



By Uriel Heilman · July 7, 2010 *Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses a Jewish gathering in New York, July 7, 2010. (Michael Priest Photography)*

NEW YORK (JTA) -- It was an otherwise wholly unremarkable stump speech before a friendly audience in New York.

On Wednesday evening at Manhattan's Plaza Hotel, the Israeli prime minister addressed a roomful of about 200 Jews on the subjects of Iran, his government's eagerness for direct peace talks with the Palestinians and the swell meeting he had just had with President Obama at the White House.

But then, in an off-the-cuff remark to a question on Jerusalem from the audience, Benjamin Netanyahu dropped a hint that his government's insistence on Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem might not be ironclad.

"Everybody knows that there are Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem that under any peace plan will remain where they are," Netanyahu said in response to the question read by the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Malcolm Hoenlein.

The implication of Netanyahu's remark -- that other neighborhoods of Jerusalem may not remain "where they are," becoming part of an eventual Palestinian state -- was the first hint that the Israeli leader may be flexible on the subject of Jerusalem. Until now, Netanyahu has insisted that Jerusalem is not up for negotiation.

While the prime minister surely did not intend the gathering under the aegis of the Presidents Conference to serve as his forum for opening up negotiations over Jerusalem, the impromptu remark before an audience of prominent New York Jews and a handful of elected officials cast a slim ray of light on what Netanyahu thinks might be the Israeli capital's ultimate fate.

It was significant as well because Netanyahu's true intentions regarding the peace process remain largely opaque, the subject of much debate from Washington to Ramallah. Netanyahu was a latecomer to the two-state position -- endorsing the idea of an eventual Palestinian state only a year ago, after much prodding by the United States -- and the governing coalition he has assembled is comprised largely of right-wing parties that do not believe in the current Palestinian Authority as a partner for negotiations.

In public, President Obama declared Tuesday that he believes Netanyahu is genuinely committed to seeking a two-state solution.

"I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants peace. I think he's willing to take risks for peace," Obama told reporters following his Oval Office meeting with Netanyahu. "And during our conversation, he once again reaffirmed his willingness to engage in serious negotiations with the Palestinians around what I think should be the goal not just of the two principals involved but the entire world, and that is two states living side by side in peace and security."

Privately, however, some U.S. administration officials have expressed doubts about Netanyahu's ability to make good on that vision. Other Obama supporters have questioned Netanyahu's commitment to that goal, and the Palestinian Authority leadership says Netanyahu's interest in negotiations is not serious.

"Words, not deeds," was the assessment of chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who dismissed Netanyahu's lip service to the peace process in an interview Tuesday with The New York Times. "We need to see deeds."

Netanyahu insists he is serious about peace talks, and that it is the Palestinians who are playing

games.

“You either put up excuses or you lead,” the Israeli leader said in his New York speech. “I want to enter direct talks with the Palestinian leadership now,”

“I think we can defy the skeptics,” he said, recalling the doubters that abounded when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin began talking to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in the lead-up to the Camp David Accords, and when Richard Nixon visited China. “This is a challenge I’m up to.”

Was it hyperbole or a sign of the legacy Netanyahu hopes for himself?

If Netanyahu is interested in following Begin and Nixon’s model, leading a conservative government to a historic rapprochement with a longtime foe, eventually he will have to include Jerusalem in negotiations with the Palestinians; they won’t sign a peace deal without it. If not, Netanyahu is trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the skeptics.

“This is going to be a very, very tough negotiation, but I’m prepared to negotiate,” Netanyahu insisted Wednesday. “But I cannot engage between someone who won’t sit at the table.”