

Netanyahu says Israel won't retreat on Jewish settlements: 'We are here to stay forever'

Days after meeting a White House delegation to discuss restarting peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu forcefully spoke out against a principal tenet of any likely agreement: the scaling back of Jewish settlements.

At an event celebrating 50 years of Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank, Netanyahu pledged Monday that his government will never evacuate a single settlement.

Addressing a large crowd, Netanyahu declared: "We are here to stay forever. There will be no more uprooting of settlements in the land of Israel. This is the inheritance of our ancestors. This is our land."

Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which are considered illegal by much of the international community, have been at the crux of peace talks for years. Successive U.S. presidents have considered the settlements an obstacle to peace and have called for, at the least, a stop to their expansion. Although President Trump has been less critical than his predecessors, even he has said that further construction would be unhelpful.

In his remarks, Netanyahu underscored the risk Israel would face if it withdrew from the West Bank — a central demand of the Palestinians, for whom the area represents a future independent state.

"Samaria is a strategic asset for the state of Israel," the prime minister said, using the biblical name for the northern West Bank. "It is the key to our future. Because from these high hills, the heights of Mt. Hatzor, we can see the entire country, from one side to the other."

The audience cheered.

"There will be no more uprooting of settlements in the land of Israel. It has been proven that it does not help peace," he said. "We've uprooted settlements. What

did we get? We received missiles. It will not happen again.”

Netanyahu appeared to be referring to Israel’s 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, and the dismantling of settlements there. The next year, the Islamist group Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, eventually taking control of Gaza.

The Israeli government officially supports a two-state solution to its conflict with the Palestinians, which would entail relinquishing control of much of the West Bank for a Palestinian state. But many of Netanyahu’s right-wing Cabinet members have steered away from that commitment, and when addressing Israelis, the prime minister occasionally distances himself.

In 2014, he told a group of Israeli journalists covering his meetings with then-U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry in Davos, Switzerland, that “I have no intention of evacuating any settlement or uprooting any Israeli.”

Netanyahu’s comments Monday came late in the evening, and there was no immediate response from Palestinian officials.

Source: <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-israel-netanyahu-settlements-20170828-story.html>

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