

Obama to press Netanyahu on peace process, settlement freeze

U.S. pushing PM to extend West Bank bank building moratorium in hop Palestinian Authority will agree to direct talks with Israel.

By Barak Ravid

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will get a warm reception from U.S. President Barack Obama on his trip to Washington next week, official sources said. But Obama is expected to question Netanyahu closely on where the peace process is heading, around three months before the freeze on West Bank construction expires.

The Americans are concerned about the implications that resuming the construction might have on the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, the sources said.

American officials are pressuring Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to start direct talks with Israel. Obama is expected to suggest to Netanyahu that he extend the building freeze in one form or another, to enable direct talks to take place.

Earlier this week, Netanyahu convened the forum of seven senior ministers for a preparatory discussion of his trip, but it is not clear if the construction freeze came up. Four ministers - Avigdor Lieberman, Moshe Ya'alon, Benny Begin and Eli Yishai - object to extending the construction freeze.

Special envoy George Mitchell and his team expressed dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's foot-dragging in the proximity talks and suggested pressuring him at the meeting with Obama, sources said.

Other officials, headed by the president's adviser Dennis Ross, said the meeting should be used to restore trust between the two leaders.

A Jerusalem source said the administration has not yet decided which approach to take, increasing the chance that Obama will not demand that Netanyahu present positions on the conflict's core issues at the talks with the Palestinians, especially the question of borders.

Netanyahu is due at the White House at 11 A.M. on Tuesday to hold a two-hour meeting with Obama. Immediately afterward the two will hold a joint news conference lasting about a half hour; it will coincide with Israel's evening news broadcasts. Later in the day Obama will host the Israeli delegation at a dinner.

Netanyahu is also scheduled to meet Vice President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. On Wednesday Netanyahu will travel to New York, where he will meet Jewish community leaders.

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