

Disagreements on Hostages Loom Over Netanyahu's Washington Trip

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Brief Analysis

Given the tense U.S. election cycle, Biden and Netanyahu will likely keep their policy disagreements within careful bounds, but the visit is unlikely to see immediate progress on the hostage deal or other key issues.

Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's latest Washington visit will center around a July 24 speech to a joint session of Congress and a meeting with President Biden two days earlier, marking their first White House encounter since Netanyahu formed his current government in December 2022. Although the prime minister will set a record for the most addresses to Congress by a foreign leader—surpassing no less than Winston Churchill—the long gap since his previous visit is a telling illustration of Jerusalem's tensions with the Biden administration, first over a controversial judicial overhaul program and now over certain aspects of the Gaza war. What will their discussions focus on, and how will Netanyahu navigate a Capitol Hill appearance that has proven to be politically tricky terrain for him in the past?

Netanyahu's Risky Hostage Gamble

Biden administration officials have indicated that the White House meeting—which is still expected to take place despite the president's recent COVID diagnosis—will focus on the latest negotiations to release the remaining 116 hostages taken on October 7, eight of them American citizens (though some reports suggest that less than half of them are still alive). In line with this theme, some hostage families are accompanying Netanyahu to Washington, though others refused. Yet the prime minister has reportedly **hardened his position** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-said-hardening-hostage-deal-stance-based-on-intel-hamas-is-weakened/>) in recent days, seeking to extract further concessions from Hamas. Biden disagrees, preferring to strike a deal soon rather than risk it collapsing under additional demands. Sources say he may publicly express this stance after he meets with Netanyahu.

Indeed, the administration has devoted considerable resources to securing a hostage deal, with CIA director William Burns and National Security Council coordinator Brett McGurk frequently attending talks in Egypt and Qatar. U.S. officials see the deal as not only a moral imperative in itself, but also a potential off-ramp from the Gaza war and the **escalating clashes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>)** between Israel and Hezbollah, thereby reducing the administration's deep fears of a regional war with Iran. They believe Netanyahu opposes a larger war as well, so Biden will likely press him on this account. Moreover, the administration still holds faint hopes that a pause in Gaza could advance Israeli-Saudi normalization.

In a July 17 Knesset speech, Netanyahu reiterated his view that the Israel Defense Forces have seriously damaged Hamas's military capabilities—a stance bolstered by the recent strike that reportedly killed the terrorist group's shadowy military mastermind Muhammad Deif. Netanyahu has argued for months that Hamas will only concede more under pressure, and he now believes he can extract fresh concessions on a multiphase hostages-for-prisoners deal.

Specifically, he is demanding that Israel maintain an open-ended military presence in two key areas:

- The Philadelphia Corridor along the Egypt-Gaza border, to stop Hamas from rearming itself through its tunnel network (Netanyahu visited this area on July 18)
- The Netzarim Corridor just above Wadi Gaza, to prevent Hamas fighters from returning to northern Gaza.

When these demands were issued, Hamas had just agreed to de-link the phases of the hostage release, sparking hope that the first phase could be finalized within weeks.

The Israeli security establishment disagrees with Netanyahu's open-ended proposal. On July 16, Mossad director David Barnea **told (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/mossad-chief-said-to-tell-cabinet-female-hostages-dont-have-any-more-time/)** the security cabinet that it would take "weeks" to establish a mechanism on Netzarim, and the hostages "do not have time." IDF chief of staff Herzi Halevi and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant have likewise argued for prioritizing hostage releases, which they see as the state's core duty after the failure of October 7.

To be sure, Netanyahu's concerns about the complex threat of Gaza border smuggling are legitimate, so emphasizing them in conversations with U.S. officials is understandable. Some observers believe that his hardened stance is mostly intended to establish a tough opening position for future bargaining.

In any case, the Biden administration appears more aligned with Barnea's view that the hostages have little time. Sources expect the president to publicly voice the need to eschew brinksmanship and go forward with the deal as is—while simultaneously reassuring Netanyahu that Washington and Cairo can **establish (<https://www.axios.com/2024/07/17/israel-gaza-egypt-rafah-crossing-ceasefire-hostages>)** a solid trilateral arrangement on the Egyptian side of the Gaza border, employing special sensor technology and giving Israel constant, real-time access to its output. Halevi has suggested that similar means could enable Israel to control the Philadelphia Corridor without a physical presence. In place of Israeli forces, the United States and other actors favor a symbolic Palestinian Authority border force—perhaps with European backing, building on the short-lived **EU security initiative (<https://www.eubam-rafah.eu/>)** established after Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza.

Critics claim that Netanyahu's brinksmanship stems from Israeli domestic politics rather than Hamas's weakness. Far-right cabinet members such as National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich have threatened to bring down the government if Netanyahu pursues a hostage deal that gives Hamas room to revive itself. Yet Netanyahu may gain a temporary reprieve from such pressure as soon as July 28, when the Knesset begins its three-month recess and can no longer hold a no-confidence vote against him. At that point, he may be more willing to make concessions on hostages and other matters.

Netanyahu's Speech and U.S. Politics

Both the hostage negotiations and Netanyahu's trip plans are clearly being affected by America's upcoming election. According to Israeli media, Netanyahu **hopes** (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/rjgtalvua>) to meet with Republican nominee Donald Trump, who has not spoken to the prime minister since he congratulated Biden for winning the 2020 election. At the same cabinet meeting where Barnea warned about time constraints, Ben-Gvir reportedly **declared** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-ben-gvir-urging-hostage-deal-to-be-held-up-to-avoid-helping-biden-vs-trump/>) that a hostage deal would be a "slap" to Trump and help Biden win in November, implying that the deal should be pushed to January. Although this is an extreme view that does not align with **widespread** (<https://en.idi.org.il/articles/55018>) Israeli public support for an immediate deal, Netanyahu may have assessed that Trump will win the election and hopes to return to his good graces—perhaps by making (or withholding) high-profile gestures while in Washington. The prime minister is certainly aware of the growing U.S. calls for Biden to withdraw from the race. Notably, he plans to hold a separate meeting with Vice President Kamala Harris, an unusual move during such a visit.

The tone of Netanyahu's congressional address will be a key indicator of his calculations on these matters. Some U.S. officials expect that he will express gratitude toward the Biden administration for its large-scale assistance since October 7 and stick to themes that underscore bilateral consensus. According to this argument, Netanyahu does not want to create further divisions with the Democrats, as seen when numerous party members **boycotted** (<https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/26/politics/democrats-missing-netanyahu-whip-list/index.html>) his polarizing 2015 speech to Congress at the height of debates over the Iran nuclear deal.

Yet other officials worry that Netanyahu will use this platform to appeal to his supporters in America and back home, in part by doubling down on opposition to Palestinian statehood following a **symbolic Knesset vote** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-votes-overwhelmingly-against-palestinian-statehood-days-before-pms-us-trip/>) to that effect on July 17. This would likely eliminate the short-term possibility of a breakthrough with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has seemingly demanded little from Netanyahu on the Palestinian issue, but one of its few clear asks is that he publicly and explicitly promise to support the possibility of a two-state solution, not just a "political horizon." He is unlikely to do so while in Washington, however.

Regarding key regional security issues, Netanyahu could remind Congress about how Iran and its proxies have stepped up their attacks against Israel. He might also convey the widespread Israeli belief that the world has forgotten about the Iranian nuclear threat.

Working With—and Around—Netanyahu?

In describing the personal history and policy differences between Biden and Netanyahu, one U.S. official told the author, "I wouldn't say trust has been lost. The president is clear-eyed about who Netanyahu is and how far he thinks Netanyahu can go." Likewise, Netanyahu still appears to trust the president's commitment to Israel.

That said, policy differences persist in four key areas, albeit to varying degrees: hostage negotiations, humanitarian aid, U.S. weapons deliveries, and Israel's lack of a "day after" plan for governing Gaza, despite the shared goal of removing Hamas from power. The differences on aid have narrowed, with new northern crossings opened and the flow of assistance increasing. Yet disagreements over the "day after" persist.

On weapons, officials have been careful to explain the differences between delivery delays for certain systems. To wit, the administration deliberately withheld 2,000-pound bombs for fear Israel would use them in densely populated areas. Yet the delay in smaller munitions stems from the expiration of an emergency authorization that was established after October 7 to fast-track deliveries and cut out Congress. Such transfers must now go through the regular, slower process. Administration officials argue that extending the emergency authorization would risk

backlash from progressive Democrats and a potential transfer freeze; in their view, a slower arms supply is better than a stalled one.

Despite such differences, the administration believes it has very strong relations with the Israeli defense establishment and has successfully worked with security officials on contentious points such as the invasion of Rafah and arms delays. Predictions of a major surge in casualties during the Rafah phase did not materialize, as Israel moved slowly with the operation and nearly all civilians were evacuated.

This cooperation cannot extend to political matters, however. U.S. officials are well aware of Netanyahu's dispute with the Israeli defense establishment over hostage terms with Hamas. It remains to be seen who will blink first: Hamas due to weakness, or Netanyahu once the Knesset recess removes the immediate threat of his government collapsing.

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