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Aluf Benn / Netanyahu leaves U.S. disgraced, isolated and weaker

By Aluf Benn

Details emerging from Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington remain incomplete, but the conclusion may nonetheless be drawn that the prime minister erred in choosing to fly to the United States this week. The visit - touted as a fence-mending effort, a bid to strengthen the tenuous ties between Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama - only highlighted the deep rift between the American and Israeli administrations.

The prime minister leaves America disgraced, isolated, and altogether weaker than when he came.

Instead of setting the diplomatic agenda, Netanyahu surrendered control over it. Instead of leaving the Palestinian issue aside and focusing on Iran, as he would like, Netanyahu now finds himself fighting for the legitimacy of Israeli control over East Jerusalem.

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The most sensitive and insoluble core issues - those which when raised a decade ago led to the dissolution of the peace process and explosion of the second intifada - are now being served as a mere appetizer.

At the start of his visit, Netanyahu was tempted to bask in the warm welcome he received at the AIPAC conference, at which he gave his emotional address on Jerusalem.

Taking a page from Menachem Begin, he spoke not on behalf of the State of Israel, but in the name of the Jewish people itself and its millennia of history.

His speech was not radical rightist rhetoric. Reading between the lines, one could spot a certain willingness to relinquish West Bank settlements as long as Israel maintains a security buffer in the Jordan Valley.

But at the White House, the prime minister's speech to thousands of pro-Israel activists and hundreds of cheering congressmen looked like an obvious attempt to raise political capital against the American president.

Knowing Netanyahu would be reenergized by his speech at the lobby, Obama and his staff set him a honey trap. Over the weekend they sought to quell the row that flared up during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's trip here two weeks ago, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Netanyahu's response to the ultimatums Washington presented to him as "useful."

Special envoy George Mitchell made a televised visit to the prime minister's bureau Sunday to invite Netanyahu to the White House. Washington, it seemed, was trying to make nice.

Far from it. Just when Netanyahu thought he had resolved the crisis by apologizing to Biden, Clinton called him up for a dressing down.

This time as well, Netanyahu almost believed the crisis had passed, that he had survived by offering partial, noncommittal answers to the Americans' questions. Shortly before meeting with Obama, Netanyahu even warned the Palestinians that

should they continue to demand a freeze on construction, he would postpone peace talks by a year.

His arrogant tone underscored the fact that Netanyahu believed that on the strength of his AIPAC speech, he could call the next few steps of the diplomatic dance.

But then calamity struck. At their White House meeting, Obama made clear to his guest that the letter Netanyahu had sent was insufficient and returned it for further corrections. Instead of a reception as a guest of honor, Netanyahu was treated as a problem child, an army private ordered to do laps around the base for slipping up at roll call.

The revolution in the Americans' behavior is clear to all. On Sunday morning Obama was still anxiously looking ahead to the House of Representatives vote on health care - the last thing he wanted was a last-minute disagreement with congressmen over ties with Israel.

The moment the bill was passed, however, a victorious Obama was free to deal with his unruly guest.

The Americans made every effort to downplay the visit. As during his last visit in November, Netanyahu was invited to the White House at a late hour, without media coverage or a press conference. If that were not enough, the White House spokesman challenged Netanyahu's observation at AIPAC that "Jerusalem is not a settlement."

The Americans didn't even wait for him to leave Washington to make their disagreement known. It was not the behavior Washington shows an ally, but the kind it shows an annoyance.

The approval of construction at the Shepherd Hotel in Sheikh Jarrah, announced before his meeting with Obama, again caught Netanyahu unawares. Apparently the special panel appointed after the Ramat Shlomo debacle to prevent such surprises failed its first test.

Netanyahu is having his most difficult week since returning to office, beginning with the unfortunate decision to relocate the planned emergency room at Ashkelon's Barzilai Medical Center and lasting through his humiliating jaunt through Washington.

Returning to Israel today, Netanyahu will need to work hard to rehabilitate his image, knowing full well that Obama will not relent, but instead demand that he stop zigzagging and decide, once and for all, whether he stands with America or with the settlers.