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BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

May 28, 2009 - Issue 326

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**What's Not Being Said About the Obama-Netanyahu Talks
Left Margin**

By Carl Bloice

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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The day after the White House talks between U.S. President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the news agency AFP (Agence France-Presse) sent out an unusual story. It seems to have noticed what some of the rest of us did, that the story was being downplayed. The talks, it said, had "earned only modest coverage in US newspapers."

"While deep differences exposed during the talks between Obama and Netanyahu earned blanket coverage in Israeli media and stoked fears in Israel of cooling ties with its main ally, the story failed to make the front pages of The New York Times, Washington Post or Wall Street Journal," the story said, adding that, "Each of the papers ran brief teasers of the meeting on page one but the stories themselves ran well inside, including on page 10 of the Journal as well as the Post, and page 12 of the Times.

"But squeezing Netanyahu off the newspapers' front pages were other global headlines, primarily the climactic end to war in Sri Lanka, and a US envoy positioning himself for a new job in Afghanistan. Domestic issues including Obama's toughening of auto emissions and mileage rules and New York City's efforts to battle swine flu also edged out the Israeli premier." The story said. "The Post chose to go further afield, printing a four-column-wide photograph of astronauts repairing the Hubble Space Telescope. It was left to the US capital's second daily, The Washington Times, to carry a page-one piece on the efforts to secure peace in the Middle East."

Of course, the talks between the U.S. and Israeli leaders were private and we aren't privy to what the two had to say to each other, however, they emerged to hold a joint press conference which was covered by the major cable news networks. Still, AFP was quite right about one thing: the contrast between the newspaper coverage here and in Israel was glaring. And it has been that way ever since.

What is most unfortunate here from the U.S. public's point of view is the failure of the U.S. media to adequately reflect the nature of the attention the Israeli media has afforded Netanyahu's visit to Washington. This is especially important in light of three of the issues at the center of the Washington talks: the continued expansion of Israeli settlements on the occupied territory of the West Bank, the continued military hold on the Golan Heights area of neighboring Syria, and the conflict over dealing with Iran's nuclear energy activity. From all published accounts, serious differences remain on all three issues, but none so glaring, and perhaps consequential, as the fate of the territories captured in the 1967 war, the continued occupation of those parts of Palestine, and the possibility of a "two-state solution" to the conflict.

President Obama is scheduled to go to Egypt June 5 where he is slated to deliver an address focusing on U.S. relations with the Islamic world. Before that he is to meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. He conferred with King Abdullah of Jordan in Washington in April.

On May 22, journalist Herb Keinon wrote that while President Obama is "not expected to unveil a full-blown plan," when he speaks in Cairo "he is likely to raise, along with the need for a Palestinian state, the issue of the need for the Islamic world to begin making gestures toward Israel."

"Both those elements - a Palestinian state and a determined effort to get the Arab world to begin developing ties with Israel at the beginning of the diplomatic process, not only at the end - have emerged as central pillars of the White House's Mideast plan," wrote Keinon, "But the details of this plan - and, more interestingly, the details of Netanyahu's diplomatic plan - still remain enigmatic, even after the latter's visit to Washington this week. Something rather odd happened when Netanyahu met Obama, after weeks of buildup and speculation, and after much talk of a vaunted "policy review" in Jerusalem: The public is no wiser now about Netanyahu's end-game, of where he is headed, than it was before he set out for DC."

But there are some important clues.

No sooner than he arrived back in Israel, Netanyahu declared that the Israelis would never agree to a divided Jerusalem and would continue to rule the city. "Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish people, a city reunified so as never again to be divided," Netanyahu told a crowd at the annual "Jerusalem Day" observance.

Here's the observation the newspaper Haaretz made last Friday:

"Ever since East Jerusalem was annexed to the State of Israel, Jerusalem Day, which is celebrated today, has turned into a festival of clichéd slogans - such as 'the united capital of Israel for all eternity.'" From year to year, the gap between the flowery words of the politicians and the sad reality in the divided city widens. The day after the festival, officials return to supporting discrimination against the Palestinian minority, who make up a third of the city's population. Forty-two years after Israel declared that Jerusalem had been reunited, it is simple to draw a clear line between the two peoples who have been compelled to live under one national and municipal roof. According to data gathered by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, two-thirds of the Palestinians in the city live below the poverty line; more than one-third of their lands have been expropriated since 1967; since there are no approved plans, 160,000 of them are living in homes that were built without permits, and can expect demolition and eviction orders; tens of thousands live without proper sewage systems or regular water supplies; their sanitation conditions are inferior; and there are too few social workers to

care for them and too many Border Policemen."

"Half of the Palestinian children of school-going age do not have a place in the state educational system, and some 9,000 of them do not receive any education at all. At the same time the separation fence pushes the Palestinians out of the city limits, the Israeli establishment is abetting the extreme right-wing organizations that take up residence in the Arab neighborhoods, sow discord and bring about the eviction of Palestinian families from their homes."

"It is not conceivable that there will be a peace agreement that will leave Israel with total sovereignty over Muslim holy places," the editorial continued. "Without a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, the countries of the world will not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and they will continue to keep their embassies elsewhere. Unless the Muslim world is made a partner to sovereignty on the Temple Mount, there is no point in discussing normal relations between Israel and its neighbors."

"Now, as U.S. President Barack Obama prepares to launch his peace plan, it would be wise for Israel's leaders to exchange their empty slogans for practical plans for a logical and just arrangement for Jerusalem."

The day after Netanyahu's declaration French Foreign Ministry spokesman Frederic Desagneaux said, "The declaration made by the Israeli prime minister yesterday in Jerusalem prejudices the final status agreement." "In France's eyes, Jerusalem should, within the framework of a negotiated peace deal, become the capital of two states," he said. Adding, "Actions such as the destruction of Palestinian homes or the transformation of Arab districts risk provoking an escalation in violence. They are unacceptable and contrary to international law."

"In broad terms, France condemns the ongoing settlement, including in East Jerusalem. We reiterate the need for a freeze on colonization activities, including those linked to natural population growth," Desagneaux said.

"While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in Washington getting an earful from US lawmakers about the need to stop Jewish settlements and establish a Palestinian state, back in Jerusalem the new mayor is implementing a very different policy," wrote Ilene R. Prusher in the Christian Science Monitor May 19. "Since taking office in January on promises to develop the city equitably, Mayor Nir Barkat has stepped up demolition orders of Arab homes in East Jerusalem, charged an Israeli human rights organization on Tuesday. In addition, he is moving forward with a \$100 million development plan that would further diminish the city's Arab population and thus thwart Palestinian efforts to establish a contiguous state with a capital in Jerusalem."

"According to the report by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), 1,052 demolition orders have been issued since the beginning of the year, 34 of them signed by Mr. Barkat himself. So far, 23 have been carried out."

"The many demolition orders issued in 2009 suggest that this number will rise dramatically by year's end," the report stated.

The mayor has denied the charge.

The report comes in the midst of Mr. Netanyahu's first official visit with President Barack Obama in the US since becoming prime minister," wrote Prusher. "Underscoring their differences, Mr. Obama emphasized the necessity of a two-state solution to the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while Netanyahu conspicuously avoided an endorsement of that formula, saying that Palestinians should be able to 'govern themselves' and that he favors increased economic cooperation."

A clue to just what that might mean can perhaps be found in a report by Jonathan Cook carried by ZNet May 22 about Uzi Arad, a top advisor to Netanyahu and head of Israel's National Security Council. Cook wrote:

"In an indication of his implacable opposition to a Palestinian state, Mr. Arad recently told an interviewer: 'We want to relieve ourselves of the burden of Palestinian populations, not the territories.'

"He has suggested that the Palestinians be required to become economically self-reliant, in the hope that their leaders will be forced to promote family planning methods to reduce the population. His motto is that the Palestinians need 'one man, one job' before they need 'one man, one vote'."

On Saturday, Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Ya'alon said on Israeli television, "We will not follow American dictates. We will not halt construction in the settlements."

"If Israel continues not to accept solving the Palestinian issue on the basis of a two-state solution, then the other option before us is one democratic state in which Muslims, Christians and Jews live side by side enjoying the same rights," Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa said last week. He went on, "The situation in this region is unstable and dangerous and US President [Barack] Obama should properly address the Arab-Israeli conflict and, in particular, the Palestinian issue. There must be a viable Palestinian state and a comprehensive peace that should involve Syria and Lebanon."

Much has been made in the major media of a confluence of interest between Israel and the governments of Sunni Arab governments in opposition to Iran. This, however, is overblown and misleading. No one can doubt that a military attack – a constant Israeli threat – would enflame the entire Islamic world.

"But as we talk about a world free of nuclear weapons, the US should bear in mind that there is a country already possessing nuclear weapons," said Musa. "We need a fair and positive deal in this question by the US. Do not talk about Iran while leaving Israel outside the talks."

Dahabi concurred, adding "everybody has to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."

"Settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward," Robert Naiman, National Coordinator of Just Foreign Policy, wrote last week. "In calling for an end to Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank, President Obama is restating longstanding U.S. policy. However, under the Bush Administration, U.S. officials tended to use weak formulations like referring to the settlements as 'an obstacle to peace' rather saying explicitly that they should stop. And the statements tended to come from folks like Secretary of State Rice, rather than from the president himself. By making the statement in his press conference with Netanyahu, President Obama underscored the policy.

"However, what really matters is giving teeth to the policy. There can scarcely be any reasonable doubt that if the Obama Administration really wants to, it can stop Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. The U.S. has a great deal of leverage over the Israeli government. The question is whether the Obama Administration will use that leverage.

"For example, earlier this month, President Obama sent his FY2010 budget request to Congress and, as expected, included in it \$2.775 billion in military aid for Israel, an increase of \$225 million from this year's budget.

"This presents the perfect opportunity for the Obama Administration to 'put its money where its mouth is.' The Obama Administration could, for example, support conditioning the increase in U.S. military aid on Israeli compliance with a settlement freeze. No-one could plausibly claim that conditioning the increase on compliance with a settlement freeze would "endanger Israel" in any way -- even if Israel did not comply with the settlement freeze, and did not receive the increase in military aid as a result, that would leave Israel receiving exactly as much U.S. military aid as it receives now.

"But such a move would make clear that the Obama Administration is serious."

Jordan's King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein recently conferred in Damascus with President Bashar al-Assad. The two are said to have discussed a Saudi-inspired Arab peace initiative which proposes full diplomatic recognition to Israel if it returns the occupied territories to Palestinian control and works out a settlement of the problem of Palestinian refugees. Last week Abdullah issued an ominous warning: "If we delay our peace negotiations, then there is going to be another conflict between Arabs or Muslims and Israel in the next 12-18 months." His father, the late King Hussein bin Talal conveyed a similar message to the White House once – on the eve of the 1967 war.


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