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Israeli launches spy satellite after US refusal to push for Iran's weapons program's dismantlement

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Launch of Ofek-10 spy satellite

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided not to delay the launch of Israel's improved Ofek 10 spy satellite Wednesday night April 9, hours after the six powers and Iran wound up another round of talks in Vienna on comprehensive accord on its nuclear program. Israel decided to show some muscle over the Obama administration's consent to raise Iran's weapons program at the next round of nuclear negotiations next month, debkafile's Washington and Jerusalem sources report. But this assurance, relayed also to the Saudi government, was not accompanied by information on the points to be raised, or the US response if Tehran continued to

maintain that its weapons program is non-existent and therefore not up for negotiation with the world powers.

Neither did Washington reply to questions from Jerusalem about how US negotiators would act in the light of the latest intelligence data supplied by Israel, Britain and Holland attesting to accelerated Iranian work on its putatively non-existent weapons program. The Israeli prime minister is still waiting for an answer from Washington. But at least one American official admits to knowing the truth.

"It would take Iran just two months to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon," US Secretary of State John Kerry told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing Tuesday in a downbeat assessment of efforts to curb Tehran's nuclear program.

High-ranking US and Israeli sources told debkafile early Thursday April 10 that it is becoming harder than ever, in the context of US-Israel relations, to disentangle the stalled Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from the ineffectual nuclear talks with Iran.

The top level of the US administration appears to have fallen into two factions pulling in opposite directions: One group, led by President Barack Obama and National Security Advisor Susan Rice, wants Israel to carry the can for progress or for obstacles in negotiations with the Palestinians, while appeasing the latter and letting Iran off the hook on the concerns of Israel (and other Mid East nations).

The opposing group, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, favors more flexibility and is trying to mediate between the White House and Jerusalem.

National Security Adviser Rice is the toughest nut to crack in this regard.

The rift between the two factions led to the cancellation of Kerry's White House meeting with the president that was scheduled for Tuesday, April 8 for an evaluation of the Israel-Palestinian peace track and whether or not to end US involvement.

Rice would have urged the US to pull out and lay the blame squarely at Israel's door.

By postponing this confrontation, Kerry bought time for another bid to salvage the negotiations. And indeed, his envoy Martin Indyk has kept low-profile talks going between the two sides.

There is every indication that Prime Minister Netanyahu is at the end of his tether on what he

regards as the Obama administration's unfair appreciation of the concessions Israel made to keep the talks alive in the face of Palestinian negativism. Sources in Jerusalem say White House lenience toward the Palestinians hardens the intransigence of their leader Mahmoud Abbas and so undermines the entire peace effort.

At least for now, Netanyahu is taking a hard line himself, debkafile's Jerusalem sources report. Wednesday, Netanyahu punished Abbas for his unilateral application to 15 UN agencies to bypass negotiations with a dose of his own medicine. He ordered all Israeli ministerial contacts cut off with their Palestinian peers and the cancellation of VIP privileges for Palestinian high-ups.

For a show of Israeli muscle, he ordered the Israel military spy satellite Ofek-10 to be launched from the Palmachim air base Wednesday night. By Thursday morning, it was circling in earth orbit every 99 minutes from an altitude of 600 kms. Ofek-10's improved surveillance capabilities include high-resolution cameras able to distinguish between objects of half a meter and operate in varying lighting and weather conditions.

That afternoon, the entry of the Samson cargo plane, the new Super Hercules C130J, into service with the Israeli Air Force took place in a public ceremony. Samson markedly extends the IAF's ability to carry troops forces and hardware over any point in Iran. It was the first of six giant air transports to be delivered by the end of next year. The message the show was meant to convey was that Israel is again preparing to conduct a military strike on Iran's nuclear program after being pressed by Obama into holding back for some years.

The old confrontation between Obama and Netanyahu is therefore back in full force. Will the Israeli prime minister continue to tough it out on either or both the Palestinian and Iranian nuclear tracks? That is anyone's guess. But Wednesday, he was heard to say that a sovereign nation has the right to say no.

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