

Netanyahu and Trump to talk tariffs, Iran and Gaza

AFP- Talks on Monday between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump are expected to be dominated by Washington's shock tariffs on Israel and escalating tensions with Iran.

Netanyahu becomes the first foreign leader to meet with Trump in the US capital since the president unveiled sweeping levies on multiple countries in his "Liberation Day" announcement on Wednesday.

Arriving in Washington direct from a visit to Hungary, Netanyahu's chief objective will be to persuade Trump to reverse the decision, or at the very least to reduce the 17 percent levy set to be imposed on Israeli imports before it takes effect.

Before leaving Budapest, Netanyahu said his discussions would include a range of issues, including "the tariff regime that has also been imposed on Israel".

"I'm the first international leader, the first foreign leader who will meet with President Trump on a matter so crucial to Israel's economy," he said in a statement.

"I believe this reflects the special personal relationship and the unique bond between the United States and Israel, which is so vital at this time."

Analysts said Netanyahu will seek to secure an exemption from the tariffs for Israel.

"The urgency (of the visit) makes sense in terms of stopping it before it gets institutionalised," said Jonathan Rynhold,

head of political studies at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv.

Such an exemption would not only benefit Trump's closest Middle East ally but also "please Republicans in Congress, whose voters care about Israel, but are unwilling to confront Trump on this at this point," he said.

Israel had attempted to avoid the new levy by moving preemptively a day before Trump's announcement and lifting all remaining duties on the one percent of American goods still affected by them.

But Trump still went ahead with his new policy, saying the United States had a significant trade deficit with Israel, a top beneficiary of US military aid.

– Gaza truce, hostages –

The Israeli leader's US trip is "also a way for Netanyahu to play the game and show Trump that Israel is going along with him," said Yannay Spitzer, a professor of economics at Hebrew University.

"I would not be surprised if there is an announcement of some concession for Israel... and this will be an example for other countries."

Netanyahu will also discuss the war in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli hostages still held in the Palestinian territory, and the growing "threat from Iran", his office said.

Israel resumed air strikes on Gaza on March 18, ending nearly two months of ceasefire with Hamas that had been brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar.

Efforts to restore the truce have since failed, with more than 1,330 people killed in renewed Israeli air and ground operations, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-controlled territory.

Palestinian militants there still hold 58 hostages, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

On Iran, Trump has been pressing for “direct talks” with Tehran on a new deal to curb the Islamic republic’s nuclear programme.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Sunday rejected the idea of direct negotiations with the United States as “meaningless”.

There has been widespread speculation that Israel, possibly with US help, might attack Iranian facilities if no agreement is reached.

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