

**NWX-WOODROW WILSON CENTER (US)**

**Moderator: Drew Sample**  
**March 14, 2013**  
**1:00 pm CT**

- Woman: Excuse me. I'd like to inform parties today's conference is being recorded. Anyone has any objections you may disconnect at this time. If anyone needs any further assistance please press star 0. Thank you. You may begin.
- Drew Sample: All right. This is Drew Sample from the Wilson Center. I just want to say thanks to everybody for joining our conference call today. We have here four experts on Israel, U.S. and the Middle East and - from the Wilson Center. And I think everybody's pretty well acquainted with each other so I think we can go ahead and start with questions if nobody objects. So does anybody want to chime in and start with the first question?
- Howard LaFranchi: Well I will. And I don't know I guess I could ask Aaron or whoever but this is Howard LaFranchi, Christian Science Monitor. You know, we keep hearing that, you know, Iran will be the big topic of the - Obama's talks with Prime Minister Netanyahu but could you tell us a little bit how you see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict playing in there? I mean, is it just going to be a nonfactor? How do you see it?

Aaron Miller: I mean - it's Aaron, Howard. I don't think it'll be a nonfactor. I think expectations are extremely low. I think the President's objective is to test whether - I guess to determine whether or not the new political reality in Israel has created any additional constraints or opportunities that he can use before he makes a decision I would argue sometime this year about what we the United States intend to do about this. So I think the fact that he's not bringing a proposal is clearly self-evident.

I think he will make it clear to Netanyahu that he needs the political time and space (unintelligible) an issue is going to be managed it's going to help immensely if the two of them consort through a way to manage these early Palestinian issue as well. I mean, Obama's got two basic problems I think. He doesn't want to be the President on whose watch the two state solution expires and he doesn't want to be the President on whose watch Iran acquires the nuclear capacity or he doesn't want to be the President who goes to war with Iran.

So the - in - Israel is a central actor in each of these (unintelligible) crisis. And he needs to test the proposition that the new Israeli government and a more constrained as early prime minister can or cannot and is prepared or is not prepared to help him manage these two things.

So I think this is only a conversation the President could have. And I think he'll have frank talks with the Israelis about the importance and need to manage it. But I don't think he's coming there to lecture Netanyahu or to make it clear that by date certain there has to be some sort of solution to this. This is a - very much a management exercise.

(Haleh Esfandiari): I'm Haleh and I'm going to chip in on Iran. I think the Iranian - this foreign ministry and the Iranian negotiators have made some conciliatory statements

that is going to be a meeting of experts later this week and then the P5+1 will meet again after the Persian new year which is the 21st of March.

So so far the messages from Iran are low key but we have to wait and see what the supreme leader is going to say when he addresses the nation on the occasion of the Persian new year. And this will have an effect also on how things will be seen in Israel.

Howard LaFranchi: If I can - since no one else is as you say chiming in - this is Howard again. How - again whoever but how do you see the Israeli political landscape, you know, the government or the coalition that we've seen - how does that sort of - how do you see that changing things?

And if I could ask Aaron again specifically when you say that you argue sometime this year if you could elaborate a little bit on that. What you mean when you say that you - it sounds like you're expecting that sometime this year - not on this trip but sometime this year Obama is going to I don't know come forward with some kind of proposal or initiative on Israeli-Palestinian issues.

Aaron Miller: I mean, this is not a war making coalition and it's not a peace making coalition. I mean, you know, Israel's had - this is the 33rd Israeli - the average length of each government since the state was created was 1.8 years. Now in some cases -- and the recent trends have been toward governments that endure -- this government is a tricky one.

It is composed - it has no religious components at least right now. That could change if (unintelligible) decides to join on terms that both Bennett and Lapid could accept. But it tries to reconcile two 40-somethings both of whom consider -- Lapid and Bennett -- both of them consider themselves to be

modern men living in a modern state. One is an Orthodox Jew. One is extremely secular. Lapid's views on the peace process are a large part unknown, Bennett's are clear. He sees no chance of a Palestinian state. He believes ultimately the Israelis should probably annex the territory they need and grant the Palestinians autonomy.

The focus of this government (unintelligible) which is why (unintelligible) has been constrained is not on national security issues. It's on issues like burden sharing. What is the role of the Orthodox community going to be in national service? It's about income asymmetry. It's about housing shortages. It's about tax lien - the reality that the Israeli economy's not growing and it's going to have to create some measure of austerity. These are very tough decisions.

So I suspect since nobody wants new elections least of all the Prime Minister this government will probably endure. But it is not a government that can take the kinds of decisions that are required to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's too diverse and frankly it's not focused enough on that particular issue.

No do I believe it's a war making coalition which is, I mean, with respect to Iraq. Which is why I think that 2013 as (Haleh) intimated is not going to be the year of confrontation with Iranians but a year of diplomacy because nobody least of all Netanyahu wants to make a decision to go to war with Iran.

I think - on the second question I think that the President pushed by (Kari). And again I think it's wrong to look at (Kari) as the reactive agent here. You know, Obama's the most controlling foreign policy President since Richard Nixon. It won't be (Kari's) compelling arguments that move him.

But Obama - I don't believe by the time he's done will be able to resist at a minimum articulating something that no other American President has ever

done which is a set of parameters early enough in his administration out of all of the core issues which put the U.S. on the side of the angels so to speak on defining its view on what (unintelligible) what are the parameters within which the parties would negotiate a two state solution.

I believe if you can't get a negotiation going right now and he certainly can't and shouldn't because it would collapse that he'll work quietly with (Kari) to see where Abu Mazen and Netanyahu are on these issues. He'll work a bottom up approach, supporting the Palestinian authority, making sure security (unintelligible) is - between the Israelis and Palestinians is moving in the right direction, trying to get the Egyptians and the Israelis to cooperate over Sinai which is a huge problem, expanding Palestinian control in parts of areas B and C according to the Oslo Approach.

But he will not go to a high profile initiative yet. He will - I believe within 18 months if he can't get any traction on this begin to think about putting out the - I call them the Obama parameters, not an Obama plan but the Obama parameters. I think he's prepared to do that because I do not believe he's prepared to leave office without trying to put his mark on an issue that's so frustrated him during his first term.

((Crosstalk))

(Marina Ottaway): Let me - yes, this is (Marina Ottaway) let me comment on one point. I think it's something that - I just want to pull on that line which comes out of what Aaron has been saying that this is really a trip for managing relations with the Israelis. It's not even a trip for managing relations with the Palestinians because there is nothing new on the Palestinian side at this point. In other word it's not an attempt to reopen the peace process and it's not really an

attempt to figure out what the Palestinians are because we know what the - he knows what the Palestinians are.

Woman: (David)?

(David Ottaway): Hi, (David Ottaway). (Unintelligible) actually think serious the most burning issue they have to have on the table to discuss it's, you know, the Golan Heights is becoming more and more of a problem for Israel. Israel's intervention on the Golan Heights are to try to secure, you know, the chemical weapons and how we're going to deal with that.

These are issues that are, you know, coming up in the next few months before we have to decide about how to deal with Iran. If it's a year of diplomacy towards Iran it's a year of trying to figure out how and when and where the U.S. and Israel are going to intervene in Syria to secure nuclear - chemical weapons and the Golan Heights for Israel.

Man: So - I'm sorry. So you said it's a year of trying to decide when and if the U.S. and Israel...

(David Ottaway): Yes.

Man: ...are going to intervene to secure the chemical weapons?

(David Ottaway): In parallel or together. I hope it's in parallel and not together because Israeli intervention in the Syria conflict is going to be a real problem for the United States.

Lesley Clark: This is Lesley Clark with McClatchy. Along those lines (David), what do you expect the President's message is going to be on Syria? I mean, we haven't - we've seen him pretty resistant to an increased military option.

(David Ottaway): Well I think the U.S. is moving towards definitely encouraging its allies to become more militarily involved starting with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. But the French and the British want to break the embargo issue towards Syria in order to provide arms. You know, it - Western military escalation is very much on the cards.

And I think our problem is going to be how Israel and the United States coordinate that intervention, maybe parallel actions. But I think if we are seen to do it together with the Israelis that's going to be really a complicated issue in Cairo and in Damascus. They're going to use it to generate more support. So how we handle that relationship with Israel and dealing with Syria I think is extremely complicated and becoming more and more - closer and closer to some kind of action.

Haleh Esfandiari: With Western military intervention will bring a lot of pressure on Iran too because so far the Iranian claim that they are not supporting the Syrian government militarily or do we all know that they do. But that will bring a lot of pressure on the Iranian to also come out in the open and either through (unintelligible) or directly start sending military equipment to Syria. So that will definitely widen the conflict much more than it is now and bring it in the open.

Lesley Clark: And (David), when you said you think the U.S. is moving towards encouraging it's allies and that it has to sort of figure out how to do this with Israel are you talking just in terms of procuring of weapons or in, you know, actual aid to the opposition?

(David Ottaway): Well there are two issues. One is the aid to the opposition and what kind of arms we send them or allow our allies to send them which is the case - what's going on right now with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Or intervention regarding if there's any indication of the (unintelligible) government using chemical weapons or chemical weapons slipping out of the control of the Damascus government.

You know, both Israel and the United States are pretty well committed to going in and stopping that. And how they're going to manage that I don't know. But I'm just hoping that it's parallel action not combined Israeli-American intervention because I think that's going to be very hard to handle for us in armed world.

Oren Dorell: This is Oren Dorell from USA Today. Aaron and I spoke about this earlier but so I'd like to hear from, you know, some of the others about, you know, we - before - earlier in the conversation we were talking about the prospects for, you know, there's some kind of a conflict ending agreement between, you know, but based on the Israeli political situation.

Can somebody talk about the, you know, the Palestinians and the presence of Hamas and their increasing, you know, prominence and how, you know, do the Israelis really have somebody to talk to that represents all the Palestinian people? And how does Hamas' presence in the, you know, in the mix affect the, you know, the possibility of an agreement in the, you know, overall?

(Marina): Well - this is (Marina). I'll think it's, you know, if you're not come spontaneous and automatically I think Hamas might change his position if there is something concrete on the table I think. In other words whether or not Hamas makes any moves towards recognizing an, you know, even indirectly

(unintelligible) it really depends on whether or not there is a concrete proposal on the table.

I don't think at this point without the, you know, a shred of complete proposal on the table that there is going to be any change in the position of Hamas.

There are some rumors that they might be thinking of but I have not certainly seen anything that specific that - and I don't think we are going to see the real change in the position of Hamas.

Oren Dorell: Why do you think that they would do that? Is there any evidence for that?

(Marina): Excuse me?

Oren Dorell: Is there any evidence that they would change their positions?

(Marina): Well there have been in the past. The question is - but they will only change their position in the context of an overall process that does not exist at this point.

Aaron Miller: You know, there have been reports in the Israeli press -- I've seen two now -- that there are talks underway in Cairo with Hamas and discussions of they would make some statement recognizing a two state solution. And the rationale -- I'm just reading this in the Israeli press -- is that Hamas wants to get out of its isolation.

And so when you're over there you might ask - pursue that issue whether the Israelis see any change in Hamas' position and what they make out of the talks in Cairo between the Egyptians, (Abas) and Hamas. (Unintelligible) (Abas). So this - anyway the speculation about some change in Hamas' position is in the Israeli press.

Oren Dorell: I'll check that out.

George Condon: This is George Condon with the National Journal. Can you talk about the impact personal dynamics will play in this? Prime Minister Netanyahu certainly made no secret of not exactly wanting President Obama to be reelected.

Aaron Miller: The - it's Aaron Miller. I actually have a piece coming out in the Washington Post on Sunday which examines the Obama and Bibi relationship and, I mean, I have to say and I've said this before (unintelligible) down on this. This is the most dysfunctional relationship between an American President and any Israeli Prime Minister in the history of the relationship.

And there have been very difficult times before. Begin had a very tough relationship with Carter and their dysfunction was rescued by Sadat which gave them a joint enterprise to work on for the bulk of Carter's presidency.

The next pair that was very tense was Bush 41 and Shamir and it was Saddam Hussein who rescued the two of them by invading Kuwait because that allows the Israelis to respond positively to Bush 41's request that they not respond to the Scud launches which Shamir did not respond and he got a enormous amount of credit and the relationship improved somewhat as a consequence. And then Baker of course negotiated a framework for Madrid which Shamir participated in.

The problem with Netanyahu and Obama - there are a couple of problems. One is there has been no common enterprise that has drawn them together. And it has created a situation where there is no tendency in the party for either man to give the other the benefit of the doubt. Second you have personality

differences (unintelligible) perceptions of those personality differences.

Benjamin Netanyahu is probably the most suspicious Israeli Prime Minister of an American role and American influence in the (unintelligible) negotiations.

And remember this is his second iteration now as Prime Minister. His third actually. But the first time around - and we know this well he was extremely frustrating and difficult to deal with. And several prominent individuals who were present then notably (unintelligible) and the former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton briefed Obama on the fact that if you want to deal with Bibi you got to be tough which Obama tried to be in a gratuitous manner I would add and it created further tensions.

And Obama - look let's be clear. I make this point in the Post. Obama's of a different generation than his two predecessors. Bill Clinton and Bush (unintelligible) were extremely pro-Israeli. They had an instinctive emotional commitment for any number of reason. Obama was born in 1961. He was six years old at the time of the Six-Day War when a lot of the pro-Israeli troupes were infused in the political elite in this country.

Obama missed all of that. In fact he grew up in an age where it wasn't Israel the heroic actor but Israel the occupier. And he grew up in an environment at the university in which - unlike Clinton who was doing politics from an early age there was no reason for him to be quote good on Israel end quote. As a consequence his relationship - his intuitive capacity to spontaneously identify and emote is limited. And that is picked up and has been picked up.

Now even if he emoted it still wouldn't be enough to probably address Netanyahu's concerns but it does affect the Israeli public. And one of the reasons Obama is going and one of the reasons (Kari) could not go and should

not have gone before Obama is only the President can relate to the Israeli public in the way Obama's going to try to relate to it.

So I think you have really dysfunction on a policy level and on a personal level. But my prediction is that the next 18 months will be much better frankly in terms of the relationship between those two than the last four years.

George Condon: What do you expect to see on this trip though? Will both of them be on good behavior and be trying to mend ties or...?

Aaron Miller: Well, I mean, if the President isn't prepared to go and push all the right buttons then frankly there's no reason for him to go because from a policy perspective this is not (unintelligible) about accomplishing anything now.

This is what I call a down payment trip. It's a down payment in terms of trying to create a relationship with the Israeli public and -- I'm sorry -- Netanyahu reads the polls. If Obama stock goes up in at least the view of Obama rises in view of the Israeli public it will put additional pressure on Netanyahu. So in a way Obama has a stake in being on good behavior, pushing all the right buttons, doing all the right symbolic things.

And I think Netanyahu as well is no longer the same Bibi Netanyahu that we saw over the last four years. I'm not sure members of his coalition can afford or want the kind of confrontational attitude that he developed including lecturing the President in May of 2011...

Woman: (Unintelligible).

Aaron Miller: ...when he came, including embarrassing Vice President Biden with additional construction (unintelligible) in a Jerusalem neighborhood, and including open

support for Mitt Romney during the campaign. I think all of those things really helped bring out the worst in Obama. And Obama's efforts to (unintelligible) which were naïve I would argue gratuitous and unproductive helped brought out the worst in Bibi. So I think both of them recognize -- I believe -- that they have to figure out - reset's a bad word. The have to figure out a way to manage their differences.

(Marina): (Unintelligible) the President doesn't have anything to lose. He got elected with more votes than Bibi. Once elected Bibi has to mind really what is happening at home while, I mean, the President can look at it as a good will mission and the (unintelligible) has been trying to play down when it comes to Palestinian-Israeli issue.

But I think the President is going to be very frank with the Palestinians, with Abu Mazen and explain to him that, you know, either you pull yourself together and put something constructive on the table and start working with the Israeli's or the Palestinian issue will never be (unintelligible).

Drew Sample: Okay, (Julie) are you there? Did you have any questions for the group?

(Julie): Hey guys. I'm sorry I had to cut out for a little bit so I'm sorry if this has already been asked. But I was just curious whether - with this coalition being formed so close to Obama's visit whether, you know, he has to take any precautions to try to show that he's not, you know, favoring one side of the coalition over the other and whether he can actually, you know, build any kind of effective coalitions of his own within this, you know, new government.

Aaron Miller: You know, he's not - he's chosen not to speak to the (unintelligible) which both of his immediate predecessors did. I think he's going to want to stay out of politics. There's really no - because the government is so broad there really

is no formal opposition so there's no formal opposition party to meet with.  
And I think he'll - if he's going to try to manipulate anything it's how he presents himself to the Israeli public.

The coalition is too new, the personalities too unknown with - frankly to this administration to be - frankly to be smart enough to figure out where the new angles are. I mean, Lapid is a relative newcomer. The 19 seats he represents they are all untested figures in Israeli politics. Naftali Bennett was Netanyahu's Chief of Staff but I don't think he's a figure that's well known to this administration.

So I think they would be - going to be very careful, cautious about any stumble bumbles when it comes to being too clever by half in the Israeli political scene. We don't do this very well and over the years we haven't including when we tried to intervene in Palestinian politics (unintelligible).

(Julie): Thank you.

Drew Sample: Okay well if there are no...

((Crosstalk))

Drew Sample: ...further questions I'd just like to thank everybody again for participating. This call was recorded so I'll distribute the audio and the transcript for it in about 24 hours and if you have any further questions for us just feel free to shoot me an email or give me a call.

Man: All right. Thank you.

Drew Sample: All right.

Woman:           Bye bye.

END