

# Netanyahu Visits Washington: Implications for Regional Diplomacy and Security

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Israeli and U.S. experts discuss the agenda for the prime minister's latest U.S. trip and the regional fallout from President Trump's highly controversial ideas on "relocating" Gaza's population.**

*On February 3, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Mira Resnick, Amos Harel, and David Makovsky in advance of the Trump-*

*Netanyahu meeting. Resnick served until recently as deputy assistant secretary of state for Israeli and Palestinian affairs and Arabian Peninsula affairs. Harel is a military correspondent for Haaretz and one of Israel's leading experts on military and defense issues. Makovsky is the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow, director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, and former senior advisor to the U.S. special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## Mira Resnick

The Gaza ceasefire is holding, but the situation remains fragile. In Washington, Netanyahu will likely find an audience that wants the ceasefire to continue. Trump has been consistent in his position that all of the hostages should be released, which would require moving from phase one of the agreement to phase two. At the same time, he is unlikely to be moved by any Israeli domestic political considerations that Netanyahu mentions as impediments to the ceasefire timetable.

Because Hamas continues to exist in Gaza, there is a real incentive for Netanyahu and Trump to find an alternative group or body to govern there. Yet neither government has brought forth a comprehensive day-after plan.

Meanwhile, weapons have been flowing into the West Bank, Iranian activity there has increased, and violent groups are escalating their attacks on Israeli and Palestinian civilians. The territory has real potential to become a major flashpoint—a scenario that would be exacerbated by a breakdown in practical partnership between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Palestinian security forces, and the Palestinian Authority more generally. Indeed, the potential for broader PA collapse is real, which would trigger a serious problem for Israel because the alternatives to the PA are even worse.

Stabilization efforts are further complicated by the fact that the Trump administration is unlikely to steer Israel away from trying to annex the West Bank—that is, unless Saudi Arabia and other players demand Palestinian control there as one of their conditions for broader normalization with Israel.

Trump has repeatedly stated that he wants to arrange the relocation of Palestinian refugees to ease reconstruction in Gaza. So far, Arab states and the Palestinians have rejected this idea entirely. But Trump certainly got Arab leaders' attention, and they may start proposing interesting alternatives of their own in response.

In addition to Gaza, Trump and Netanyahu have a lengthy bilateral security agenda to address, including Israel's need to restock after sixteen months of multifront warfare. Washington can help ease the war's economic impact by lowering the travel warning level for Israel and resuming U.S. airline service there. The administration might also consider resuming the high-level bilateral strategic dialogue on technology. Finally, vital negotiations over the next ten-year memorandum of understanding on U.S. security assistance to Israel loom on the horizon and should be addressed soon.

## Amos Harel

This visit may be the most important meeting between a U.S. president and Israeli prime minister in decades. Netanyahu will presumably aim to project self-assurance even as Trump presses him about moving on to phase two of the ceasefire deal, while far-right coalition members back home push him to resume fighting in Gaza. If Trump is committed to reaching phase two, Netanyahu will find it difficult to refuse him.

Most Israelis support a deal to bring the hostages home under nearly any circumstances. The releases so far have deeply impacted the public's psyche, intensifying the sense of urgency to free those still in captivity. Failure to bring them home might turn more of the public against Netanyahu. At the same time, the events of October 7 have instilled a sense that talk of "peace" and "statehood" with the Palestinians is currently out of bounds for much of Israeli society.

In military terms, the IDF has achieved success against Hamas, but these achievements have not been translated into diplomatic progress. This failure is largely rooted in Israel's reluctance to plan for postwar governance in Gaza—another product of Netanyahu's political reliance on the far right. As for Trump's proposal to relocate Palestinians in order to facilitate reconstruction, certain sectors of Israeli society are enthusiastic about the idea, but Jordan and Egypt perceive it as threatening, so it is likely a nonstarter.

On other topics, the threat of Iran's nuclear capabilities still looms large despite the regime's serious setbacks in recent months. Trump has already released the shipment of heavy bombs that was held up by the Biden administration, and more U.S. weapon deliveries are expected in Israel soon. Yet it remains to be seen whether Trump would truly support an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

## David Makovsky

Ahead of their meeting, it is unclear whether the two leaders will be able to organize their most pressing regional issues—from reaching phase two of the Gaza ceasefire to advancing Saudi normalization and countering Iran's nuclear program—and weave them into a wider strategy. Although the Trump administration has just taken office, the balance of power in the Middle East is fundamentally shifting, giving the president and prime minister a chance to play key early roles in transforming the region. If they can agree on the broad brushstrokes of this effort, then their summit may soon be followed by lower-level meetings between the two governments.

Entering the summit, Netanyahu is aware that Trump's focus is domestic; the president also sees himself as a peacemaker, a point restated in his inaugural address. Given this mindset, Netanyahu will likely try to frame his views to be consistent with Trump's vision and priorities, with personal dynamics figuring prominently in their discussion.

In Gaza, the second phase of the ceasefire agreement requires a full Israeli withdrawal, which Netanyahu reportedly does not want to order because it might bring down his government. He may therefore propose alternatives such as extending phase one or announcing the end of major military operations while maintaining counterterrorism raids against Hamas.

In return for phase two compliance, Washington could offer a pair of important incentives. First, jumpstarting normalization talks with Saudi Arabia would give Netanyahu a powerful reason to bear the political risks of a Gaza withdrawal. Yet Netanyahu would likely balk at the Saudis' apparently firm demand for a clearly defined path toward a Palestinian state. One workaround may be a U.S. statement on this issue that substitutes for an Israeli commitment.

Second, Trump could offer Israel practical support on addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge in exchange for movement on Gaza. In this scenario, a good cop/bad cop approach might emerge, with Trump publicly favoring diplomatic and economic pressure while Israeli military threats push Tehran toward a deal. This approach stands a better chance of working now that Iran's air defenses have been greatly weakened. Alternatively, Netanyahu might tell Trump that Israel will strike unless Washington reaches a deal with Iran by a certain deadline. Yet the IDF would still need U.S. backing and capabilities before taking that path. Lending out these capabilities in the near term while making Israel commit not to use them without permission would be a strong signal that Washington is serious on this issue.

*This summary was prepared by Rena Gabber and Simone Saidmehr. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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