

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel in New York City

September 21, 2016

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Mr. President, it's very good to see you again. First, I want to thank you for the memorandum of understanding that we signed last week. It greatly enhances Israel's security. It fortifies the principle that you've enunciated many times that Israel should be able to defend itself, by itself, against any threat.

Secondly, I want to thank you for the extensive security and intelligence cooperation between our two countries. I don't think people at large understand the breadth and depth of this cooperation, but I know it. And I want to thank you on behalf of all the people of Israel.

Third, I want to thank you for the many meetings we've had in which we discussed how to confront common challenges and how to seize common opportunities. The greatest challenge is, of course, the unremitting fanaticism. The greatest opportunity is to advance a durable peace. That's a goal that I and the people of Israel will never give up on.

We've been fortunate that, in pursuing these two tasks, Israel has no greater friend than the United States of America, and America has no greater friend than Israel. Our alliance has grown decade after decade, through successive Presidents, a bipartisan Congress, and the overwhelming support of the American people. It's an unbreakable bond based on common values, buttressed by common interest, and bound by a shared destiny.

And I want to thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to once again discuss how we can shape that destiny together. And I'd like to add, if I may, one final point. As you conclude your presidency, I know you're going to be busy with many, many things, much more than improving what I hear is a terrific golf game. [*Laughter*] Your voice—your influential—voice will be heard for many decades. And I know you'll continue to support Israel's right to defend itself and its right to thrive as a Jewish state. So I want you to know, Barack, that you'll always be a welcome guest in Israel.

And, by the way, I don't play golf, but right next to my home in Caesarea, in Israel, is a terrific golf course. So——

President Obama. We'll set up a tee time. [*Laughter*]

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Well, it's good to once again welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu and his delegation here. I want to start by just sending a message that all of the American people, my entire administration, and me, personally, are thinking about Shimon Peres, a great friend, a hero, and giant in the history of Israel. And we are hopeful that he will have a speedy recovery.

I've always joked whenever I've seen Shimon that I wanted to see what he ate and what he did, because he's always looked so good. I know this has been a challenging time for him and his family, but I wanted to make sure that I relay my gratitude to him for his friendship and his leadership in helping to forge a strong U.S.-Israeli bond.

As Prime Minister Netanyahu mentioned, the bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable. It is based on common values, family ties, a recognition that a Jewish State of Israel is one of our most important allies, and a guiding principle throughout my Presidency—one that I've expressed often to the Prime Minister—is, is that it is important for America's national security to ensure that we have a safe and secure Israel, one that can defend itself.

And so the memorandum of understanding that we recently signed, I think, is indicative of that. What it does is provide an assurance and a foundation for the kinds of ongoing military and intelligence cooperation that has been the hallmark of our relationship. It allows, I think, Israeli planners the kind of certainty in a moment where there's enormous uncertainty in the region. It is a very difficult and dangerous time in the Middle East, and we want to make sure that Israel has the full capabilities it needs in order to keep the Israeli people safe and secure.

So this will give us an opportunity to talk about the challenges that arise out of situations like Syria. I'll also be interested in hearing from the Prime Minister his assessment of conditions within Israel and in the West Bank. Obviously, our hearts go out to those who have been injured, both Israeli and Palestinian. Clearly, there is great danger of not just terrorism, but also flareups of violence. We do have concerns around settlement activity, as well. And our hope is that we can continue to be an effective partner with Israel in finding a path to peace.

Obviously, I'm only going to be President for another few months. The Prime Minister will be there quite a bit longer. And our hope will be that in these conversations we get a sense of how Israel sees the next few years, what the opportunities are and what the challenges are in order to assure that we keep alive the possibility of a stable, secure Israel at peace with its neighbors and a Palestinian homeland that meets the aspirations of their people.

But obviously, these are challenging times. One thing I can say about Prime Minister Netanyahu is, he has always been candid with us, and his team has cooperated very effectively with ours. We very much appreciate it. And I guarantee you that I will visit Israel often, because it is a beautiful country with beautiful people. And Michelle and the girls, I think, resent the fact that I've not taken them on most of these trips, so they're insistent that I do take them. Of course, they will appreciate the fact that the next time I visit Israel I won't have to sit in bilats—[laughter]—but instead can enjoy the sights and sounds of a remarkable country.

So thank you very much.

Prime Minister Netanyahu. Thank you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 1 p.m. in the Holmes I room of the Lotte New York Palace hotel. In his remarks, he referred to former President Shimon Peres of Israel, who suffered a stroke on September 13.

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