

Netanyahu's White House visit

written by Lahav Harkov | 04.02.2025

When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday, the leaders are expected to address a long list of interconnected issues with fateful repercussions for Israel's national security.

With the war in Gaza at a turning point, continued talks about normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and Iran's nuclear program advancing further than ever before, Netanyahu has a key opportunity to strengthen Israel's position in the region. Netanyahu will be the first foreign leader invited to the White House in Trump's second term, and he will have the chance to try to align Israel and the U.S. positions on these critical issues.

Here are some of the top issues on the agenda:

Gaza ceasefire: Israel and Hamas entered a ceasefire agreement that was virtually identical to the one Israel had agreed to over six months before. While Hamas was not willing to consider the deal at all until shortly before Trump re-entered office, it came as somewhat of a disappointment on Israel's end that the deal could not be significantly improved following Trump's involvement.

The ceasefire went into effect on January 19, 2025, with Israeli hostages freed in exchange for Palestinian terrorists released from prison, along with a gradual withdrawal of the IDF from much of the Gaza Strip. While the hostages' release has been broadly celebrated in Israel, the deal is also viewed as a kind of devil's bargain by Israelis, who are well aware that Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind behind the Oct. 7 attacks, was released in such an exchange in 2011. Every terrorist released is a danger to Israelis.

In addition, Israel has had primarily negative experiences with outsourcing its security to others. It remains unclear whether the private contractors charged with inspecting Gazan pedestrians and vehicles returning to northern Gaza will be successful in ensuring that weapons and terrorists do not cross from southern Gaza northward, to areas that closely abut Israeli cities and kibbutzim.

Monday, February 3, marked day 16 of the deal, the day on which negotiations are meant to resume over the second stage of the deal, in which Israel would

move towards fully withdrawing from Gaza and the hostage-for-terrorist exchanges would continue.

Netanyahu's meeting with Trump is an opportunity to try to shape the next stages of the deal in a way which mitigates the risks to Israel, and allow Israel's advancement towards "total victory," as the prime minister has put it — eradicating Hamas as the dominant military and governing force in Gaza. Turning the second stage of the deal into an extension of stage one would be advantageous to Israel. Full military withdrawal from Gaza would allow Hamas to smuggle in weapons and terrorists in order to regroup militarily. Ending the war in a situation in which there is no governing alternative to Hamas being set up in Gaza, while the terrorist group continues to pocket humanitarian aid and uses it to enrich itself, is a recipe for only a very partial victory.

Relocation and reconstruction: One of Trump's favorite topics in recent weeks has been deportation and relocation — not only of illegal immigrants from America, but also the voluntary move of Gazans to other countries. Israeli officials suggested as much early in the war, but were rejected by leaders in the region, as well as by the Biden administration. Trump however has touted the idea of moving Gazans elsewhere, noting that large swaths of Gaza have been destroyed, and that having hundreds of thousands, perhaps over a million people living in rubble will make reconstruction difficult.

There is some concern in certain parts of the Israeli government about Trump's suggestion that Jordan and Egypt take in Gazan refugees. While there is a great deal of logic to that suggestion, certainly geographically and to some extent because of Egypt's responsibility due to its failure to curb Hamas smuggling, there is some concern in Jerusalem about the potential destabilization of its neighbors, leading to the suggestion that more distant Muslim-majority countries be considered as potential destinations as well.

Of even greater concern for Israel is who will fund and administer reconstruction in Gaza. While U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff may believe that Qatar is doing "God's work" as a mediator in the hostage talks, Israel knows better. Israel understands that Qatar is really doing the work of jihadists, and trying to keep Hamas in power in Gaza. Netanyahu must relay to Trump that a Qatar-backed reconstruction or "day after" plan is unacceptable.

Broadening the circle of peace: Officials in the Trump administration and the Israeli government have talked about how normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as other Arab and Muslim countries, is still possible. Riyadh's public statements have been accusatory towards Israel and insistent on tangible progress toward a Palestinian state in order to advance towards diplomatic relations. After suffering the worst attack on Jewish people since the Holocaust, which the Palestinian Authority has barely condemned, Israel is not inclined to make major concessions to the Palestinians, even while seeking ties with the Saudis.

The job of the U.S. is to find the middle ground, something Israel can do that will not endanger its national security or sovereignty, and that will be satisfactory for Saudi Arabia and allow its leadership to say that it helped the Palestinians. Trump has not given indications on where he stands on this question since entering office, but his enthusiasm for deal-making does not seem to have waned. With the Abraham Accords being one of the most positively-received policies of his first term, he's likely to push for their expansion.

Iran: The issue underpinning all others is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The mullahs' regime sponsored and trained Hamas before the Oct. 7 attack. Iran's proxies Hezbollah and the Houthis continued to attack Israel throughout the past year and three months. Iran directly attacked Israel multiple times. And Tehran continues to advance its nuclear program beyond the point that has a plausible civilian justification.

Israel took out much of Iran's air defenses in October 2024, leading many to think that a further attack, perhaps on oil production sites or nuclear facilities, was on the way. Neither happened in the short term, which sparked speculation that Israel was waiting for the Trump administration.

Now, Trump is using the possibility of an Israeli strike as a threat to Iran to try to bring the mullahs to the negotiating table and reach a new nuclear deal. Unlike the Obama administration, Trump is saying this openly. Hopefully, he will welcome Netanyahu's input on the matter, such that the deal will be worthwhile and not one that leaves a window for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon in a short time, as the last JCPOA deal did. A worthwhile deal would also curb Iran's ballistic missile program and its sponsorship of terrorist proxies around the world.

This week's meeting is a chance for Netanyahu and Trump to align their positions on the Iranian threat in order to better work together to weaken the Islamic Republic and eliminate its nuclear weapons program before it is too late. Israel and the US should keep military action against Iran on the table in case negotiations fail.

Isolationists: Netanyahu is arriving in Washington as the second Trump administration is still coming together. While some of the most prominent names — Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, National Security Advisor Mike Waltz — are strongly pro-Israel figures, there are other, lower-level administration figures who hold views that are of concern to Israel. Among those are people who think that the U.S. should fully disengage from the Middle East, and those who believe that while Iran may pose a significant threat to Israel, it does not pose a significant threat to America. Netanyahu can effectively explain the folly of such views to Trump, as well as to other administration figures he is set to meet this week.

Conclusion:

President Trump has made it clear that he wants Hamas defeated, Iran's nuclear program eradicated and normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia to come to fruition. All of these issues are interconnected: The Saudis want to be able to point to some kind of achievement on the Palestinian front, which cannot happen when the war is still ongoing and Hamas retains some level of control in Gaza. Hamas is part of Iran's "Axis of Resistance," which also threatens Saudi Arabia, a country which took a friendlier approach to Israel in the past decade due to their shared enemy.

When Netanyahu is in Washington this week, it will be his job to connect these dots for Trump. President Trump would likely support a plan that would address all of the issues on the agenda. Netanyahu therefore has a historic opportunity to advance Israel's national security and move towards victory against the terrorists on Israel's borders and the Islamic Republic threatening it from afar — and to do it all in one package deal, with the support of the United States.