Obama, Netanyahu give no sign of narrowing gap on Iran
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WASHINGTON, March 6 — President Barack Obama yesterday appealed to Benjamin Netanyahu to give sanctions more time to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, but the Israeli prime minister gave no sign of backing away from possible military action.

The two men, who have had a strained relationship, sought to present a united front in the Iranian nuclear standoff as they opened White House talks. But their public statements revealed differences over how to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

In one of the most consequential meetings of US and Israeli leaders in years, Obama and Netanyahu made no mention of lingering disagreements that Washington fears could lead to an Israeli rush to attack Iran's nuclear sites in the coming months.

Obama took a double-barrelled approach, seeking to assure Netanyahu that the United States was keeping the military option open against Iran and always "has Israel's back", but also urging Israeli patience to allow sanctions and diplomacy to work.

Netanyahu, speaking in historical terms about the Jewish state's determination to be the "master of its fate", focused on Israel reserving the right to defend itself against Iran. Israel sees Iran's nuclear programme as a threat to its existence.

"We believe there is still a window that allows for a diplomatic resolution," Obama said, even as he sought to convince Netanyahu of stiffened US resolve against the Islamic republic.

In cautioning against renewed international diplomatic engagement with Iran, Netanyahu has warned Western powers not to fall into a "trap" of letting Iran buy more time.

Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama in the Oval Office at the White House. — Reuters pic

There was no immediate sign from yesterday's talks that Obama's sharpened rhetoric against Iran and calls for restraint by Israel would be enough to delay any Israeli military plans against Tehran, which has called for the destruction of the Jewish state.

Despite that, the body language between the two leaders was a stark contrast to their last Oval Office meeting in May 2011 when Netanyahu lectured Obama on Jewish history and criticised his approach to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

This time, Obama and Netanyahu appeared cordial and businesslike, smiling at each other and sometimes nodding as the other spoke.

Even though Obama has ratcheted up his rhetoric against Iran in recent days, he and Netanyahu went into the talks divided over how quickly the clock is ticking towards possible military action, and the meeting appeared unlikely to change that.

They remain far apart on any explicit nuclear "red lines" that Tehran must not be allowed to

cross, and they have yet to agree on a time frame when military forces might need to be applied.

Preserving trust

Obama's encounter with Netanyahu was considered crucial to preserving the trust of America's closest Middle East ally, which fears that time is running out for an effective Israeli strike on Iran, and to counter election-year criticism from Republican rivals who question his support for the Jewish state.

He is also trying to tamp down increasingly strident talk of another war in the region that could cause further spikes in global oil prices and hit the fragile recovery of the US economy — dire consequences that could threaten his re-election chances.

Speculation is mounting that Israel could opt to act militarily on its own unless it receives credible guarantees that the United States will be ready to use force against Iran if international sanctions and diplomacy fail.

Israel fears that Iranian nuclear facilities may soon be buried so deep that they would be invulnerable to its bunker-busting bombs, which are less powerful than those in the US arsenal.

Obama said both he and Netanyahu "prefer to resolve this diplomatically" and that both understand the cost of military action.

Netanyahu did not echo that point in his own brief public remarks, saying instead: "If there's one thing that stands out clearly in the Middle East today, it's that Israel and America stand together."

What is clear, however, is the potential political liability for Obama's re-election bid if hostilities break out in the Middle East before the November 6 US presidential election.

Netanyahu's visit comes one day before the pivotal "Super Tuesday" round of Republican presidential primaries, with Obama's Republican rivals seizing on the chance to accuse him of being weak in backing a staunch ally and in confronting a bitter foe.

Further complicating matters is a trust deficit between Obama and Netanyahu.

In their last Oval Office meeting a year ago, Netanyahu embarrassed Obama by lecturing him on Jewish history and flatly rejecting his proposal that Israel's 1967 borders be the basis for negotiations on creating a Palestinian state.

But relations have thawed somewhat since then as Obama has taken a tougher line on Iran while refraining from any new Middle East peace drives. Obama also scored points with Israelis for opposing a Palestinian bid for UN recognition last September of statehood. — Reuters

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