

Netanyahu Heads to Washington for Brief Meeting With Obama

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Washington last night and will meet today with President Barack Obama, seeking a promise from the U.S. leader to block any Palestinian initiative to declare statehood unilaterally. Iran will also be on the agenda.

The White House had refused for the last two weeks to say whether it would agree to a meeting, and by Saturday, Israel had concluded that no meeting would occur. But yesterday morning, Obama's office surprised Netanyahu and his staff by telling the Prime Minister's Bureau he would agree to meet this evening, Washington time. Diplomatic correspondents learned of the meeting just moments before the premier's plane left Tel Aviv.

The White House hinted that it was Netanyahu, not Obama, who initially wanted the meeting. But after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the region last week failed to produce a diplomatic breakthrough, Obama found it hard to refuse.

The meeting will be closed to the media and is expected to be brief. Netanyahu also hopes to improve his chemistry with Obama.

Meanwhile, despite Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' threat to quit, U.S. officials said they have not given up on him and still see him as essential to the peace process.

Last week, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly was somewhat evasive when asked whether Washington was trying to persuade Abbas to stay; he merely said he was sure American officials were in touch with the Palestinian leader and that the decision on whether and when to hold elections was strictly a Palestinian one.

Netanyahu is in Washington to address the United Jewish Communities' General Assembly. Obama had also been scheduled to address the gathering, but canceled on Saturday; instead he will attend a memorial service for those killed in last week's shooting at the Fort Hood army base. In his place, White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel will address the GA.

In addition, Obama has agreed to meet with some 20 American Jewish leaders at the White House this evening before seeing Netanyahu.

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