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INTERNATIONAL

NEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Former, present Israeli leaders discuss security

■ **UNITY:** Benjamin Netanyahu has decided to share views with former foe, Shimon Peres

JERUSALEM (AP) — Abandoning tough opposition talk for the smoother sounds of governance, Benjamin Netanyahu sat down Tuesday with the man he defeated and professed to share his views on many critical issues.

In fact, after their first post-election meeting, the prime minister-elect said he was looking forward to more sessions with rival Shimon Peres, whom he once described as "deluded."

Such talk fueled speculation that Netanyahu would invite Peres' defeated Labor Party into his government — a move that could keep hard-liners at bay and allay the fears of Israel's Arab negotiating partners, who worry Netanyahu will renege on promises made by the Peres government.

Netanyahu's conciliatory tone was matched by some Labor leaders, who spoke of joining Netanyahu in a national unity coalition to assure the peace process advances.

After a three-hour meeting, Netanyahu and Peres smiled and shook hands, and Netanyahu affectionately addressed the outgoing prime minister as "Shimon" — in sharp contrast to the personal attacks of the campaign.

"The main issues we discussed were security," said Netanyahu, adding that the two shared "a broad consensus" on the issue.

Meetings with Peres, he said, were "always interesting, beneficial and fascinating."

Israel's Channel 2 TV, meanwhile, reported that Labor and Likud officials had been discussing the possibility of a coalition.

It said Likud officials were working on policy guidelines that would be acceptable to Labor and ease Arab concerns.

These include honoring existing accords with the Palestinians and an agreement with Lebanon that would enable Israel to withdraw from the border strip it occupies in southern Lebanon, the report said.

Although Netanyahu talked tough as a candidate, he has been intentionally vague about his positions since winning the election. His advisers have hinted he is ready to compromise on key issues, including the future of Jewish settlements and the Golan Heights, which were captured from Syria in 1967.

During the campaign, Netanyahu promised to continue expanding settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Peres had hinted he was ready to return part of the Golan Heights as part of a peace treaty with Syria.

A top Netanyahu adviser said Tuesday the new government would pursue a completely new approach to negotiations with Syria, trying to secure limited agreements on specific issues rather than a full peace treaty with an exchange of ambassadors, as did Peres' government.

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— Zalman Shoval
top Netanyahu adviser

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some sort of compromise or a completely new approach which will look to incremental progress," Zalman Shoval said.

Yossi Beilin, Peres' top policy adviser and a principal architect of the peace process, said the Likud and Labor positions were not so far apart.

"If Netanyahu makes us a respectable proposal to join his government, I think it would be a mistake to refuse it outright," Beilin said. "If we really want to ensure the greatest chances for the success of the [peace] process, in my opinion it is from within the government, [even if] someone else is guiding."

Netanyahu won the May 29 election by just 29,500 votes out of nearly three million valid ballots.

Although no Likud legislator has publicly broached the prospect of a Likud-Labor coalition, Israeli media reports say those close to Netanyahu prefer it as a way to heal the deep divisions among Israelis about their nation's future.

Including the Labor Party in the government would also reduce Netanyahu's dependence on the far right, both within his own party and in alliances with other right-wing parties, such as

the National Religious Party.

Peres did not rule out a Likud-Labor coalition Tuesday, but said Labor should wait until Likud made an offer.

"Benjamin Netanyahu is forming the government," he said. "If he has proposals, he will make them."

Likud officials have hinted the new government would back down from some key hard-line planks in the Likud platform, suggesting the sharp lines of the campaign were largely rhetoric.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said Netanyahu would not necessarily shut down Orient House, the Jerusalem headquarters of the Palestinian leadership, as long as the Palestinians did not use the building on behalf of the Palestinian Authority.

Throughout the campaign, Netanyahu had promised to shut down the office — a move that Palestinians — who want east Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state — said could spark violence.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, in an appearance at England's Oxford University on Monday, suggested that Jerusalem could be shared, serving as capital for both Israel and a Palestinian state.

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