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Ex-Aide Bennett Battles Netanyahu Over Settlements



Since their falling-out, Bennett has become one of Netanyahu's sharpest critics on West Bank building policy (Reuters)

By Jonathan Ferziger

July 14, 2010 (Bloomberg) -- Naftali Bennett, a former top aide to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who runs Israel's biggest settler organization, said he will fight against his former boss if a moratorium on West Bank construction is extended.

Bennett, a millionaire computer entrepreneur and reserve army commando, said builders will start new projects across the territory as soon as Netanyahu's limited 10-month construction freeze expires Sept. 26.

"The notion of not allowing Jews to build houses" in the West Bank "is absurd and immoral," Bennett, 38, said yesterday in an interview. "All that is going to end Sept. 26. We'll be out building."

Netanyahu asked President Barack Obama at the White House last week to help persuade Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to start direct peace negotiations. Abbas, who agreed to participate in U.S.-mediated indirect talks with Israel, refuses to meet face-to-face

until Netanyahu imposes a complete freeze on construction in the West Bank, which Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Obama said he expects the two leaders to start direct talks before the housing moratorium is over and Netanyahu said he sees no reason to extend it. Bennett expressed concern, though, that “Netanyahu is coming under extraordinary pressure to make concessions.”

The prime minister stopped all new settlement construction last November, allowing completion of about 3,000 homes already started. More than 300,000 Jews live amid some 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank, which Israel captured from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Obama Address

In his June 4, 2009 address at Cairo University, President Barack Obama said the U.S. “does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements,” adding that “it is time for these settlements to stop.”

To fight any extension, Bennett started a newspaper and telephone campaign, quoting Netanyahu’s speech in December in which he said the freeze is temporary and building will start again as soon as the 10-month period expires. The campaign is titled “A word is a word.”

Netanyahu declined to comment on Bennett’s remarks and the advertising campaign, spokesman Mark Regev said. Bennett, whose parents immigrated to Israel from San Francisco before he was born, declined to elaborate on what settlers will do if the army enforces extension of the freeze. He said builders have already secured financing to build houses across the West Bank once the September deadline passes. “The bottom line is we’re going to build and nothing will stop us,” he said.

Parliamentary Opposition

Bennett, founder of anti-computer fraud firm Cyota Inc., which was sold for \$145 million to RSA Security Inc. in 2005, was chief of staff to Netanyahu until 2008 when the Likud Party chairman led the parliamentary opposition. He now runs the Yesha Council, named after a Hebrew acronym for Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Judea and Samaria are the biblical names for the regions that comprise the West Bank and are commonly used by Israelis.

While Bennett as director-general runs the council’s operations, serving alongside Chairman Danny Dayan, he is not a settler himself and lives in the prosperous Tel Aviv suburb of Raanana.

He dismisses criticism that the job should belong to a West Bank resident. Settlers will fight efforts to evacuate any of the more than 120 settlements in the West Bank, Bennett said, declining to rule out violent resistance. “All options are on the table,” he said.

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