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Netanyahu is trading Israeli security for right-wing ideology

By Editorial

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has led Israel into a serious crisis in relations with the United States and to a collapse in peace talks with the Palestinians just when they were to be resumed.

A year after he took office, it is apparent that his government's policies, which made it top priority to populate East Jerusalem with Jews, is leading to Israel's increasing international isolation and threatening its key security interests in the name of an extreme right-wing ideology.

The crisis began over the humiliation of Joe Biden with the announcement, in the middle of the U.S. vice president's visit, of the approval of construction plans for 1,600 new apartments in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo. Netanyahu thought that excuses in the form of "I didn't know," "Bureaucrats tripped me up," and "From now on I'll watch what they do" would suffice for Biden to forgive the insult to his and America's pride.

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Netanyahu hoped the crisis had passed, but his assessment was divorced from reality, as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear to him Friday in a long telephone conversation. On instructions from U.S. President Barack Obama, Clinton told Netanyahu the announcement of the construction in Ramat Shlomo was an "insult" to the United States. She demanded that he take steps to show his commitment to bilateral relations between the two countries and to the peace process. The tough message was made public.

There is one reason for the crisis: Netanyahu's persistence in continuing construction in East Jerusalem, in placing Jews

in Arab neighborhoods and evicting Palestinians from their homes in the city. This is not a matter of timing but substance. Despite repeated warnings and bitter experiences, he stokes the flames over the conflict's most sensitive issue and is bound to get himself in trouble. Netanyahu has made it clear by his actions that American support for Israel, especially essential now in light of the Iranian threat, is less important to him than the chance to put another few Jews in the Sheikh Jarrah or Ramat Shlomo neighborhoods. Even if Netanyahu's adversaries in the U.S. administration have exploited his misstep to push him into a corner, as his "associates" will certainly argue, a statesman as experienced as he should have been especially careful.

Clinton made clear to Netanyahu that it was impossible to expand Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and also enjoy America's friendship. Netanyahu's flip-flopping games have come to an end. Even at the price of risks involving domestic party politics, he should opt for what is in the national interest and act to strengthen American support for Israel