

Netanyahu Comes to Washington: A Recalibration, if Not a Reset

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Brief Analysis

The Israeli prime minister and U.S. president appear to be taking steps to ensure next week's visit avoids past minefields.

On November 9, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu will visit the White House following a year of acrimony stemming from sharp differences over the Iran nuclear deal. As the administration heads into its final year, a full reset for the bilateral relationship is unlikely. All the same, both sides could take various steps aimed at stabilizing, or recalibrating, ties in a manner that avoids future collisions. And preliminary indications suggest both sides want to repair ties. Allowing for possible surprises, the upcoming visit will be guided by the following issues.

Iran Deal Aftermath: The Direction of U.S.-Israel Ties

Unlike during his March U.S. visit, Netanyahu is no longer seeking to persuade lawmakers to overturn the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known. Last week, during his own U.S. visit, Israeli defense minister Moshe Yaalon publicly affirmed that Israel understands the deal will be carried out. Also, whereas this summer the prime minister refused to discuss a security upgrade with the United States, believing this would compromise Israel's principled opposition to the deal, now Netanyahu is willing to talk. As for the U.S. angle, in the run-up to Congress's JCPOA vote, Obama sought to woo lawmakers by publicly pledging that the security upgrade talks would follow rapidly and smoothly.

Two sets of issues, resources and capabilities, will likely be covered during the visit. On resources, one focus will be on the ten-year extension of the 2007 memorandum of understanding (MOU), a document that covers U.S. foreign aid to Israel. A key question will be whether the United States agrees to provide the specific top-line figure, and how it compares to the current MOU level -- approximately \$3 billion a year in military assistance, or a total of about \$30

billion over the ten-year period. Notably, Netanyahu seems to have wanted to have this discussion with Obama himself, rather than letting Yaalon handle it during his visit.

As for capabilities, media reports suggest that, in preparing for the prime minister's visit, Yaalon asked his counterpart, U.S. secretary of defense Ashton Carter, for military hardware such as a squadron of F-15 jets and V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor planes. For his part, Obama, writing publicly to key members of Congress, highlighted the extent of U.S. military assistance to Israel, noting that Israel will be the first country to receive the F-35 fifth-generation fighter next year and elaborating on different forms of assistance for Israeli missile defense.

On the symbolic level, it should be noted that Maj. Gen. Joseph Dunford, the newly installed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently made his first trip abroad to Israel.

In these days leading up to the visit, however, neither Netanyahu nor Yaalon has focused publicly on either resources or capabilities. This may be because politics is about managing expectations, or it may be deeper reasons. Such reasons may be embedded in the possibility that no public announcement on a top-line MOU figure and hardware list will be made absent a larger U.S.-Israel understanding on two regional hotspots -- Iran and Syria. Here, questions abound. While Israel and the United States diverge sharply over the Iran deal, individual perceptions vary on the extent to which the JCPOA signals closer U.S.-Iran regional ties. Indeed, a U.S.-Iran condominium in the Middle East feels quite far-fetched, but even the prospect of closer bilateral relations unnerves Israel and the Gulf states. Nevertheless, understanding the broader context and why U.S.-Iran enmity toward ISIS cannot undergird a common regional approach is critical.

On the Iran deal specifically, Israel clearly favors the creation of a joint U.S.-Israel panel to monitor implementation. Trust is an issue here, with the U.S. administration possibly calculating that such close consultation could enable Israel to poke at and ultimately unravel the deal. Alternatively, a panel -- which would assess penalties for violations and evaluate whether the deal's terms are being upheld -- could help build bilateral trust. Likely less sensitive will be consultations about the impact of Iranian cash injections to proxies such as Hezbollah. With regard to Iran's objectionable nonnuclear activities such as terrorism, Netanyahu will probably want to know the extent of U.S. commitment -- at least in general terms -- to imposing additional sanctions.

On the Syrian conflict, a clear U.S. strategy would include a space for U.S.-Israel issues. But absent such a strategy, it is unclear if Netanyahu will feel compelled to consult more closely with the new regional arrival, Moscow, on the war's implications. Somewhat ironically, both Obama and Netanyahu are minimalists when it comes to Syria, each for his own reasons. Their shared desire to avoid getting embroiled could perhaps give them common cause. But without clear communication, Israel will probably assume the worst and view unfavorably the U.S. consultations in Vienna with countries including Iran, given that the war is at Israel's doorstep.

In short, the visit should be judged less by the announcement of a top-line MOU figure than by constructive, good-faith progress toward a U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue that addresses the region's highly fluid developments. The MOU's scope should therefore reflect new challenges relating to Iran, Syria, and Russia.

Easing the Road to Washington

In two notable areas, Netanyahu has acted to ensure the Washington trip goes smoothly. The first involves demonstrating progress toward finalizing a multibillion-dollar offshore gas deal involving the Leviathan field -- eighty miles off Haifa's coast -- with the American firm Noble Energy. The deal has been stalled for close to a year and has become an added irritant in the U.S.-Israel relationship, given a battle within Israel as to whether the Noble deal violates Israeli antitrust laws. To facilitate the deal, Netanyahu has brokered the resignation of Aryeh Deri -- who leads the ultraorthodox Shas Party -- as economy minister, with Netanyahu himself to fill the position and Deri to move to another portfolio. Deri had been reluctant to override the antitrust authority, believing Noble should not

be exempt from the monopoly tag. For his part, Netanyahu has sought a compromise for profit sharing, fearing the implications of not finalizing the deal with Noble, which has threatened international legal arbitration over the persistent delay. Broader delay-related concerns have centered on a potential negative impact for future foreign investment as well as Israel's putative gas arrangements with Jordan and Egypt. As Deri's replacement, Netanyahu will now authorize the deal.

On the Palestinian issue, while fierce debate has surrounded the extent of settlement activity during Netanyahu's 2009-2015 terms, the prime minister seems recently to be avoiding major West Bank settlement drives, despite heading a hawkish coalition. Unclear is whether this restraint is tactical and temporary, or linked to a desire for improved ties with Washington or an effort to lure the Labor Party into his government and thereby broaden its configuration. The Obama administration has itself refrained from contentious moves, opposing a potential divisive UN Security Council resolution favored by France that would impose a final deal on Israelis and Palestinians. It also did not press for a UN Security Council vote on settlements. Instead, with the help of the other Quartet states (the European Union and Russia), it has spearheaded an effort that would broaden Palestinian civilian (nonsecurity) authority and access in at least part of the West Bank under Israel's full authority (Area C), an effort more modest than past U.S. peace initiatives.

2016 and Bipartisanship

Neither Obama nor Netanyahu seems to want another stormy encounter. From Obama's perspective, a harmonious visit could help make the case for a Democrat to succeed him and correspondingly preserve his foreign and domestic policy legacy. He emerged victorious from the JCPOA battle with domestic critics, but this does not mean he seeks more fights. Netanyahu, meanwhile, may have absorbed the message that his March speech to Congress, not coordinated with the White House, risked toppling bipartisan support for strong U.S.-Israel relations, a pillar for decades. Therefore, after agreeing to accept an award from the neoconservative-linked American Enterprise Institute during his visit, Netanyahu is giving a speech to the liberal Center for American Progress.

Such steps hardly ensure that the visit will come off as planned, but both leaders appear committed to avoiding minefields that have sabotaged past meetings.

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