

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Rebuilding U.S.–Israel Ties at the Trump–Netanyahu Summit

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When President Donald Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on February 15, he will have an opportunity to rebuild bilateral ties with America’s foremost ally in the Middle East. The two leaders, meeting for the first time since Trump’s election, will exchange views on a number of common threats and how to cooperate to defeat those threats. Four topics on their agenda will be:

- Iran,
- The defeat of Islamist terrorist groups,
- The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and
- President Trump’s promise to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

### **A Reset for Bilateral U.S.–Israel Relations**

The February 15 meeting will help to repair the damage inflicted by eight years of strained relations between the U.S. and Israel during the Obama Administration. Chronic disagreements and sniping over the Iran nuclear agreement, Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations, and Israeli settlements erod-

ed the special relationship between Washington and Jerusalem. Unlike the Obama Administration, which went out of its way to criticize and distance itself from Netanyahu, the Trump Administration should cooperate closely with the conservative Israeli leader.

### **A Focus on Iran**

Iran remains the chief long-term regional threat to the U.S. and Israel. While the Obama Administration turned a blind eye to many of Iran’s malign activities to avoid jeopardizing its flawed nuclear agreement with Tehran, the Trump Administration is committed to confronting and pushing back against Iran. On February 1, National Security Adviser Michael Flynn put Iran “on notice” for its defiant missile test and destabilizing regional activities.<sup>1</sup> The Administration subsequently applied sanctions on individuals and entities linked to Iran’s missile program and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>2</sup>

As a presidential candidate, Trump lambasted the nuclear agreement, but his Administration’s evolving strategy appears to be to tighten enforcement of the agreement and pressure Tehran either to renegotiate key provisions or to walk away from the deal. Netanyahu, who blasted the 2015 nuclear agreement as a “historic mistake,”<sup>3</sup> will want to be briefed on Trump’s strategy for dealing with the nuclear issue and responding to Iran’s continued support for terrorism, expanding ballistic missile program, and deepening military intervention in Syria.

Cooperation on missile defense should be an especially important agenda item. Iran’s medium-range missiles already can reach Israel with a 1,000-pound payload. On February 4, Mojtaba

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4655>

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Zonour, a member of Iran's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, helpfully reminded the world that "only seven minutes are needed for an Iranian missile to hit Tel Aviv" and that 36 U.S. military bases in the Middle East are within range of Iranian missiles.<sup>4</sup> Israel is now deploying the Arrow-3 interceptor, developed jointly with the United States, and the two leaders should agree to support cooperation in further enhancing missile defenses.

### The War in Syria

Both the U.S. and Israel seek the rapid destruction of ISIS in Syria, but Israel is concerned that President Trump's intention to cooperate with Russia in Syria could strengthen the influence of Iran and Hezbollah there. Netanyahu will want to gain an understanding of U.S. plans for Syria, efforts to split Russia from Iran, and the implications for Israeli security. At a minimum, Jerusalem wants to prevent Iran and Hezbollah from establishing a military presence near the Israeli-Syrian border.

### The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In contrast to the Obama Administration—which allowed the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2234 condemning Israel and added insult to injury with a blistering anti-Israel speech from Secretary of State John Kerry—the Trump Administration will be much more supportive of Israel at the U.N. and elsewhere. Trump should publicly underscore that the U.S. will veto any one-sided U.N. Security Council resolutions and assert that only direct

bilateral negotiations, not the U.N., can produce a peace agreement.

President Trump should also stress that Palestinian terrorist attacks, not Israeli settlements, are the chief obstacles to peace. Although the Administration has not taken an official position on settlements, it did release a statement saying that new settlements "may not be helpful" in achieving a peace agreement.<sup>5</sup> A senior Administration official later told *The Jerusalem Post* that new settlements could undermine Trump's plans to engineer a final status agreement.<sup>6</sup>

Trump has described an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement as "the ultimate deal,"<sup>7</sup> but the situation is not ripe for such a deal. The Palestinian Authority is unwilling to make the necessary concessions and too weak to enforce any agreement in the face of Hamas's implacable opposition to Israel.

### Possible U.S. Embassy Move to Jerusalem

President Trump's commitment to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would correct a historic anomaly: The United States has never recognized any part of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. However, moving the embassy could ignite protests, riots, and anti-American backlashes among Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims.

### A Great Opportunity

The upcoming meeting offers a great opportunity for the U.S. to improve relations with Israel after eight years of the Obama Administration. In order to take full advantage of this meeting, the White House should:

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1. Mark Landler and Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Is Threatened with U.S. Reprisals over Missile Test," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/world/middleeast/iran-missile-test.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/world/middleeast/iran-missile-test.html?_r=0) (accessed February 10, 2017).
  2. "U.S. Imposes New Sanctions Against Iran," *Financial Tribune*, February 4, 2017, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/58802/us-imposes-new-sanctions-against-iran> (accessed February 10, 2017).
  3. William Booth and Ruth Eglash, "Israeli Leaders Condemn Iran Deal, 'One of the Darkest Days in World History,'" *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-blasts-iran-deal-as-dark-day-in-history/2015/07/14/feba23ae-0018-403f-82f3-3cd54e87a23b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.8802e2e42983](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-blasts-iran-deal-as-dark-day-in-history/2015/07/14/feba23ae-0018-403f-82f3-3cd54e87a23b_story.html?utm_term=.8802e2e42983) (accessed February 10, 2017).
  4. "Iranian MP Threatens Reprisals at US Bases," *Middle East Monitor*, February 5, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170205-iranian-mp-threatens-reprisals-at-us-bases/> (accessed February 10, 2017).
  5. Louise Radnofsky, "Israeli Settlements 'May Not Be Helpful' for Middle East Peace, Trump Administration Says," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-settlements-may-not-be-helpful-for-middle-east-peace-trump-administration-says-1486088589> (accessed February 10, 2017).
  6. Michael Wilner, "Trump Warns Israel: Stop Announcing New Settlements," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Trump-warns-Israel-Stop-announcing-new-settlements-480446> (accessed February 10, 2017).
  7. Elliott Abrams and Uri Sadot, "President Trump and the Art of the 'Ultimate' Israel-Palestine Peace Deal," *Foreign Policy*, December 4, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/04/president-trump-and-the-art-of-the-ultimate-israel-palestine-peace-deal/> (accessed February 10, 2017).
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- **Build a common front against Iran's aggression.** President Trump should discuss plans to hold Iran accountable for its hostile regional policies and roll back its influence, outlining the Administration's strategy for ratcheting up sanctions on Iran and particularly on the IRGC, which controls Iran's ballistic missile program and efforts to export terrorism. President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu should also coordinate on interdicting the flow of Iranian arms to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist groups.
- **Strengthen counterterrorism cooperation.** Islamist terrorist groups pose a significant threat to the U.S. and Israel. Both countries can benefit from better coordination. Trump and Netanyahu should coordinate policies on fighting ISIS in Syria and explore ways to reduce the ISIS threat to Jordan and Egypt. Jordan needs intelligence and counterterrorism help in uncovering terrorist plots and economic support to lighten the burden of more than 600,000 Syrian refugees. Egypt has sustained heavy losses fighting ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula, and the group claimed responsibility on February 9 for a cross-border rocket attack on the Israeli city of Eilat. Cairo needs quiet help in defeating the ISIS insurgency, which has received extensive aid from Hamas and other Islamist extremist groups in Gaza.
- **Do not legitimize Russia's or Iran's role in Syria.** Israel has legitimate concerns about the increasing role that Iran and Hezbollah are playing in Syria. Trump needs to ensure that U.S. policies in regard to Syria will not inadvertently harm Israel's security.
- **Coordinate policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.** The Administration should focus on managing rather than resolving the conflict, which is impossible for the immediate future. Trump should consult with Netanyahu about how to restore calm, undermine Hamas and other Islamist extremist groups, and create a more stable environment for future step-by-step negotiations. Refraining from establishing new settlements would be helpful in this context.
- **Ensure that certain standards are met before moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.** To mitigate the risks of the move, Trump should consult with Netanyahu on the timing; pick a site in West Jerusalem, which has been controlled by Israel since 1948; and explain that the move does not change other aspects of U.S. policy. The U.S. should make it clear that the borders and final status of Jerusalem should be determined through negotiations; that the embassy move would not preclude a Palestinian state; that the U.S. consulate-general in Jerusalem would continue to function as the U.S. representative to the Palestinian Authority; and that no changes would be made in the status of Muslim holy sites, which would continue to be administered by Jordan.

### The Bottom Line

Israel is America's foremost ally in the Middle East. Both countries are democracies, value free-market economies, and uphold human rights at a time when many other countries in the Middle East reject those values. The Trump-Netanyahu summit is a promising opportunity to reassert American leadership in the Middle East and strengthen U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation on foreign policy, defense, and counterterrorism issues.

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