

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and an Exchange With Reporters

March 3, 2014

President Obama. Well, it's a pleasure to welcome once again Prime Minister Netanyahu to the Oval Office. There's nobody I've met with more or consulted with more than Bibi. And it's a testimony to the incredible bond between our two nations. I've said before, and I will repeat: We do not have a closer friend or ally than Israel, and the bond between our two countries and our two peoples is unbreakable.

And that's the reason why on a whole spectrum of issues, we consult closely; we have the kind of military and intelligence and security cooperation that is unprecedented. And there is a strong bipartisan commitment in this country to make sure that Israel's security is preserved in any contingency.

We're going to have a wide range of issues obviously to discuss given what's happening on the world stage and in the Middle East, in particular. So we'll spend some time discussing the situation in Syria and the need for us to not only find a political solution to the tragic situation there, but also to address growing extremism inside of Syria, the spillover effects on Lebanon and Jordan, in particular.

We'll have an opportunity to discuss the work that we do in counterterrorism and the work that we are going to be continuing to do to try to stabilize an environment that has become very dangerous in many respects.

We'll also have a chance to talk about Egypt, a country that obviously is of critical importance and where we have the opportunity, I think, to move beyond recent events over the last several years to a point in which once again there is a legitimate path towards political transition inside of Egypt. And that's important to Israel's security as well as to U.S. security.

We're going to be talking about Iran and my absolute commitment to make sure that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon, something that I know the Prime Minister feels very deeply about. And we will discuss how the Joint Plan of Action that is currently in place can potentially, at least, lead to a solution that ensures that Iran is not developing a nuclear weapon.

And we'll spend time talking about the prospects of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. I want to commend publicly the efforts that Prime Minister Netanyahu have made in very lengthy and painstaking negotiations with my Secretary of State, John Kerry, Abu Mazen. They are tough negotiations. The issues are profound. Obviously, if they were easy, they would have been resolved many years ago. But I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu has approached these negotiations with a level of seriousness and commitment that reflects his leadership and the desire for the Israeli people for peace.

It's my belief that ultimately, it is still possible to create two states—a Jewish State of Israel and a state of Palestine—in which people are living side by side in peace and security. But it's difficult, and it requires compromise on all sides. And I just want to publicly again commend the Prime Minister for the seriousness with which he's taken these discussions.

The frame—timeframe that we have set up for completing these negotiations is coming near, and some tough decisions are going to have to be made. But I know that, regardless of the outcome, that the Prime Minister will make those decisions based on his absolute commitment to Israel's security and his recognition that ultimately, Israel's security will be enhanced by peace with its neighbors.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, I want to welcome you again, and thank you again for your leadership and your friendship with the American people.

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Thank you, Mr. President.

President Obama. Thank you.

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Mr. President, I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today, especially since I know you've got a few other pressing matters on your plate. During the 5 years of your Presidency, you and I—and Israel and the United States—have worked very closely on critically important issues—security, intelligence sharing, missile defense—and we're deeply grateful for that.

I look forward to working closely with you in the years ahead to address the main challenges that confront both our countries, and of these, the greatest challenge, undoubtedly, is to prevent Iran from acquiring the capacity to make nuclear weapons. I think that goal can be achieved if Iran is prevented from enriching uranium and dismantles fully its military-nuclear installations.

Now, Mr. President, if that goal can be achieved peacefully and through diplomacy, I can tell you that no country has a greater stake in this than Israel. Because, as you know and I'm sure you'll appreciate, Iran calls openly for Israel's destruction, so I'm sure you'll appreciate that Israel cannot permit such a state to have the ability to make atomic bombs to achieve that goal. We just cannot be brought back again to the brink of destruction. And I, as the Prime Minister of Israel, will do whatever I must do to defend the Jewish State.

We're also going to discuss the peace process, as you said. I want to thank you and Secretary Kerry for, when I say tireless efforts, I mean tireless efforts that he is putting into this quest, as you are. It's an opportunity to congratulate Secretary Kerry on the birth of his new granddaughter. Mr. Secretary, you may not be aware of this, but the news of the new granddaughter came to Secretary Kerry while we were discussing the peace process. So we've had many productive meetings, but this is truly a productive meeting. [*Laughter*] And so I thank you both for your efforts and your team's.

The 20 years that have passed since Israel entered the peace process have been marked by unprecedented steps that Israel has taken to advance peace. I mean, we vacated cities in Judea and Samaria. We left entirely Gaza. We've not only frozen settlements, we've uprooted entire settlements. We've released hundreds of terrorist prisoners, including dozens in recent months.

And when you see—look at what we got in return, it's been scores of suicide bombers, thousands of rockets on our cities fired from the areas we vacated, and just incessant Palestinian incitement against Israel. So Israel has been doing its part, and I regret to say that the Palestinians haven't.

Now, I know this flies in the face of conventional wisdom, but it's the truth. And the people of Israel know that it's the truth because they've been living it. What they want is peace. What we all want fervently is peace: not a piece a paper—although that too—but a real peace,

a peace that is anchored in mutual recognition of two nation-states that recognize and respect one another and solid security arrangements on the ground.

Mr. President, you rightly said that Israel, the Jewish State, is the realization of the Jewish people's self-determination in our ancestral homeland. So the Palestinians expect us to recognize a Palestinian state for the Palestinian people, a nation-state for the Palestinian people. I think it's about time they recognize a nation-state for the Jewish people. We've only been there for 4,000 years.

And I hope President Abbas does this, as I hope that he'll take seriously Israel's genuine security needs. Because, as you know and I think everybody does, in the Middle East, which is definitely the most turbulent and violent part of the Earth, the only peace that will endure is a peace that we can defend. And we've learned from our history—Jewish history, but I think from general history—that the best way to guarantee peace is to be strong. And that's what the people of Israel expect me to do, to stand strong against criticism, against pressure, stand strong to secure the future of the one and only Jewish State.

And I think there is a partnership there, a partnership between Israel and America, that I think is important for this end. I want to thank you again for your friendship and your hospitality and the warmth you've shown me on this snowy Washington day. I thank you. It's good to see you again.

President Obama. Appreciate it. Thank you.

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Thank you.

[*At this point, several reporters began speaking at once.*]

President Obama. Julie Pace [Associated Press].

Ukraine/Russia's Role in Ukraine

Q. The initial punishments that the U.S. is threatening against Russia for their advances into Ukraine don't seem to be having much of an effect. What leverage do you believe you have over President Putin at this point? And is the U.S. concerned primarily about getting Russian forces out of Crimea, or are you also concerned about Russian forces moving into parts of eastern Ukraine?

President Obama. All of the above. I spent the weekend talking to leaders across Europe, and I think the world is largely united in recognizing that the steps Russia has taken are a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, Ukraine's territorial integrity; that they're a violation of international law; they're a violation of previous agreements that Russia has made with respect to how it treats and respects its neighbors. And as a consequence, we got strong statements from NATO, from the G-7, condemning the actions that Russia has taken. And we are going to continue these diplomatic efforts during the course of this week.

My interest is seeing the Ukrainian people be able to determine their own destiny. Russia has strong historic ties to the Ukraine. There are a lot of Russian nationals inside of Ukraine as well as native Russians, as there are a lot of Ukrainians inside of Russia. There are strong commercial ties between those two countries. And so all of those interests, I think, can be recognized. But what cannot be done is for Russia, with impunity, to put its soldiers on the ground and violate basic principles that are recognized around the world.

And I think the strong condemnation that it's received from countries around the world indicates the degree to which Russia is on the wrong side of history on this.

We are strongly supportive of the interim Ukrainian Government. John Kerry is going to be traveling to Kiev to indicate our support for the Ukrainian people, to offer very specific and concrete packages of economic aid. Because one of the things we're concerned about is stabilizing the economy even in the midst of this crisis. And what we are also indicating to the Russians is that if, in fact, they continue on the current trajectory that they're on, that we are examining a whole series of steps—economic, diplomatic—that will isolate Russia and will have a negative impact on Russia's economy and its status in the world.

We've already suspended preparations for the G-8 summit. I think you can expect that there would be further follow-up on that. I think we are taking a look at a whole range of issues that John Kerry mentioned yesterday.

And the question for Mr. Putin, who I spoke to directly, and the question for the Russian Government generally, is if in fact their concern is that the rights of all Ukrainians are respected, if in fact their primary concern, as they've stated, is that Russian speakers and Russian nationals are not in any way harmed or abused or discriminated against, then we should be able to set up international monitors and an international effort that mediates between various parties, that is able to broker a deal that is satisfactory to the Ukrainian people—not to the United States, not to Russia, but to the Ukrainian people—and we should be able to deescalate the situation.

And so we've been very specific with the Russians about how that might be done under the auspices of either the United Nations or the OSCE or some other international organization. And John Kerry will pursue that further when he arrives.

And so there are really two paths that Russia can take at this point. Obviously, the facts on the ground in Crimea are deeply troubling, and Russia has a large army that borders Ukraine. But what is also true is that over time, this will be a costly proposition for Russia. And now is the time for them to consider whether they can serve their interests in a way that resorts to diplomacy as opposed to force.

One last point I would make on this: I've heard a lot of talk from Congress about what should be done, what they want to do. One thing they can do right away is to work with the administration to help provide a package of assistance to the Ukrainians, to the people and that Government. And when they get back in, assuming the weather clears, I would hope that that would be the first order of business. Because at this stage there should be unanimity among Democrats and Republicans that when it comes to preserving the principle that no country has the right to send in troops to another country unprovoked, we should be able to come up with a unified position that stands outside of partisan politics. And my expectation is, is that I'll be able to get Congress to work with us in order to achieve that goal.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:04 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia. He also referred to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

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