

# Netanyahu talks Syria, Iran with Trump ahead of Putin summit



*President Donald Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office of the White House, Monday, March 5, 2018, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that he spoke with President Donald Trump over the weekend about “security and diplomatic issues” pertaining chiefly to Syria and Iran, ahead of a hotly anticipated meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin where those issues are expected to feature prominently in talks.

Revealing a Saturday evening telephone conversation with Trump, Netanyahu said the two “discussed security and diplomatic issues in light of developments in the region, with Syria and Iran first and foremost, of course.”

“As you know, these issues will also come up at the presidents’ summit in Helsinki. Of course I discussed them with President Putin last Wednesday,”

Netanyahu added.

Netanyahu said that during the conversation he thanked Trump for his “strong policy against Iran” and said that Trump in turn “clearly reiterated his commitment to the security of Israel and his willingness to help the State of Israel in various fields.”

The phone call between the leaders comes amid a flurry of reports suggesting that Israel and the US are coordinating a strategy that would see the total removal of Iranian forces from Syria in exchange for Israel’s nonintervention in the stabilization of President Bashar Al-Assad’s rule and, even more significantly, a potential offer from Trump to drop sanctions and recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea.



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sits down with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on July 11 2018. **Kobi Gideon/GPO***

“Trading Ukraine for Syria” was first brought up by an Israeli cabinet member shortly after Trump’s entering office, the *New Yorker* magazine reported earlier this month.

Israel has repeatedly warned that pro-Iranian forces fighting alongside Russian-



backed Assad were attempting to stake out a permanent presence in the country, consolidating in southern Syria adjacent to Israel's northern border.

After Netanyahu and Putin's meeting on Wednesday evening, Israeli diplomatic sources were quoted by the *Haaretz* daily as saying that in exchange for Russia pushing Iranian forces from the border, Israel is expected not to "intervene" in Assad's efforts to stabilize his rule.

It was not clear what specific actions Putin wants Israel to refrain from taking.

"We won't take action against the Assad regime, and you get the Iranians out," the *Reuters* news agency quoted Netanyahu as telling Putin on Wednesday, citing an Israeli official.

Though allied with Assad, Moscow has largely given Israeli warplanes a free hand over Syrian skies and has turned a blind eye to frequent strikes attributed to Israel targeting Syrian military outposts housing Iranian and Iran-backed forces and armaments, including heavy weapons convoys believed destined for Hezbollah.



*Des soldats israéliens sur le plateau du Golan, annexé en partie ar Israël, observent la province voisine de Qouneïtra en Syrie, le 7 juillet 2018* **JALAA**

## MAREY (AFP/Archives)

Following his meeting with Putin, Netanyahu appeared to significantly soften his rhetoric towards Assad, whom he has previously branded a “butcher” for his regime’s part in an eight-year civil war that has claimed the lives of some 350,000 people and driven millions from their homes.

“We haven’t had a problem with the Assad regime, for 40 years not a single bullet was fired on the Golan Heights,” the Israeli premier was quoted by *Haaretz* newspaper as telling reporters who accompanied him on the Moscow visit.

But Israel’s commitment to stay out of the Syrian conflict may not be enough for Russia to push Iranian forces, which explains reports that Netanyahu prepared Putin for a potential arrangement trading Syria for Crimea.

*The Times* reported that US national security adviser, John Bolton appeared to corroborate a tit-for-tat deal, quoting him as saying that “There are possibilities for doing a larger negotiation on helping to get Iranian forces out of Syria . . . which would be a significant step forward.”

Trump declined to answer questions as to whether the US would recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea during a press conference following the NATO summit last week, but acknowledged Russia’s significant investment in infrastructure in the territory.

Trump also apparently said during a dinner at the G7 summit last month that Crimea was part of Russia, since everyone speaks Russian in the region.

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