Netanyahu Arrest Up for Debate as UK Petition Hits Target

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A petition on the British Parliament’s website urging the UK to arrest Netanyahu for “war crimes” has received more than 100,000 signatures, making the matter eligible for debate by lawmakers. The campaign reached its target on Saturday morning.

The petition demands that Netanyahu “be arrested for war crimes upon arrival in the UK for the massacre of over 2,000 civilians in 2014,” a reference to the 51-day war between Israel and Hamas that summer.

Netanyahu will visit London this coming week for talks with British counterpart David Cameron.

The two prime ministers are expected to discuss regional issues, with an emphasis on the Iran nuclear deal reached between world powers and Tehran on July 14. British officials told Channel 2 that Cameron plans to discuss the situation in the Gaza Strip, stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and the Syrian civil war.

he petition has already been dismissed by the British government and described by a senior Tory MP as “completely absurd.”

“Under UK and international law, visiting heads of foreign governments, such as Prime Minister Netanyahu, have immunity from legal process, and cannot be arrested or detained,” [the British government said in a formal response.](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/105446)

“The UK is a close friend of Israel and we enjoy an excellent bilateral relationship, built on decades of cooperation between our two countries across a range of fields. Our priority for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the achievement of a two-state solution, based on 1967 borders,” the statement also noted. “We continue to believe that negotiations will be necessary in order to achieve this, and that both parties need to focus on steps that are conducive to peace. The UK Government will reinforce this message to Mr Netanyahu during his visit.”

“We recognise that the conflict in Gaza last year took a terrible toll. As the Prime Minister said, we were all deeply saddened by the violence and the UK has been at the forefront of international reconstruction efforts,” the UK government statement noted in its response.

“However the Prime Minister was clear on the UK’s recognition of Israel’s right to take proportionate action to defend itself, within the boundaries of international humanitarian law. We condemn the terrorist tactics of Hamas who fired rockets on Israel, built extensive tunnels to kidnap and murder, and repeatedly refused to accept ceasefires. Israel, like any state, has the right to ensure its own security, as its citizens also have the right to live without fear of attack.”

Current British law does not permit the government to make the arrest, and the petition’s organizer, anti-Israel activist Damian Moran, said its intent was different.

“I honestly don’t expect him to get arrested because of the universal jurisdiction laws…. It is a clear message to him that there’s a massive amount of people who don’t want him here,” he told Al Jazeera.

The petition does not mention Hamas, and offers a figure for civilian deaths far higher than Israel’s, the UN’s and even Hamas’s.

The petition amounts to a “meaningless publicity stunt,” Israel’s embassy in London said. An embassy spokesman noted that despite the vociferous activism against Israel, trade and other cooperation between Israel and the UK are going dramatically. “Mutual trade has doubled over recent years, while academic, scientific and cultural cooperation is constantly growing.”