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Beneath the Surface: Is the Trump-Netanyahu 'Unthinkable' About to Erupt?



Image by Ronit Shaked.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Washington was no ordinary trip. The consensus among Israeli analysts, barring a few remaining loyalists, is that Netanyahu was not invited but, rather, summoned by US President Donald Trump.

All evidence supports this assertion. Netanyahu rarely travels to the US without extensive Israeli media fanfare, leveraging his touted relationships with various US administrations as a "hasbara" opportunity to reinforce his image as Israel's strongman.

This time, there was no room for such campaigns. Netanyahu was informed of Trump's summons while on an official trip to Hungary. There, he was received by Hungarian President Viktor Orbán with exaggerated diplomatic accolades, signaling defiance against international condemnation of Netanyahu, an accused war criminal wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), and portraying him as anything but an isolated leader of an increasingly pariah state.

The capstone of Netanyahu's short-lived Hungarian victory lap was Orbán's announcement of Hungary's withdrawal from the ICC, a move with profoundly unsettling implications.

It would have been convenient for Netanyahu to use his Washington visit to deflect from his failed war in Gaza and internal strife in Israel. However, as the Arabic saying goes, "the wind often blows contrary to the ship's desires."

The notion that Netanyahu was summoned, not invited, is corroborated by Israeli media reports that he attempted to postpone the visit under various pretexts. He failed, ultimately flying to Washington on the date determined by the White House. Initially, reports circulated that no press conference would be held, denying Netanyahu the platform to tout Washington's unwavering support for his military actions and to expound on the "special relationship" between the two countries.

A press conference was held, though it was largely dominated by Trump's contradictory messages and typical rhetoric. Netanyahu spoke briefly, attempting to project the same confident body language observed during his previous Washington visit, where he sat with an erect posture and spread out his legs, as if in command. But this time, his body language betrayed him; his eyes shifted nervously, and he appeared stiff and surprised, particularly when Trump announced that the US and Iran would begin direct talks in Oman soon.

Trump also mentioned the need to end the war in Gaza, but the Iran announcement clearly shocked Netanyahu. He desperately tried to align his discourse with Trump's, referencing Libya's disarmament under Muammar Gaddafi. But that was never part of Israel's official regional plan. Israel had consistently advocated for US military intervention against Iran, despite the certainty that such a war would destabilize the entire region, potentially drawing the US into a conflict far more protracted and devastating than the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Further evidence of the US' diverging views from Israel's regional ambitions—centered on perpetual war, territorial expansion, and geopolitical dominance—lies in the fact that key political and intellectual figures within the Trump administration recognize the futility of such conflicts. In leaked exchanges on the encrypted messaging platform Signal, JD Vance protested that escalating the war in Yemen benefits Europe, not the US, a continent with which the US is increasingly decoupling, if not engaging in a trade war.

The Yemen war, like a potential conflict with Iran, is widely perceived as being waged on Israel's behalf. Figures like Tucker Carlson, a prominent commentator, articulated the growing frustration among right-wing intellectuals in the US, tweeting that "anyone advocating for conflict with Iran is not an ally of the United States, but an enemy."

Trump's willingness to openly challenge Netanyahu's policies remains unclear. His conflicting statements, such as calling for an end to the Gaza war while simultaneously advocating for the expulsion of Palestinians, add to the ambiguity. However, recent reports suggest a determined US intention to end the war in Gaza as part of a broader strategy, linking Gaza to Yemen, Lebanon, and Iran. This aligns with Washington's need to stabilize the region as it prepares for a new phase of competition with China, requiring comprehensive economic, political, and military readiness.

Should Trump prove capable of doing what others could not, will Netanyahu finally submit to American pressure?

In 2015, Netanyahu demonstrated Israel's unparalleled influence on US foreign and domestic policy when he addressed both chambers of Congress. Despite a few insignificant protests, Republican and Democratic policymakers applauded enthusiastically as Netanyahu criticized then-President Barack Obama, who did not attend and appeared isolated by his own political class.

However, if Netanyahu believes he can replicate that moment, he is mistaken. Those years are long gone. Trump, a populist leader, is not beholden to finding political balances in Congress. Now in his second and final term, he could, in theory, abandon the US's ingrained reliance on Israel's approval and its aggressive lobby in Washington.

Moreover, Netanyahu's political standing is diminished. He is perceived as a failed political leader and military strategist, unable to secure decisive victories or extract political concessions from his adversaries. He is a leader without a clear plan, grappling with a legitimacy crisis unlike any faced by his predecessors.

Ultimately, the outcome hinges on Trump's willingness to confront Netanyahu. If he does, and sustains the pressure, Netanyahu could find himself in an unenviable position, marking a rare instance in modern history where the US dictates its terms, and Israel listens. Time will tell.

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