

February 2017

The context of the meeting

- This Wednesday, 15 February, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet US President Donald Trump, the fifth world leader to visit Trump since his inauguration.
- For Trump, the meeting is an opportunity to further distinguish himself from the Obama administration, by displaying near-unquestionable public support for Israel, in contrast to the often-fractious Netanyahu-Obama relations over the Palestinian issue and the Iran nuclear programme.
- Netanyahu – a veteran Middle East operator – will no doubt hope to shape the President's and his administration's Middle East thinking and develop the basis for a close long-term relationship.
- He will be just as keen to reaffirm his leadership credentials at home, arriving in Washington under intense pressure from the hard right wing of his coalition on the Palestinian issue, and police investigations into breach of trust and bribery allegations.
- The meeting's agenda will include the Iranian nuclear deal; Syria and the threat from ISIS; as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the settlement issue, which may also open up the question of Trump's election promise to move the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Iran and the nuclear deal

- During his campaign, US President Donald Trump vowed to dismantle the "disastrous" deal with Iran, yet also to vigorously enforce it. Netanyahu waged a public and bitter campaign against the Iran deal before it was signed, and it remains a key concern. Nuclear restrictions will expire within 10-15 years,

putting Iran in touching distance of nuclear weapons, and rather than moderating Iran's behaviour, the deal has **emboldened** it.

- However, with the deal a year into implementation, the trend among [Israeli experts](#) is to favour tighter enforcement rather than cancellation. Iran has already cashed in sanctions relief and repatriation of funds. Unilateral US withdrawal would not be backed by the other signatories, and could compromise those restrictions and inspections which were secured. Netanyahu will likely urge Trump to lay out steps for punishing Iran for violating the agreement and new measures to halt its development of ballistic missiles meant to carry nuclear warheads, but without unravelling the framework which currently holds back Iran's development, albeit only temporarily. He will also press Trump to take a stronger stance against Iran's wider destabilising regional agenda.
- Netanyahu will likely find a receptive ear on this issue. Trump has already put Iran on official "notice" and imposed new sanctions targeting specific companies and individuals following its recent ballistic missile tests, whilst Republicans in Congress, who opposed the agreement from the beginning, have started introducing new legislation that, if passed, will broaden the sanctions on Iran to include countering Iran's non-nuclear activities, such as its ballistic missile violations, human rights abuses and support for terrorism.

Iran, Russia and the Syrian question

- More complex will be the question of Iran's role in Syria and its relations with Russia. Trump seeks to turn President Putin into an ally, including for the purposes of a concerted effort to destroy ISIS in Syria. Trump signed a [presidential memorandum](#) on 28 January

giving the Secretary of Defence until the end of February to present a “new plan to defeat ISIS,” and has mentioned his support for the idea of safe zones. How his policy will vary from the existing strategy, in which US and allied forces are contributing airpower, train and equip operations and special forces, remains to be seen.

- From Israel’s perspective, Netanyahu will stress the importance of any arrangement with Russia over Syria preventing Iran and Hezbollah from entrenching their position there, although questions remain as to the capacity of the administration to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran. Israel entirely supports the goals of destroying ISIS, and Netanyahu will no doubt emphasise this point with Trump, but Israel nonetheless considers Iran and its allies to pose the graver threat.
- Israelis are increasingly concerned that Assad’s advantage in the Syrian civil war, achieved with Russian and Iranian help, will allow Iran to control a corridor from Iran, through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Israel is particularly concerned about Iran and Hezbollah turning the Syrian controlled part of the Golan Heights into a base to threaten Israel.
- Until now, Israel has adopted a policy of non-intervention in Syria, acting militarily only when its interests were directly affected, in particular to strike advanced weapons convoys heading for Hezbollah in Lebanon. To this end it has established military coordination procedures with Russia. However, there are increasing voices in Israel calling for intervention within Syria to prevent hostile forces further establishing themselves in the border area.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The US perspective

- The Trump administration’s moves on the Palestinian issue have been a source of confusion, and the meeting will be an opportunity to see if a more coherent position is developing.
- On the one hand Trump has drawn a line under the fraught Obama-Netanyahu relationship in particular by criticising his decision not to veto a UN Security Council resolution on

Israeli building in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, by nominating the pro-settlement David Friedman as ambassador, and by promising to move the US embassy in Jerusalem.

- However, he has also repeatedly declared that an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal can and should be done. Yet his appointment of his son-in-law Jared Kushner, with no diplomatic experience or significant expertise, to broker such a deal would be bizarre by the standards of any other administration. If Trump truly aspires to an end of conflict deal, it seems a mission doomed to failure, since almost no Israeli or Palestinian leader thinks such a deal possible at present, though there are [many steps](#) that could be taken to improve the current situation.
- Remarkably, Trump has recently begun to articulate his own concern about settlements, [telling](#) pro-Netanyahu Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom* in a weekend interview: “They [settlements] don’t help the process. I can say that. There is [only] so much land left. And every time you take land for settlements, there is less land left... I am not somebody that believes that going forward with these settlements is a good thing for peace.”

The Israeli perspective

- Netanyahu arrives in Washington facing a dilemma on the Palestinian issue. The right flank of his coalition, led by Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett, demands he seize the opportunity of a supportive and open-minded White House to cancel his commitment to a two-state solution, made in a landmark policy speech at Bar Ilan University in 2009. The right of the coalition recently pressurised Netanyahu into accepting legislation to facilitate legalisation of settlement homes built on private Palestinian land. Although the law will likely fall before Israel’s Supreme Court, its passage indicates Netanyahu’s vulnerability. In a recent cabinet meeting Netanyahu responded to criticism from his right flank by telling ministers that had offered the Palestinians, “not exactly a state with full authority, rather a state minus”. In the public elements of his meeting with Theresa May, whilst committing himself to the search for peace, Netanyahu notably avoided the words “two-state solution”. Netanyahu’s sensitivity to his political base is augmented by the personal pressure he is under due to high

profile police investigations into bribery and breach of trust allegations.

- However, a more pragmatic strain of thinking, articulated in recent months by defence minister Avigdor Lieberman and leader of Yesh Atid Yair Lapid, and perhaps closer to Netanyahu's own private thinking, is to coordinate policy with the US in order to receive its acquiescence to construction within existing settlement blocks, where most settlers live and which Israel would hope to keep in any future territorial arrangement. In return Israel could hold back construction in more isolated settlements, thereby preserving the possibility of a two-state outcome. The Obama administration was unreceptive to such a differentiation, as have been European governments.
- A model of sorts for this arrangement is the Bush letter to Ariel Sharon in 2004, in which the Bush administration acknowledged major settlement blocks would remain part of Israel, in return for Israel committing to withdraw from Gaza and some isolated settlements in the northern West Bank. Meanwhile Michael Oren, a deputy minister with responsibility for public diplomacy in the Prime Minister's office, and former Ambassador to Washington, has been reaffirming in Israeli media interviews that Israel's goal is two states for two peoples, although this position has become increasingly unpopular amongst Likud MKs. It remains to be seen how Netanyahu and Trump navigate the question of a Palestinian state in both the public and private elements of their meeting.
- Whatever form of words they use, Netanyahu will likely reiterate his commitment to negotiate with the Palestinians without preconditions, but convey to Trump that the underlying barrier to progress is Palestinian intransigence, including their unwillingness to acknowledge Israel's character as the nation state of the Jewish people, and their continued incitement to violence.

Broader relations with Sunni states

- Netanyahu will also likely seek Trump's help in establishing a more public relationship with Sunni Arab states whose covert cooperation with Israel has grown in recent years in line with their shared concerns regarding Iran. He will likely repeat his argument that this

relationship could establish the basis for a renewed peace effort between Israel and the Palestinians. Trump's *Israel Hayom* interview gave the impression it was an argument he had already been introduced to, telling the paper: "Maybe there is even a chance for a bigger peace than just Israel and the Palestinians."

- Trump will already have heard the concerns of Sunni states in the region directly. Among his first contacts with world leaders were calls with leaders of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, and Trump met briefly with King Abdullah of Jordan in Washington. The Palestinian issue is far from being the top priority for any of them, but if it came up, they will no doubt have made clear that any upgrade of relations with Israel will depend on a clear Israeli commitment to bringing about a Palestinian state.
- The issue of moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem may also arise. Trump promised to carry out the move during his presidential campaign, but has since stepped back, telling *Israel Hayom*: "The embassy is not an easy decision... I'm thinking about it very seriously, and we will see what happens." The move, which would entail formal recognition of West Jerusalem (at least) as Israel's capital, correcting an anomaly in international diplomacy, is one that many Israeli politicians cannot publically object to, even if some may have apprehensions that it could spark violence among Palestinians and the wider Islamic world. But whilst it may be mentioned in the meeting, Netanyahu is likely to let Trump take the lead on this issue, since the address of the US embassy is not his top priority.

Conclusion

- This hefty agenda will not be resolved in one meeting, and this is the start of a process. However, the public remarks, and the reports of the behind closed discussions which follow, will provide some more indications of how the agendas of the two sides are developing with respect to one another. In the meantime, the optics, directed primarily at domestic audiences, can be expected to signify a warm mutual embrace.

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