diplomacy. It remains to be seen whether—or how fast—Mr Obama may come to the same conclusion.

DOES he really want a deal? **The Economist**, New York, 14 maio 2009. Disponível em: <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 22 maio 2009.

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