



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The call that Netanyahu has been anxiously waiting for - are the US and Israel headed for normalisation?



It was a call that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been waiting for four months. He was probably anxious, because the previous phone conversation last March went very poorly for him.

Netanyahu had a phone conversation with US President Joe Biden last Monday, which is already a positive development for the Israeli prime minister. An even better message was that the US president said he would meet with him soon but did not mention when or if at the White House.

After this conversation, the Israeli prime minister could consider that relations with the biggest and most important partner have moved forward from a low point where they have been since the election of the Israeli government last December.

Even though the details of this conversation have not been published, one of the less significant reasons for President Biden's call was that the Israeli Prime Minister had just left the hospital the day before, where he had spent the weekend due to weakness.

The more significant motive was that the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, was supposed to visit President Biden last Tuesday.

Regardless of Washington's cold attitude towards his government's policies, a meeting of President Herzog with the US President would perhaps be too harsh a message for Netanyahu, who did not get a meeting in the White House or anywhere else with Mr Biden this term.

He even received a message that he would not be visiting the White House "in the near term", as President Biden said last March, after his last telephone conversation with Mr Netanyahu.

Netanyahu is happy that he is still a partner

However, things have changed. Last Monday,

Mr Netanyahu received an invitation from President Biden to meet "in the US" and have a "warm and long" conversation, according to the Israeli PM's office.

The date of their meeting has not been announced, not even a provisional date, even though there has been an unofficial mention of the possibility of meeting by the end of the year, possibly during the September session of the UN General Assembly in New York.

In any case, Mr Netanyahu has reason to be pleased with this development. After several months of frozen communication, conversation with President Biden means he is still a partner for talks with the US, despite the criticism he received in the meantime.

In this respect, Mr Netanyahu might consider that the promise of visiting the US for talks with President Biden represents a significant guarantee that he would remain a prime minister.

For a few months definitely when the meeting with President Biden should take place.

The invitation came after concessions in Israel

The invitation to the meeting was the result of an assessment by the White House that the conservative prime minister, with his ultra-right government, has begun to make concessions and soften his rigid intentions to take control of the judiciary.

With a radical policy towards the Palestinians, Mr Netanyahu's new government has been trying to control the independence of the Supreme Court with initiatives that would allow the Knesset to overturn its rulings and give the government, through the parliament, a decisive say in the selection of judges.

Because of this policy, Israel has been facing massive protests for months, demanding the independence of the judiciary.

These were the reasons why Washington took an extremely harsh position towards the new ultra-right Israeli government.

“They cannot continue down this road,” said President Biden last March, after a conversation with PM Netanyahu, referring to his government's radical policy regarding the judiciary.

Faced with mass civil discontent and harsh criticism from Washington, PM Netanyahu announced three weeks ago that his cabinet would give up on a key point in the "reform" of the judiciary - that the parliament be given the authority to overturn the Supreme Court's verdict.

“I threw that out,” said the Israeli Prime Minister. This decision was undoubtedly the result of the warnings he received from the US president last March, who said that he should reach a compromise and ensure a broad consensus regarding judicial reform.

Business in the region has priority

President Biden decided to thaw relations with Netanyahu and the "most extreme government in decades", as he called it, considering that the situation in the Middle East calls for a quick revival of US-Israeli relations.

The invitation to Netanyahu has been the result of an assessment that criticism of his government's internal policies and keeping a distance is less significant at this time than the speedy return of US-Israeli relations to their usual high level.

Changes threatening their joint positions in the Middle East took place during months of cold relations between the US and Israel as an alliance of key importance for the region.

This has primarily regarded the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, under the mediation of China, and the return of Syria and its leader Bashar al-Assad

to the Arab League.

Returning relations with Israel to normal as soon as possible has also been an imperative for President Biden in light of his announced new presidential race.

That race would be much more difficult for him if he ran with the burden of blocked relations with the most significant ally in the Middle East.

The potential loser from the expected normalisation of communication between the leaders of Israel and the US could only be the liberal-oriented Netanyahu's opposition in the country, which does not allow mass protests to put the judiciary under the paw of the ultra-conservative government.

The opposition fears that US concessions to PM Netanyahu would result in certain concessions from Washington regarding the government's plans to control an independent judiciary under pressure from geopolitics.

Administration officials assure that this will not happen. For now. “You shouldn't take away from the fact that they had a conversation today and that they will meet again that we have less concerns over these judicial reforms or less concerns over some of the extremist activities and behaviour by some members of the Netanyahu cabinet,” said John F. Kirby, a spokesman for the National Security Council.