



Netanyahu Pushed by Coalition Partner, U.S. to Curb Home Plan

Share | Email | Print | A A A

By Jonathan Ferziger and Gwen Ackerman



March 29 (Bloomberg) -- Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** now faces pressure from within his own governing coalition, as well as U.S. President **Barack Obama**, to rein in housing construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

The suggestion by Labor Party minister **Isaac Herzog** that his party may leave the government unless Netanyahu moves to resolve the dispute with the U.S. and restart negotiations with the Palestinians means Netanyahu will likely confront internal dissent no matter which way he moves.

The 60-year-old Israeli leader, who met Obama at the White House last week, is caught between pressure from the U.S. and Labor to revive peace talks and demands from coalition partners such as Yisrael Beitenu and Shas to expand

settlements. During his previous tenure as prime minister, 12 years ago, his government fell apart when he acceded to U.S. demands for concessions to the Palestinians.

"There's a certain element of brinkmanship being played out here among the local actors," said Hebrew University political scientist **David Ricci**. "The question is whether Netanyahu is more worried about" criticism from his coalition partners or pressure from the U.S., Ricci said.

Netanyahu's coalition includes parties such as Shas and Yisrael Beitenu that support settlement expansion, as well as the Labor Party, which has backed ceding most of the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Herzog said the government must end the disagreement with the U.S. that erupted during Vice President **Joe Biden's** visit earlier in the month when the government approved plans to construct 1,600 homes in east Jerusalem. That is an area Israel captured from Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the Palestinians demand as the capital of a future state.

Labor May Leave

Failure to do so may force his party to consider pulling out of the governing coalition, he said.

"Labor will reach its moment of truth after Passover when it will have to decide whether or not to stay in the coalition," Herzog told Israel Radio, referring to the Jewish holiday that begins tonight and ends April 5.

Interior Minister **Eli Yishai**, who heads the ultra-Orthodox Shas, told the party newspaper on March 25 that he was thankful to "the creator of the world that I have been given the privilege to be the minister who approves thousands of housing units in Jerusalem."

Minister of Culture and Sport **Limor Livnat**, a member of Netanyahu's Likud, revealed yesterday that one U.S. demand was that the prime minister extend a freeze he imposed on West Bank settlement construction last November.

'Totally Unacceptable'

The prime minister "said to the Americans that he is talking about a 10-month freeze only," Livnat told Israel's Army Radio. "Now we are hearing a demand that the freeze continue or that the prime minister commit to a freeze beyond September. That is totally unacceptable."

Palestinian Authority President **Mahmoud Abbas**, who initially agreed to participate in U.S.-mediated indirect talks, said March 27 that negotiations could not begin until settlement construction is halted.

Labor's departure from the coalition wouldn't rob Netanyahu of a majority. The party holds 13 seats in the 74-seat ruling coalition; he needs 61 seats to maintain his majority in the **120-seat parliament**.

Still, Netanyahu brought Labor into his government with the hope that its longstanding support of the land-for-peace approach would boost his international image as a pragmatic leader.

Call for Kadima

Some Labor members have been calling on Netanyahu to include in his coalition the Kadima party of former Foreign Minister **Tzipi Livni**, which also supports a two-state solution, even at the expense of parties that oppose this formula.

During his first term as prime minister, which ended in 1999, Netanyahu's coalition unraveled over concessions he made to the Palestinians under pressure from then-President **Bill Clinton**.

Israeli and U.S. leaders yesterday sought to play down the dispute. "Even when there are disagreements, these are disagreements between friends," Netanyahu said at the Cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

Obama adviser **David Axelrod** said on CNN's "State of the Union" program that "there was no snub intended" with the lack of ceremony around Netanyahu's March 23 meeting with the president. There were no photo opportunities or joint public statements.

"It is hard to remember a time with so much acrimony," **Nicholas Burns**, U.S. undersecretary of state from 2005 to 2008, said in an interview.

Strategic Mistake

Netanyahu said he regretted that the announcement of the decision to approve housing plans in east Jerusalem's Ramat Shlomo neighbourhood for ultra-Orthodox Jews was made during Biden's visit, although he has defended Israel's right to build in the area. Speaking before a March 21 cabinet meeting, he declared construction in any part of Jerusalem was no different than building in Tel Aviv.

Obama's choice to make a stand on Israeli construction in east Jerusalem was a strategic mistake that previous U.S. leaders rightly avoided, said **Efraim Inbar**, a political scientist at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv.

"The Israeli interest in keeping Jerusalem united is more intense than the Obama desire for a foreign policy success," Inbar wrote in a paper published March 25 by his university's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. "The balance of determination tilts in Israel's favor."

To contact the reporters on this story: **Jonathan Ferziger** in Tel Aviv at jferziger@bloomberg.net; **Gwen Ackerman** in Jerusalem at gackerman@bloomberg.net.

Last Updated: March 28, 2010 18:59 EDT

