

Netanyahu-Trump Love Affair Begins with Anti-Palestinian Measures

February Meeting

By [The New Arab](#)

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The inauguration of a new chapter of what many experts fear is closer than ever US-Israeli relations on Sunday culminated with a phone conversation between the two men, during which they agreed a rendez-vous in February in Washington.

The conversation, described by Netanyahu in a statement as 'very warm', discussed "the nuclear deal with Iran (which Israel wants repealed), the peace process with the Palestinians and other issues". A date for the meeting would be set in the coming days, the statement said.

Israel's right-wing government sees Trump as the most pro-Israeli US president yet, one who has much fewer qualms about its aggressive settlement of the West Bank and Jerusalem, and one who has less interest in the two-state solution compared to his predecessors.

Israel is already wasting no time. Less than 24 hours after Trump's inauguration, it moved to [approve hundreds](#) of new settlements in occupied Palestinian territories.

However on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu delayed a vote on an explosive proposal to annex one of the West Bank's largest settlements, yet perhaps only to coordinate his policy toward the Palestinians with the new administration of President Donald Trump.

The move put on hold legislation that threatens to unleash fresh violence and damage already faded hopes for Palestinian independence. It also may mark Trump's first foray into Middle East diplomacy.

After eight years of frosty relations with President Barack Obama, Netanyahu has welcomed Trump's election as an opportunity to strengthen ties between two allied nations.

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Pro-settlement Trump

With Trump signaling a more tolerant approach toward the much-maligned settlement movement, Israel's nationalist right now believes it has an ally in the White House, and Israeli hard-line leaders make no secret they will push for aggressive action in the occupied West Bank.

✖ Education Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of the pro-settlement Jewish Home Party, has been pushing Netanyahu to abandon the internationally backed idea of a Palestinian state and to annex the Maaleh Adumim settlement near Jerusalem.

But after convening his Security Cabinet on Sunday, Netanyahu said his Cabinet ministers, including Bennett, had decided “unanimously” to delay action until he goes to Washington to meet with Trump. Netanyahu's office said the Cabinet would hold further discussions ahead of the meeting, which is expected in early February.

Earlier Sunday, Netanyahu thanked Trump for his friendship and his inaugural speech pledge to battle radical Islamic militants. Netanyahu had said they would discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation in Syria and the Iranian threat, among other issues.

Netanyahu, a longtime supporter of the settlements, has nonetheless been cautious about expanding them in the face of strong opposition from the international community. In a final showdown with Israel last month, the Obama administration allowed the UN Security Council to pass a resolution condemning settlements as illegal.

But Bennett and other hard-liners believe there is no longer any reason for restraint.

“For the first time in 50 years, the prime minister can decide: either sovereignty or Palestine,” Bennett wrote on Twitter.

There was no explanation for Sunday's delay. But earlier, an official in the Jewish Home Party said Netanyahu had been trying to delay the Cabinet vote at the request of the Trump administration, which did not want to be blind-sided by unilateral Israeli steps. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss internal coalition negotiations.

Annexing Maaleh Adumim, a sprawling settlement of nearly 40,000 people east of Jerusalem, could cause a major clash with the Palestinians and the rest of the international community.

The Palestinians seek all of the West Bank and east Jerusalem — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for a future state. The Palestinians and the international community consider all settlements illegal, and unilaterally making Maaleh Adumim part of Israel would deal a powerful blow to hopes for a two-state solution.

To the Palestinians, it would be seen as undermining negotiations. Maaleh Adumim is also strategically located in the middle of the West Bank, potentially hindering the establishment of their state.

“If they are serious about making it part of Israel and closing it down, then it is actually cutting the West Bank into two,” said Hagit Ofran of the anti-settlement group Peace Now.

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Embassy politics While Trump has not expressed an opinion on the annexation, he has signaled a kinder approach toward the settlement movement than any of his predecessors.

His designated ambassador to Israel has close ties to Jewish West Bank settlements, and a delegation of settler leaders attended Friday’s inauguration as guests of administration officials.

Trump also has already said he supports one of Israel’s key demands — moving the [US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem](#). The president ignored a question Sunday from reporters about plans to move the embassy.

But the White House said later on Sunday that it is in the early stages of talks to fulfill President Donald Trump’s pledge to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

“We are at the very beginning stages of even discussing this subject,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer said in a statement.

The US, like all other countries, maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv, saying the conflicting claims to Jerusalem must be worked out in negotiations.

Trump, however, faces heavy pressure from the Palestinians and Arab countries against moving the embassy. The fate of east Jerusalem, home to the city’s most sensitive religious sites, is deeply emotional, and disagreements have boiled over into violence in the past.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has sent a series of messages to Trump urging him not to move the embassy and warning that he would revoke recognition of Israel if the move takes place.

Abbas met Sunday with Jordan’s King Abdullah II in Amman. Jordan, which serves as the custodian of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, has warned that moving the embassy would cross a “red line.” Jordan is a key Israeli and Western ally in the battle against Islamic militants.

“We discussed the possibility of moving the embassy, and we say that if this thing happens, then we have measures that we agreed to implement together with Jordan,” Abbas said. “And we hope that the American administration will not do that.”

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