

Israel PM 'may back two states'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be prepared to endorse a peace process leading to an independent Palestinian state, his defence minister has said.

Ehud Barak, a long-time rival now part of Israel's governing coalition, spoke ahead of Mr Netanyahu's first meeting with US President Obama in Washington.

He told Israeli TV a regional deal could be struck within three years.

Mr Netanyahu has so far been unwilling to discuss a two-state solution, saying only he wants a "fresh approach".

He recently made his first visits out of Israel since taking office, travelling to Egypt and Jordan during the past week.

A two-state solution based on independent

is a goal strongly backed by the US and by Jordan and Egypt, Israel's only allies among Arab states.

'Fresh approach'

President Obama is expected to push

on the issue when they meet for talks at the White House on Monday.

Mr Barak, the Labour leader, says his long-time rival is ready to take a pragmatic approach to peace negotiations.

" I don't see a reason why Netanyahu would not say that at the end of an accord... there will be two peoples living side by side "
Ehud Barak Israeli defence minister

"Netanyahu will tell Obama: We're willing to engage in a process whose end is a regional peace accord," he told Channel 2 TV.

He stopped short of saying that Mr Netanyahu would back a two-state solution while in Washington in the coming week, but suggested an independent Palestinian state could emerge from a revived peace process.

"The Arabs say 'two states,' [and] I don't see a reason why Netanyahu would not say that at the end of an accord... there will be two peoples living side by side in peace and mutual respect," he said.

Mr Barak said he thought such an agreement could be reached between Israel and its neighbours within three years, and take another five years to implement.

However, some members of Mr Netanyahu's Likud party cast doubt on Mr Barak's views.

Transport Minister Yisrael Katz said the prime minister would "oppose any creation of an armed Palestinian state on

Israel's borders, which would endanger Israel's security," the AFP news agency reported.

'Triple track'

Mr Netanyahu is scheduled to arrive in Washington on Sunday, with talks at the White House planned for the following day.

Although Israel's long-standing relationship with the US remains strong, analysts say Mr Netanyahu is likely to find himself under pressure from the US president.

During his victorious election campaign earlier this year he remained opposed to Palestinian statehood, and spoke out vociferously against the Hamas administration which runs the Gaza Strip.

But in an address to US supporters of Israel at the start of May Mr Netanyahu said he favoured a "triple track" approach.

Political progress must be combined with a strengthening of the Palestinian security apparatus and moved to stimulate the Palestinian economy, he said.

Israeli newspaper Haaretz quoted a White House official as saying Mr Obama would not present a specific plan for the Middle East at his meeting with Mr Netanyahu on Monday.

"This is [the president's] first opportunity to take the next step to deepen and expand [US-Israeli co-operation. And I'm quite sure it will be the first of many such conversations," Haaretz quoted the official as saying.

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