

# Netanyahu Determined to Make Trump's Visit a Success

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

**The Israeli prime minister has taken pains to accommodate the U.S. president, overlooking some potentially troublesome developments, but many questions remain on how the parties will convert a graceful reception into tangible progress.**

**O**n May 22, President Donald Trump will arrive in Israel for the second leg of his overseas trip, following his stay in Saudi Arabia. The Israel stop will include a visit the next morning in Bethlehem, where Trump will meet with Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas. Whereas in Saudi Arabia the U.S. president will hold a summit with Arab and Muslim leaders aimed at upholding a broad coalition against the Islamic State, other extremists, and Iran, he will, in Israel, be seeking to emphasize his connection with his hosts while tentatively exploring prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

## Why the Visit Matters So Much to Netanyahu

**I**n affirming the U.S. commitment to Israel, Trump and his team will be eager to establish a contrast with the maiden Middle East visit by his predecessor, Barack Obama, who in 2009 delivered a major speech in Cairo but did not make it to Israel, riling the close U.S. ally. In turn, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is determined to make the Trump visit a success -- and such an attitude undoubtedly gives Trump leverage. The reasons for this Israeli position are manifold. First, like the Arab states, Israel wants to make sure Trump remains engaged in the Middle East, with a particular hope that he will act to deter Iran. Relatedly, some in Israel and elsewhere in the region fear an America First approach could morph into "America Only" after the U.S.-led coalition defeats the Islamic State, as expected, in the coming months.

Second, Netanyahu aides have concluded that closeness with Washington has positive ripple effects for Israeli foreign policy in other arenas. Immediately after Netanyahu returned from his [early White House meeting in](#)

**February (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-one-state-preliminary-conclusions-from-the-netanyahu-meeting>)**, for instance, he was invited to Beijing, after having awaited such an invitation for some time. Indeed, Israeli officials are wary that Trump is unpredictable, and therefore are hoping a successful visit will somehow insulate the bilateral relationship against a potential future downturn. To ensure the president feels welcome, and to reinforce the personal component, Netanyahu will follow the working meeting with an intimate dinner with the Trumps. Traditionally, Netanyahu has used such dinners to build rapport with American leaders and to impart Israel's narrative about the region.

Third, Netanyahu wants to demonstrate that recent bilateral tensions should be blamed on former president Obama, not on him. If the Israeli prime minister cannot develop a strong relationship with a Republican -- the U.S. party he is widely believed to favor -- then the Israeli public could perceive Netanyahu as the culprit. Nor can his domestic timing be ignored. Netanyahu is under criminal investigation for graft, and he is set on showing his public not only that Israel's government is functioning but that he is an indispensable figure who is close to the U.S. president.

All this explains Israeli efforts to play down the various incidents that have emerged over the past week and could have marred the visit if magnified by Israeli officials. This begins with the firestorm over the Oval Office meeting between Trump and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, during which the president is alleged to have shared sensitive Israeli intelligence about the Islamic State, and on which Israel has not uttered a negative word. Whatever the details of this case, Israel has no substitute for the United States when it comes to close intelligence ties.

Relatedly, Israel has quietly been trying to encourage tighter links between Washington and Moscow on Syria, in the hope that a U.S.-Russia alliance can drive a wedge between the Kremlin and Iran, thus marginalizing Tehran.

Israel is also downplaying the question of whether an Israeli will accompany Trump to the Western Wall, with the inevitable related tensions explaining why past U.S. presidents have not visited the wall. Indeed, the United States has opposed the presence of an Israeli escort as implying American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem, at odds with longstanding U.S. policy. Across administrations from both parties, the U.S. position holds that the legal status of East Jerusalem must be resolved in negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel, for its part, has passed a law annexing East Jerusalem and considers the entire city to be under its sovereignty, while at the same time agreeing to negotiate its status with the Palestinians.

Finally, U.S. officials have made clear to reporters just before this trip that Trump will not be announcing the U.S. embassy's relocation from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite his campaign pledge to do so. As a result, Trump will need on June 1 to sign the same national security waiver as his predecessors have done every six months since 1995. In a public speech -- first scheduled for Masada, where Jews chose mass suicide over surrender to ancient Rome, and now to be held at the Israel Museum -- Trump may indicate his intention to effect the move during his current term, while clarifying that it will not happen this time. Netanyahu is evincing no disappointment over this shift, even though Trump's visit comes on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 war, as marked on the Hebrew calendar, during which Israel "reunified" Jerusalem.

## **Progress on Peace?**

**T**ump has indicated that he wants to make "the ultimate deal" for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. One might detect hope for such an outcome in the apparently successful Washington meeting he had earlier this month with PA president Mahmoud Abbas. Although the two will meet again on May 23 in Bethlehem, no plans have been made for a three-way summit to include Netanyahu. Abbas has said, however, that he is willing to drop his longstanding preconditions for such a meeting under Trump's auspices, possibly enabling the first Netanyahu-Abbas encounter in seven years, even if not immediately. Anticipating the Trump visit, Netanyahu authorized his finance minister, Moshe Kahlon, to meet with his PA counterpart, Shukri Bishara, to discuss economic incentives for Palestinians, such as keeping the Allenby Bridge open twenty-four hours a day, further opening industrial zones near

Jenin and Tarqumiyah, and providing for more efficient transfer of taxes collected on Palestinian exports back to the PA.

## Measuring Success

To be sure, Trump and Netanyahu will be able to declare an achievement based on overcoming the bilateral policy tensions that prevailed during the Obama years. Beyond this, Trump may seek to use the visit to announce the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks, but the substantive basis and direction for those renewed negotiations are far from clear. Having moved beyond his first hundred days, Trump will -- sometime soon -- no longer benefit from low expectations regarding foreign policy matters, including peace talks. The bar will rise and, in turn, details and clear steps forward will be necessary.

Most tantalizingly, the question remains whether Trump will bring from the Gulf a commitment to closer overt ties with Israel -- rather than the current under-the-table liaisons on counterterrorism -- in exchange for positive steps from Israel toward the Palestinians. A *Wall Street Journal* report suggests that the Gulf states would agree to establish telecommunication links, civil aviation overflights, and visas for business travelers if Israel agreed to halt settlement activity outside the security barrier. Although such hopes are likely premature for this inaugural trip, U.S. officials may decide to pursue related opportunities once the talks are over. On settlements, in deference to Trump, Netanyahu has been content to speak of a less precisely defined overall slowdown, having not, for example, relocated settlers evicted by courts from the Amona outpost. But he has averted a hard commitment to a freeze outside the West Bank blocs and the security barrier (territory comprising 92 percent of the West Bank) for fear such a move would spark a crisis with right-wing allies in his domestic coalition.

On Gaza, which was badly damaged as a result of its summer 2014 war with Israel, U.S. officials have met with their Gulf counterparts in advance of the presidential visit to determine prospects for increased electricity and economic infrastructure assistance. Such assistance is in the Israeli interest, given that an unstable Gaza could lead to future military conflicts.

And on a separate subject, Israeli officials will be eager to hear whether Trump has wrested increased Saudi commitments in countering Iran and fighting the Islamic State. They will certainly press the president on these matters.

## Conclusion

In President Trump's first visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories, the United States holds considerable leverage. Thus far, both sides want to avoid the appearance of saying "no" to the new U.S. leader. Assuming this stance holds, the remaining questions will involve how Washington can use the visit as a springboard to devise more concrete, effective policies to meet its priorities: facilitating gains between the Israelis and Palestinians, and countering Iran, the Islamic State, and other forces of extremism.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. His publications include the Transition 2017 paper "[Toward a New Paradigm for Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>) (coauthored with Dennis Ross). ❖*

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