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5 on 45:

On Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's White House visit
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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

SACHS: Hi, my name is Natan Sachs and I'm a fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, and I focus particularly on Israeli affairs. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has arrived in Washington for his first formal meeting with President Trump, and of course it's a big moment in this new relationship. They're going to look to establish a new personal chemistry, something that, to put it mildly, was lacking in the relationship between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. And they are going to try to establish a relationship for the next few years, assuming they're both in office, especially Netanyahu, who faces some trouble at home.

Second thing they're going to be trying to do is show appearances, make it look good. It's good for both of them for domestic reasons. For Netanyahu, especially, this is the first time he's going to have a Republican president to work with. Previously, in the 1990s he was Prime Minister with Bill Clinton, and although their relationship was not as rocky as with Obama, there was certainly a lot of animosity towards Netanyahu, especially towards the end, from the White House. Then, there was President Obama, and that was a very difficult relationship. Now, the appearances will be much better, and this is something that Israeli voters like. They like their prime ministers to get along with the US and they'll be very happy to see an American president, who at least in rhetoric seems to be much easier for Israel to deal with.

The third issue, and in substance, it's easily the first issue from the Israeli perspective, is Iran; Iran and the nuclear agreement between the P5 plus one and Iran

known as the JCPOA. Israel of course is not party to that agreement, but it is deeply interested in it. The Israelis are going to be looking to see a shared goal with the American administration. They want to see a shared goal that mainly says that the JCPOA is terrible, maybe the worst deal in history, as the President said during the campaign.

This doesn't mean necessarily that either side is going to look to annul the agreement immediately. After all the United States is not the only signatory. Besides Iran there are only five other signatories to this agreement and it's not the best tactic for either side to try and simply annul the agreement. But, what they will try and do perhaps is to push back very forcefully against Iran on other issues that are not a part of the nuclear agreement, in particular ballistic missile testing and terrorism or involvement in other issues around the region, Syria being first among them.

However, there is a big difference between the Trump administration and the Obama administration or putative Clinton administration regarding Iran. The Trump administration's probably not going to be particularly worried about whether the nuclear deal falls apart, and so pushing back against Iran will not be mitigated by this kind of concern, and that's something that the Israelis will want. And this is an important point. It's not merely that the Israelis think that Iran might cheat on this nuclear deal. In fact, the Israelis are most concerned about the fact that Iran might not cheat, and then at the end of some of the provisions of the deal, the sunset clauses, in 10, 15, 20 years, then Israelis think that Iran will be very close to a nuclear arsenal. It will have most of the material and they believe will be free from international constraints. And so to a very

large degree, the Israelis are worried about the deal itself, not just about Iran cheating on the deal.

Related to this issue is perhaps the most important issue in the Middle East right now from a regional perspective, and that's the terrible civil war in Syria, where Russia is heavily involved alongside Iran itself, and with active support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy and Lebanese Shia party and militia which is fighting heavily in Syria. These three actors have helped the Assad regime shore up its position in Syria and turn the tide of the war, so much so that Assad now controls the heartland or much of the heartland of Syria, although certainly the war is not over. The question is of course what happens outside of the heartland, and especially in areas where the so-called Islamic State rules, and there, from the Israeli perspective, the big question will be the Russian-Iranian alliance here.

President Trump has come in, of course, with a very different approach to Iran. It's in the news for many reasons now, and the question from the Israeli perspective is what will be the relationship between the US and Russia but the animosity between the US and Iran mean for the Russian-Iranian alliance? Can a wedge be driven between Russia and Iran, especially in Syria? This is something that not only Israel is looking to, but other allies and partners of the United States in the region, first and foremost Saudi Arabia, the great adversary of Iran in the region.

Then there's another issue, which of course in the press gets a lot of attention and is an extremely important issue, but from the Israeli perspective is not high on the list, and that is the question of the Palestinian issue, or Palestinian-Israeli relations. Settlements of course have been front and center in recent times, with the UN Security

Council resolution on settlements and with various and very differing statements by the president and his men on settlements. While in the past, it seemed like the president may give a free hand to Israel on settlements, now we see new talk, we see the president saying that they don't help peace in the long term, which is an understatement from the perspective of other actors in the international arena.

But from the Israeli perspective, there's actually a bit of a surprising approach. Netanyahu himself does not necessarily need a free hand. From his perspective, the constraint from the US also serves a domestic need. He sometimes needs to say to his right flank, led by Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home Party, he has to say to them, the superpower does not let me do anything, that is why I don't build more, that is why we will not formally annex parts of the West Bank, that is why we can't do a variety of different things that would foreclose the possibility of a two-state solution in the long run. And in that regard, it may be that the constraints from the United States are actually tacitly welcomed, at least to a certain degree, by the Israelis.

Finally, the regional perspective, the architecture of the Middle East. The United States has been the paramount outside power in the Middle East since the 50s, and it has changed dramatically in recent years during the Obama presidency and especially with the falling of the regional order. From the Israeli perspective, a change is welcome, but the Israelis are likely not going to see a new architecture imposed from the United States. President Trump does not seem to have the appetite to reengage dramatically in the Middle East as a superpower imposing its will. Rather, we are likely going to see a U.S. that is engaged much more transactionally, that is partnering perhaps with Russia, that is partnering with specific allies in the region—first among them, perhaps, Israel.