

Can Israel tamp down Jerusalem clashes?

Even before the Jerusalem clashes today, the US had asked Israel to confirm it would include the Jerusalem's status in renewed talks with the Palestinians. But Netanyahu's range of options is constrained by his rightist coalition partners.

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Tel Aviv, Israel —

Palestinian protesters and Israeli policemen clashed today in the West Bank and Jerusalem, underscoring the holy city's emergence as the frontline of Israel's battle with the Palestinians and the forefront of a new diplomatic rift with its closest ally, the US.

The rededication of a synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City stoked tensions already high over last week's announcement that Israel would build 1,600 new homes in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem.

The crisis, which has landed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in hot water not only in Washington but at home, highlights the difficulty of governing Israel with a diverse coalition. In a multiparty political system where instability is endemic, religious parties and the ideological right have often been the Achilles heel of Netanyahu and his center-right Likud party.

Netanyahu's hands tied by religious right

Israel is expected to respond today to a US request for clarification on several points relayed by a "frustrated" Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last weekend. Reportedly among them are a request for Israel to guarantee that "core issues," including Jerusalem's status, will be included in renewed talks with the Palestinians – talks which the Palestinians are threatening to pull out of over the 1,600 homes announcement. A tender to build a further 309 Jewish homes in the Neve Yaakov, beyond the green line in Jerusalem, were announced by the Ministry of Housing on Tuesday.

Even if Netanyahu personally agrees that Jerusalem should be part of the talks, rightist members of his coalition such as ultranationalist Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman wield enough power to block such peace moves.

This week, a new figure came into the international spotlight: Interior Minister Eli Yishai, the leader of the religious Shas party whose ministry issued the announcement of 1,600 new homes in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo. While traditionally known more for focusing on social welfare for the Jewish underclass, Shas has spearheaded the religious right's surge in government and is dead-set against negotiations to divide Jerusalem.

“[Yishai] has said, ‘We will never negotiate over Jerusalem,’ ” says Avraham Diskin, Hebrew University political science professor. “Defending Jerusalem is a matter of consensus not only in his party, but all over Israel. So it is a good issue for him.”

Yishai mindful of hawkish Shas members

Yishai denied knowledge of the announcement of new building, which threw a wrench in Vice President Joe Biden’s fence-mending trip last week, but observers familiar with his stance on Jerusalem believe otherwise.

“Yishai said he didn’t know,” wrote Yossi Verter in the center-left Haaretz newspaper. “A minister who is aware he is sitting on a keg of dynamite would, presumably, from his first day in office, have his ears open, act carefully and see to it that the message filters down.”

Though the rabbinic leaders of Shas have preferred compromise to maximizing Israel’s territory, grass-roots members of Shas are more hawkish, says Prof. Diskin. Yishai, more concerned with winning points with his constituents than international diplomatic controversies, has pushed for new ultra-Orthodox building projects like the one in Ramat Shlomo and in the Jerusalem settlement suburb of Givat Zeev to feed demand because of high birth rates in the religious community, say analysts.

One associate of Shas argued that despite his recent moves, Yishai and his party have not abandoned the dovish religious political outlook first detailed by its venerated spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, in the mid-1990s. In a famous religious ruling, Rabbi Yosef said that avoiding bloodshed is more important than holding on to land.

“Yishai believes the constituents of Shas are extremists. On the other hand that Yishai knows very well that rabbi Ovadia Yosef supports peace,” says David Glass, a lawyer who has represented the party in coalition negotiations. “Although Eli Yishai is very outspoken against a Palestinian state and for settlements, that is not the real Eli Yishai.”

'Netanyahu can't afford to kick Shas out

With only 11 seats in the parliament, Shas lacks the ability to bring down Netanyahu’s government. Still, a withdrawal would seriously destabilize Netanyahu. Together with Lieberman, who opposes negotiations and controls 15 seats, they are part of an exclusive group of seven ministers that the prime minister consults with on foreign affairs and security. More important, they can veto peace concessions.

“Netanyahu can’t afford to kick Shas out of the coalition,” says Aviv Bushinsky, a former communications advisor to Netanyahu. “He’s a slave to his partners. He doesn’t want to go into a head to head confrontation with him – it won’t serve his political stability.”