

Netanyahu in London for talks with British prime minister

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew to London yesterday to meet with his British counterpart, Theresa May. He was officially there to demand support for renewed sanctions against Iran, after Tehran's test firing last week of a ballistic missile.

Netanyahu's visit comes after the US administration of Donald Trump last week placed Iran "on notice," warning Tehran that it was "playing with fire" and imposing sanctions on a number of Iranian individuals.

Trump is seeking to blow up the agreement reached under the auspices of his predecessor, Barack Obama, with Tehran in 2015 on its nuclear program. Under the deal with the P5+1 (the five UN Security Council permanent members—the US, UK, Russia, France, and China—plus Germany), Iran pledges to "redesign, convert, and reduce its nuclear facilities."

Britain still formally adheres to the deal it played a role in securing. After it was signed, in the face of bitter opposition from Israel and Saudi Arabia, the UK rushed to negotiate trade deals with Tehran, and reopened its embassy in the city and it is reluctant to freeze relations and reapply sanctions now.

But May, in her efforts to compensate for the possible loss of access to European markets following Brexit, has staked her own future and that of British imperialism on consolidating an alliance with the US that includes a trade deal and political support in the coming negotiations with Brussels. Indeed, she met with Netanyahu on the eve of the third reading of the bill paving the way for triggering Article 50 in March and beginning the two-year process for quitting the EU.

Like the strong-arm man for some mafia boss, Netanyahu is seeking to squeeze out every advantage of Trump's hostility to Iran and support for Israel, and May's utter dependency on the US. Speaking ahead of the talks, he said, "Iran seeks to annihilate Israel, it

seeks to conquer the Middle East, it threatens Europe, it threatens the West, it threatens the world. ... That's why I welcome President Trump's assistance of new sanctions against Iran. I think other nations should follow suit, certainly responsible nations."

Netanyahu is specifically seeking to enlist Britain's support in efforts to bypass the UN, which is charged with determining whether the test was in breach of the agreement. Such a decision would require a Security Council resolution, which the Russians could be expected to veto, to formally punish Iran or even to issue a statement paving the way for reimposing sanctions.

May's spokesperson, in contrast, said that the talks would focus on bilateral relations with Israel, including the potential for more trade post-Brexit. There was no press conference following the meeting, and Netanyahu then went for discussions with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

On Iran, Downing Street issued a cautious statement saying, "We share concerns about that test. It was discussed at the UN and we made clear our position. With regard to the specific agreement relating to the nuclear weapons ... it's important that it is very carefully and rigorously policed, but we should also be clear that it has neutralised the possibility of the Iranians acquiring nuclear weapons for more than a decade."

Netanyahu will, behind closed doors, also have sought UK reassurances that there will be no practical measures that cut across Israel's stepped-up programme of settlement construction in the occupied territories of east Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Officially, May's spokesperson declared, "Of course, I would expect the peace process to come up and in that context to reiterate our longstanding position to make

clear that we view the continued increase of settlement activity as undermining trust, but also a very clear position that we have taken of needing to pursue a twin track approach, recognising the right of Israel to live safe from terrorism.”

However, Netanyahu wants to make sure that it is Israel’s “rights” that are indeed paramount in this weasel-worded formulation. He is fully aware in doing so that Britain’s foreign policy on this question is determined primarily by the White House.

Last December, Obama instructed the US ambassador to the UN to break with normal US practice and abstain on a toothless UN Security Council resolution—actually drafted by Britain—criticising Israel’s settlement expansion as illegal and prejudicial to any peace deal with the Palestinians, allowing the resolution to pass.

Netanyahu went ballistic, called in the British ambassador to Israel for a dressing down on Christmas Day and ordered his cabinet ministers to boycott Britain.

With a Trump presidency approaching, Britain rapidly switched horses and criticised Secretary of State John Kerry’s follow-up speech reiterating all the nostrums about US support for the “two-state solution” and opposing Israeli intransigence, even though, as Obama pointed out, this was long-held British policy.

May refused to support the Paris conference of more than 70 countries, organised by the French government, but held five days after Trump’s inauguration. She only sent an observer. The conference criticised Israel over its settlement building and re-endorsed a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Britain also intervened to stop the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council adopting the Paris communiqué, after Trump told the *Sunday Times* that he expects Britain to oppose any future UN Security Council resolution criticizing Israel.

Emboldened by Trump’s pledge to be “the most pro-Israel president in history,” Netanyahu defied the UN resolution and gave the go-ahead for the construction of 3,500 new homes in settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The White House issued a statement that, while mildly criticising the decision, tacitly accepted their legality. It stated, “While we don’t believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of

existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal.”

It continued, “The Trump administration has not taken an official position on settlement activity and looks forward to continuing discussions, including with Prime Minister Netanyahu when he visits with President Trump later this month.”

Netanyahu knew, therefore, that any criticism made of settlement expansion during his visit to London would only be for show. May is in no position to oppose anything or anyone that has Trump’s backing. As Netanyahu said, “We are in a period of diplomatic opportunities and challenges,” adding, “The opportunities stem from the fact that there is a new administration in Washington, and a new government in Britain.”

It should be noted that Downing Street had already announced that Israel’s blatant interference in Britain’s political processes was not a problem and was not on the agenda. Shai Masot, an Israeli embassy staffer, was caught on video plotting to “take down” Deputy Foreign Secretary Alan Duncan and other senior Conservative politicians verbally opposed to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land, and to undermine Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party.

As far as the British government was concerned, it considered the matter closed after receiving a token apology from the embassy, rejecting calls from opposition parties for an investigation into the affair.

Later this week, Netanyahu goes to Australia, another US ally that was given a very public dressing down last week when Trump leaked the content of a phone call in which he berated Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull over a refugee swap deal brokered with the Obama administration, and then slammed the phone down on him after 25 minutes. After these visits, Netanyahu will meet Trump in Washington on February 15 to report back to his new political paymaster.



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