

What Will Netanyahu Discuss with Trump?

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 following is based on remarks delivered by Ziegler Distinguished Fellow David Makovsky [at a Washington Institute Policy Forum \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-netanyahu-meeting-a-rest-for-u.s.-israel-relations\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trump-netanyahu-meeting-a-rest-for-u.s.-israel-relations) on February 8. His views on these issues are spelled out in greater length in 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. [Read Robert Satloff's remarks \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-netanyahu-meeting-in-the-context-of-emerging-u.s.-middle-east-pol\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-netanyahu-meeting-in-the-context-of-emerging-u.s.-middle-east-pol) from the same event.

On February 15, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu will hold his first working meeting with President Donald Trump. The administration just took office and is not fully staffed up, so it has yet to announce its full array of Middle East policies. Yet the early timing of the visit is undoubtedly important for both leaders.

Although the Obama administration had a very close defense relationship with Israel, the bruising tension between the president and Netanyahu on core policy issues left its mark. Trump campaigned on setting a different tone with Israel, insisting he would rejuvenate the bilateral relationship in both substance and attitude. An early meeting without any expectation of major announcements is an opportunity to demonstrate a new, friendlier mood and establish a solid rapport.

For his part, Netanyahu sees the visit as a symbolic opportunity to show the world that he is a much-desired visitor in the new Washington. He is the fourth world leader invited to meet with Trump, coming just on the heels of visits by the leaders of bedrock U.S. allies Britain, Japan, and Canada. (The Jordanian king's recent meeting was conducted on the fly as part of a previously scheduled visit to Washington.) Netanyahu likely hopes to get a better grasp of President Trump's thinking and, more important, influence Washington's calculus on critical issues precisely at a time when policies are still in flux.

WHAT ISSUES WILL NETANYAHU BRING TO WASHINGTON?

The prime minister will probably focus on are four issues during his White House visit:

1. Enforce the Iran nuclear deal rather than scrapping it. Judging by the recent confirmation hearings for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis, the Trump administration seems to believe that the deal should be scrupulously enforced rather than scrapped. This fits with the apparent view of Israeli national security officials. Both governments see the advantages of delaying Iran's nuclear program for ten to fifteen years. Yet Netanyahu is no doubt keen on understanding what steps Trump plans to take now in preparation for challenges in the longer term, when the agreement's key provisions expire and Iran becomes a threshold nuclear state.

2. Use a deal with Russia to marginalize Iran in Syria. Netanyahu likely assumes that Trump wants to cut a deal with Moscow on fighting the Islamic State in Syria. This prospect does not worry Israeli officials, who seem to believe that Washington will need to come up with an enticing package to ensure a cooperative relationship with the Russians. In Israel's view, the ideal package would drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran in Syria, where the two outside players do not share identical interests despite Russia's continued military assistance to the Iranians. In particular, Tehran is more wedded to keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, so that could be a breaking point with Moscow.

Alternatively, Netanyahu may push for a subtler compromise that limits Iran and Hezbollah's movements in southern Syria, particularly along the Golan Heights. Israel would also want other standard concerns to be enforced, such as preventing the transfer of advanced weaponry from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon and closing down Syrian military-industrial production financed by Iran.

3. Bring Israeli-Sunni cooperation out from under the table. A common set of threats has created strategic convergences between Israel and its pragmatic Sunni neighbors in Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states. All of these governments are worried about Iranian regional influence, radical jihadist threats, or both. As a result, Israeli-Arab security cooperation has steadily increased in recent years, though much of this activity is still conducted under the table.

Netanyahu wants to make this cooperation more overt and will likely seek Trump's assistance in this regard. One of his arguments for doing so is that it would foster a regional approach to the peace process, giving the Palestinians political cover to make concessions that they could not make in a bilateral context. Yet Arabs remain suspicious about Israel's actual willingness to make concessions to the Palestinians. They may also believe that as long as they are receiving security benefits from covert cooperation with Israel, they have no reason to make this activity public and risk paying a price with their own peoples.

To address these perceptions, Netanyahu may try to gain points with Sunni leaders during his Washington visit, perhaps by quietly advocating issues they care about (e.g., increasing economic aid to Egypt). In doing so, he would likely argue that U.S. support for the stability and security of Sunni states is the best way to curb Iran's hegemonic aspirations.

4. Play for a solid single with the Palestinians instead of a home run, at least for now. The Israeli-Palestinian issue has lost the salience it had at the start of previous U.S. administrations, in large part because Arab states are so distracted with their own regional crises. Even so, President Trump has insisted that he wants to reach a grand deal between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet current leadership constraints suggest that the chances of hitting a home run on this issue are bleak -- an all-or-nothing approach guarantees nothing and may even be counterproductive. Moreover, Netanyahu will likely try to convince Trump that the Obama administration's tougher approach toward Israel on peace issues forced the Palestinians into a more uncompromising stance, since they did not want to be outflanked by the United States.

Yet the current impasse has its risks as well. The situation could easily drift toward greater radicalization and

violence, or spur a new Palestinian campaign for a "one person, one vote" solution in Israel and the West Bank -- an arrangement that Israel can never accept.

Since a final two-state outcome cannot yet be implemented, and since ongoing stagnation threatens to produce nonstarter one-state outcomes, the best hope is to maintain the viability of the two-state approach through more limited initiatives. Any such strategy would need to balance complex politics on both sides of the ledger. On the Palestinian side, President Mahmoud Abbas is eighty-one years old and has no identifiable successor, so his people are on the cusp of murky succession politics. And in Israel, Netanyahu is one of the only members of his governing coalition to publicly favor a two-state solution. In fact, his coalition just passed a law that would enable Israeli settlers in the West Bank to force Palestinians to yield their land in certain instances for unwanted compensation. Netanyahu's attorney-general has said he would not defend the law in the courts and expects it to be overturned, yet its passage speaks volumes about the pressures that are pushing the government toward a more rightward trajectory.

Recently, after King Abdullah of Jordan met with Trump, Netanyahu's right-wing rivals were caught off guard by a White House statement suggesting that new Israeli settlements do not contribute to peace. This may have pleased Netanyahu, who quietly favors a more differentiated policy on settlements in order to avoid expanded construction in areas that could change the current Israel/West Bank situation into a de facto one-state reality. The Obama administration's policy of opposing all new settlement construction provided an anchor of sorts for Netanyahu, enabling him to keep his right-wing rivals in check. If Trump abandoned that opposition entirely, Netanyahu would come under more pressure to expand the settlements.

One mechanism that could help Netanyahu in this regard is the 2004 letter that President George W. Bush sent to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the context of Israel's planned pullout from Gaza. At its core, the letter differentiated between settlements, acknowledging that a large majority of settlers live in large blocs located mainly inside the West Bank security barrier, while a large majority of Palestinians live outside these areas.

Trump may want his own letter, but the Bush letter could be an important baseline. Going forward, Washington and Israel could agree on a similarly differentiated approach to settlements in order to begin shaping the demographic and geographic contours of a two-state solution. This would require Israel to restrict construction to select areas inside the security barrier that comprise some 8 percent of the West Bank, while making a very clear commitment not to build outside the barrier. It would also require coordination with the United States, much like when Sharon quietly sought the Bush administration's tacit endorsement in shaping the barrier's route before bringing it to his cabinet for approval.

Washington could also encourage Israel to allow more Palestinian governance and economic projects in defined segments of Area C, a sparsely populated zone that comprises 60 percent of the West Bank but remains under full Israeli control. Such concessions would require serious American diplomatic cover. In return, the Palestinians would need to stop funding "martyrs foundations" that provide stipends to relatives of those who kill Israelis or foreigners, instead encouraging the formation of more grassroots peace groups in the West Bank.

Finally, the two leaders are certain to discuss the idea of relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv. If asked, Netanyahu will likely assert that moving the embassy to West Jerusalem is not tantamount to prejudging the status of East Jerusalem, which Israel has committed to negotiating with the Palestinians. In recent interviews, Trump has indicated that the United States will not discuss this issue publicly at this time.

To be sure, neither leader is likely to put forward any concrete agreements on such issues during this initial meeting. Rather, their wide-ranging discussion of key topics will probably be foundational, setting the basis for which decisions will need to be made in the months ahead. ❖

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