

Bush Warns Israel's Sharon to Avoid Adding Fuel to Fire

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WASHINGTON--President Bush admonished visiting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Tuesday to avoid provocative acts such as expanding Jewish housing in disputed areas, possibly rekindling the friction that marred the relationship between Israel and his father's administration.

In what officials said was an otherwise congenial first meeting between the new leaders of traditional allies, Bush called on both Israel and the Palestinian Authority "to do nothing at this stage that would make the already volatile situation in the region . . . get worse," a senior U.S. official told reporters at the White House.

Jerusalem municipal authorities this week gave preliminary approval for construction of almost 3,000 homes in a Jewish neighborhood on the city's outskirts, and the senior official made it clear that this is the sort of activity the president hopes to discourage.

On other topics, Bush generally told Sharon what he wanted to hear, joining the Israeli prime minister in demanding that the Palestinians put a stop to violence that has persisted since last fall and pledging increased cooperation on military projects, including Israel's antimissile program. The president said his administration will remain ready to help Israel and the Palestinians make peace but noted that he will not pressure the parties to reach compromise.

"I assured the prime minister my administration will work hard to lay the foundation of peace," Bush said in a brief joint appearance with Sharon after their meeting. "I told him that our nation will not try to force peace."

Sharon later told Israeli reporters that he was very pleased with the meeting. According to an Israeli official who attended that brief news conference, Sharon said Bush shared his assessment that the approach of former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and former President Clinton in seeking "a big breakthrough" to end 50 years of Arab-Israeli animosity was not realistic.

Sharon said Bush seemed to agree with him that Israel cannot be expected to resume negotiations "under the shadow of terror and violence." He said that when he asserted that the Palestinian Authority and its president, Yasser Arafat, are directly implicated in terrorist acts, "the Americans did not contradict us."

The senior administration official who briefed reporters said Bush and Sharon agreed to increase military cooperation, especially on missile defense, a subject that both governments hold dear. But he said nothing specific was decided because "it is going to take two new administrations a little time to sit down and talk about" the details.

The official said Bush will not renew Clinton's request to Congress for \$400 million to help Israel pay for removing its troops from Lebanon and for other incidental costs of peacemaking. When Clinton asked for the money, it was intended as a sweetener for an Israeli-Palestinian

peace agreement that did not materialize. Nevertheless, Bush's budget would maintain Israel's position as recipient of the biggest amount of U.S. foreign aid.

Although the White House meeting was the first between Bush as president and Sharon as prime minister, Bush recalled that they met in 1998 when Sharon hosted a group of governors on a helicopter tour of the West Bank.

Turning to Sharon, Bush said: "You didn't think you were going to be the prime minister, and you probably darn sure didn't think I was going to be the president."

But there was no hiding the friction over Israeli settlement activity, a source of irritation between Bush's father, former President George Bush, and former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, like Sharon a leader of the right-wing Likud Party. Although Washington hopes to discourage all new or expanded settlement activity, it finds construction of Jewish housing in traditionally Arab sectors of Jerusalem especially troubling.

Sharon was cheered lustily Monday night by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful pro-Israel lobby group, when he vowed to retain Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem "forever." **But Tuesday, a group of 100 American rabbis issued an open letter to Bush and Sharon charging that the new Israeli government's settlement policy would make it impossible for any future government to make the sort of compromises over Jerusalem that Barak offered during last summer's Camp David summit.**

Although Bush did not specifically endorse the rabbis' argument, he warned Sharon that "provocative acts at this time would not contribute to peace or stability in the region," the administration official said.

Sharon has promised not to begin any new settlements. But this policy does not apply to construction in Jerusalem, Israeli officials said.

Asked if the controversial plans to expand the Jewish Har Homa neighborhood in East Jerusalem, captured from Jordan in the 1967 Middle East War, were discussed, the Israeli official noted: "The prime minister said that the issue of Jerusalem came up in the meeting. He stated Israel's position that Jerusalem will remain the united capital of the state of Israel."