

PM Netanyahu should address the UN General Assembly this week

written by Lahav Harkov | 26.09.2024

The escalation in Hezbollah's attacks on Israel in recent weeks and Israel's response, including the pinpoint attack on Hezbollah terrorists via their pagers, sparked talk that PM Benjamin Netanyahu would, or maybe should, stay in Jerusalem while the UN General Assembly takes place in New York this week.

Rumors spread that Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer would be delivering the address instead; one high-level diplomatic source said this week that Foreign Minister Israel Katz or UN Ambassador Danny Danon were being considered as understudies for the prime minister. That being said, the source emphasized that Netanyahu planned to be in Turtle Bay on Friday to give his speech: "The U.N is also an arena; the prime minister sees it as an important platform," the source said.

Some analysts have said that Netanyahu must stay in Israel because of the imminent risk of war with Lebanon. They have even suggested that if the prime minister feels the need to make an address to the world, he can do so from Israel and it will surely be televised.

According to the high-level diplomatic source, Israel is not interested in launching a ground invasion at this point, and Netanyahu has instructed the IDF to pursue a gradual escalation in response to escalations by Hezbollah. Even if that was not the message the Prime Minister's Office sought to relay to the world this week, it would be unlikely that the IDF would begin a ground invasion while Netanyahu is out of the country, unless doing so was some kind of intentional bait-and-switch.

Still, there are other major security concerns that may arise while he is out of the country. When Hezbollah killed 12 children in the Golan Heights earlier this year, Netanyahu was in Washington, D.C. He was able to get on a flight back to Israel within hours, even though it was still Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, in the U.S. That was possible because Israel now has a plane for prime ministers and presidents, rather than chartering flights from Israel's flag carrier El Al, which does not fly on the Sabbath. The prime minister's plane, called Wing of Zion, also has the technology installed allowing him to remain confidentially connected to

what is happening in Israel while in the air.

There are also many advantages to Netanyahu being present and delivering a speech at the UNGA this week.

Counter-intuitively, the timing of the UNGA and the escalation in the north may be opportune as opposed to inconvenient. Netanyahu can use the time to effectively make the case that Israel needs to strongly defend itself from the threats of the Shiite jihadist group on its northern border, and his arguments will be fresh in the international community's minds should the situation escalate into a ground war in Lebanon. This would also be the time to advocate for the world to pressure Hamas to free Israeli hostages, some of whose relatives will be flying to New York with Netanyahu and attending his speech.

Just being in New York during UN week enables Netanyahu to hold face-to-face meetings with world leaders like US President Joe Biden, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz who addressed the General Assembly this week. This will allow him to make the case for Israel's defense in person and hear the concerns of Israel's allies.

Netanyahu has long distrusted Israel's Foreign Ministry and overshadowed Israel's foreign ministers when he does not hold the portfolio himself. That attitude has weakened the ability of others to make Israel's case on a prominent global stage such as the UNGA. The fact that Katz is not fully proficient in English, and that his messages are not always aligned with those of other parts of the government, (for example, he regularly posts AI-generated images mocking antagonistic world leaders,) makes him a less-than-ideal substitute for Netanyahu at this time. And while Danon's English is better and he is more in sync with Netanyahu, ambassador-level addresses rarely garner attention during the UNGA when presidents and prime ministers speak.

Whether one likes Netanyahu or not, he is by far the best-known Israeli political figure today, and possibly the best-known Israeli, period. That already draws international attention to his speeches in a way that addresses by other Israeli prime ministers and foreign ministers in recent years did not. In addition – again, whether one agrees with the message or not – Netanyahu is a gifted orator who knows how to relay messages effectively and memorably, with visual aids and turns of phrase.

For all of these reasons, having Netanyahu address the UN General Assembly this week would be the right thing to do for Israel.