

Backing with Side Effects

Israel's View of Trump 2.0



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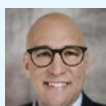
In a Nutshell

Donald Trump's second term marks a return to a clearly pro-Israel yet distinctly unilateral Middle East policy. From the outset, Trump sent unmistakable signals: Military aid to Israel was expanded, while funding for the Palestinian Authority was frozen. The President demonstrated close political alignment with Prime Minister Netanyahu, which was viewed in Israel as a strategic gain but internationally as a destabilising factor.

The security alliance was most visible in the coordinated action against Iran, which culminated in joint military strikes in June 2025. However, this scenario also exposed divergences over Gaza policy and multilateral processes. Trump's increasingly unilateral foreign policy left Israel on the sidelines at times.

Although Israel remains a key US partner, the strategic alignment between the two countries is weakening. Trump's focus on bilateral deals with Arab states highlights the primacy of US self-interest.

Domestically, Trump has served to divide opinion in Israel: Right-wing factions celebrate him as a historic ally, while centrists and left-leaning groups view his policies as self-serving. At the same time, there is mounting concern that Israel's dependence on a politically partisan form of US support could undermine its room for manoeuvring in foreign policy in the long term.



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High expectations and pragmatic signals

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 was met in Israel with high expectations. Even during his campaign, Trump repeatedly emphasised his intention to deepen the strategic partnership with Israel. In Jerusalem, this was seen as a unique opportunity to revive the active Middle East policy of his first term – in contrast to the Biden administration, which was perceived in Israel as cautious to critical. At the annual conference of the Republican Jewish Coalition, Trump made sweeping promises during the campaign: “I will work with you to make sure Israel is with us for thousands of years.”¹ He took a clear stance on the Gaza war and announced measures to combat antisemitism at US universities.

From the very start of his presidency, Trump sent a series of striking signals. On 20 January 2025, he signed Executive Order 14169, which suspended all US development aid for 90 days, with the sole exception being military aid to Israel.² The following day, he imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court and lifted sanctions on violent Israeli settlers. In so doing, Trump positioned himself demonstratively against the international criticism of Israel's settlement policy and military operations. At the same time, the United States effectively froze financial support for the Palestinian Authority.

Prompt visit to Washington: Symbolism and substance

On 4 February 2025, Donald Trump received Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the first foreign guest of his second term – a deliberate diplomatic signal. The hours-long meeting was widely interpreted as a “watershed moment”

in bilateral relations. At the subsequent press conference, Trump underlined the unbreakable nature of US-Israeli ties, while Netanyahu responded in kind: “You are the greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House.”³

Particular attention was drawn to Trump's proposal for the Gaza Strip. In a highly controversial mix of economic development plan and geopolitical paradigm shift, he suggested that the United States could “take over” and rebuild Gaza – with the aim of turning it into “the Riviera of the Middle East”. Netanyahu praised Trump's unorthodox thinking.

The shared strategic goal of weakening Iran was also strongly emphasised. Netanyahu declared, “They [the Iranian regime] tried to kill you, Mr President – and they tried [...] to kill me. We're both committed to rolling back Iran's aggression in the region and ensuring that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon.”⁴ Trump made it clear that the “maximum pressure policy” against Tehran would continue and – if necessary – be intensified. On the question of the West Bank, however, Trump struck a more cautious tone. When asked about possible US support for annexation scenarios, he refrained from taking a clear position but indicated that the issue remained open on the US agenda.

The security alignment between the United States and Israel has reached a new level of financial and operational intensity. Compared with the Biden administration, the change is evident not only in tone, but also in practice. While support under President Biden was marked by political restraint, conditional arms assistance, and human rights considerations, Trump's approach is more uncompromising and at times even unconditional – particularly regarding Iran – but

is also indicative of the occasionally erratic and unilateral nature of his policy style.

A comparison of defence aid underscores this paradigm shift. Although the Biden administration provided around 17.9 billion US dollars in military assistance to Israel⁵ between October 2023 and October 2024, including modern fighter aircraft, artillery systems, and precision munitions, this support was partly tied to political conditions. Delivery suspensions, needs assessments, and human-rights-based restrictions were among the criteria.

By contrast, within just two months of taking office, the Trump administration had authorised arms deliveries worth more than 12 billion US dollars,⁶ with many more following. Requirements for transparency towards Congress and reporting obligations were largely bypassed or ignored. This course represents a clear and unequivocal reinforcement of Trump's Middle East policy.⁷

The first weeks of Trump's second presidency thus revealed a consistent return to the Israel-centred Middle East policy of his earlier years. The president continues to rely on symbolic strength, close political alignment with Netanyahu, and a radical questioning of previous diplomatic conventions. For Jerusalem, this constitutes significant political backing. For many other states, however, it poses an increasing dilemma that has these states torn between political and economic ties with the United States (and for some, also loyalty to Israel) on the one hand and concern over growing regional instability on the other.

Despite close coordination during the Iran–Israel war, coordination problems have begun to appear in the security cooperation between Israel and the United States.

Joint warfare: Iran as the litmus test

The culmination of security coordination between Washington and Jerusalem to date was the Twelve-Day War with Iran in June 2025. Following targeted Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, air defence systems, senior regime officials, and leading nuclear scientists, the United States joined in with direct military strikes against Iran's most heavily fortified nuclear sites. Trump hailed the Israeli attacks as "excellent" and praised the cooperation: "We worked as a team like perhaps no team has ever worked before."⁸ The approach was also widely accepted in Europe. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom called on Iran and Israel to de-escalate while simultaneously stressing the importance of "ensuring that Iran never attains or acquires a nuclear weapon".⁹

Despite close coordination during the Iran–Israel war, cracks have begun to appear in the day-to-day security cooperation between Israel and the United States. In Gaza, for instance, the Trump administration – through the mediation of US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff – oversaw ceasefire negotiations that were nominally coordinated with Israel but that were – in practice – conducted in an increasingly unilateral manner. The so-called Witkoff Plan provoked discontent among parts of the Israeli government,¹⁰ which felt side-lined, particularly regarding commitments made to Egypt and the delineation of demilitarised zones.

In the West Bank, Washington initially pursued a rather detached policy in the months following Trump's inauguration: Israeli operations were neither openly endorsed nor criticised – a form of tacit approval that Trump had previously cultivated during his first term. In response to continuing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, US action was primarily guided by the nation's own interests. Although early American strikes were carried out in coordination with Israel, the Pentagon repeatedly underlined the independent nature of US operations. Ultimately, the United States concluded a bilateral agreement with the Houthis without taking Israeli security concerns



Moment of triumph: Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu shake hands before the Knesset on 13 October 2025, hours after the last living hostages had been released by Hamas. Photo: © ANI News, Imago.

into account. This partial disengagement caused unease in Israel, even if it was not publicly addressed by the government.

These developments likewise illustrate that the Trump administration is pursuing an increasingly unilateral course in foreign and security policy. While close operational cooperation remains with Israel on key issues such as Iran, a jointly coordinated approach in the sense of the multilateral consensus of previous years has clearly eroded.

Strategic distancing without new alliances

Despite the declared solidarity with Israel, Trump's second presidency has seen the gradual emergence of a strategic distancing in key areas of foreign and security policy. What is often presented externally as the continuation of a historic friendship is – on closer inspection – actually an

asymmetrical relationship that is increasingly shaped by self-interest, power politics, and – in some respects – mutual operational exclusion. These growing tensions are not necessarily the result of open ruptures; rather, they reflect subtle structural and domestic political shifts within the United States – developments influenced by radical actors on the increasingly assertive left wing of the Democratic Party and – conversely – by eccentric representatives of the MAGA movement. Together, these forces have far-reaching implications for Israel's regional position and for the long-term trajectory of US Middle East policy.

Under Trump, the United States remains Israel's most important military partner. However, in multilateral processes and regional dialogue forums, a widening gap has become apparent between US and Israeli interests. One telling example was Trump's first overseas trip in May 2025, which took him to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and




How much was destroyed? Following the targeted US military strikes against the nuclear facilities in Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan, it remains unclear how successful the attacks were. The satellite photo shows the Iranian nuclear facility in Natanz before the attacks. [Photo: © ABACA Press, Imago.](#)

the United Arab Emirates – pointedly excluding Israel. The symbolic significance of this decision did not go unnoticed in Jerusalem. While Israel’s absence from key discussions on regional security architecture is neither entirely new nor surprising, it underscores the notion that under Trump, American interest-driven policy ultimately takes precedence: Israel continues to enjoy strong support, but no longer unconditional – or exclusive – backing.

Trump’s foreign policy remains rooted in the principle of “Make America Great Again!” At its core lies a focus on bilateral deals with Arab states designed primarily to secure economic and security advantages for the United States. Although Trump continues to invoke the Abraham Accords – agreements on diplomatic normalisation between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain – and highlights the contribution of these agreements to regional security, the Israeli–Arab normalisation project has been stalled since 7 October 2023. Saudi Arabia in

particular has made further progress conditional on an end to the war in Gaza and the inclusion of a Palestinian state on the political agenda – a condition that the current Israeli government strongly rejects because any steps towards a Palestinian state at this point would be seen as a sign of “success” for the terrorist organisation Hamas. In Riyadh, Trump nevertheless sought to create an impression of movement. Parallel negotiations were taking place with Syria, Oman, and Qatar and even with Hamas and the Houthis – often without Israeli participation or prior consultation. Particularly sensitive were indirect talks with Hamas concerning a ceasefire and the release of hostages as part of the US-led Witkoff Plan.

While Netanyahu publicly nominated Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize in early July 2025, criticism within the US administration of Israel’s conduct grew increasingly vocal. Behind this lay Israeli airstrikes in Syria and the escalating military operations in Gaza: These actions were



not coordinated with the United States and – in the eyes of some US officials – undermined diplomatic processes. At times, both Trump and his inner circle reacted with irritation. Following the accidental bombing of a church in Gaza, Trump personally demanded clarification from Netanyahu and privately complained about Israel’s escalating behaviour. Such statements shed light on Washington’s growing frustration with Israel’s unilateral actions.

The personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu oscillates between political instrumentalisation and personal frustration.

At the same time, the US administration itself is operating with increasing independence. Trump remains consistent in his pragmatic understanding of foreign policy: His decisions serve measurable, often short-term interests that are heavily influenced by the isolationist wing of the MAGA movement. This applies to relations with the Gulf states, for example, with which he has concluded extensive investment and security agreements. However, it also applies to policy towards Iran, for which the Trump administration conducted secret talks in Oman aimed at temporary de-escalation – without prior Israeli involvement. The Israeli government – which has traditionally been keen to maintain escalation control vis-à-vis Tehran – was presented with a *fait accompli*. This was not a complete rupture, but a sign of a gradual drift away from the often-emphasised synchronised decision-making with the Trump administration.

The Trump–Netanyahu relationship

The personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu remains one of the most ambivalent factors in current bilateral relations, oscillating between political instrumentalisation and personal frustration. The dynamic between the two

leaders not only reflects individual vanity, but also has tangible effects on the bilateral relationship between – and the political climate in – both countries.

Even during Trump’s first term (2017–2021), his relationship with Netanyahu was considered exceptionally close. The relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, and the US support for Israeli positions in multilateral fora were seen as political gifts to the Israeli prime minister, who regularly praised Trump publicly in return. However, disillusionment followed immediately after Trump’s electoral defeat. In an interview with Israeli journalist Barak Ravid, Trump expressed unusually harsh criticism of Netanyahu, insulting him for congratulating Joe Biden on his election victory.¹¹

With Trump’s return to the White House in 2025, the relationship took a new turn. Amid rising tensions with Iran, particularly in the context of coordinated military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, Trump once again presented himself as Netanyahu’s close ally. He spoke of unprecedented cooperation, praising both the Israeli army and Netanyahu personally. Nevertheless, tensions persist. Statements from within the White House reveal growing irritation over Netanyahu’s insufficiently coordinated military operations – not only in Gaza and Syria, but most recently also against Hamas’s political leadership in Qatar. Remarks from Trump administration insiders suggest that while the Israeli prime minister is celebrated publicly, he is increasingly regarded as a liability internally. Some observers interpret the public disagreements as part of a strategic division of roles between Washington and Jerusalem. However, whether this is the case remains doubtful: Indeed, internal tensions and Israel’s increasingly unilateral conduct are too obvious.

The personal relationship reached a remarkable climax in June 2025, when Trump intervened in Netanyahu’s domestic trial. In several posts on his platform Truth Social, he described the proceedings as political persecution and called

for the trial to be dropped.¹² He reiterated these remarks in his address to the Knesset on 13 October 2025¹³ while presenting his peace plan for the region. These statements illustrate not only Trump's willingness to interfere in Israel's internal affairs, but also his tendency to equate political loyalty with unconditional personal support whenever he deems it useful to his agenda – regardless of institutional or legal principles.

Donald Trump's second term has met with a divided – albeit largely favourable – response from within Israeli society.

The relationship between Trump and Netanyahu remains fundamentally consistent but is marked by considerable political volatility: Their mutual use of their closeness for image-building, positioning, and silencing critics illustrates both the opportunities and the risks of personalised foreign policy. The current dependence on two highly divisive political figures makes the medium- and long-term outlook for bilateral relations highly uncertain.

Israeli society's view of Trump

Donald Trump's second term has met with a divided – albeit largely favourable – response from within Israeli society. Both the government and its supporters, as well as some elements of the opposition and particularly the families of Israeli hostages, have pinned their hopes for conflict resolution on Trump. While the Israeli public recognises Trump's central role in addressing current crises, awareness is also growing of the US president's volatility and of the structural uncertainty that comes with dependence on Washington.

Surveys paint a nuanced yet generally positive picture. For instance, a poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute in January 2025 found that 74 per cent of Jewish Israelis and 64 per cent of Arab Israelis credited Trump with

playing a pivotal role in achieving the ceasefire and prisoner–hostage exchange concluded that month.¹⁴ Data published by the Pew Research Center in June 2025 confirmed a stable and – in some respects – increasing level of esteem for the United States under Trump, with 83 per cent of Israelis expressing a positive view of the US – up six percentage points from the previous year. There are clear ideological divisions, however: While 93 per cent of right-leaning Israelis support Trump's Middle East policy, approval among left-leaning respondents stands at just 21 per cent.¹⁵ A survey carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) during the same period further illustrates the ambivalent perception of Trump, with 29 per cent believing he places Israel's interests at the centre of his foreign policy and a majority viewing his support as conditional and self-serving. At the same time, the proportion of Israelis who consider Trump unpredictable and unreliable has fallen from 23 to 18 per cent.¹⁶

By contrast, public attitudes towards Netanyahu are far more mixed. After the release of the last surviving hostages in October 2025, approval ratings for both the prime minister and his Likud party rose sharply. However, many still hold him partly responsible for the protracted duration of the war and for the delay in freeing hostages. The succession of high-level US visits to Israel following Trump's announcement of his regional peace plan – disparagingly described by some observers as “Bibi-sitting” – was also reflected the US administration's own scepticism towards Netanyahu's political intentions.¹⁷

The Israeli government and the (far) right: Trump as a historical opportunity

For Israel's current government under Prime Minister Netanyahu, Donald Trump is above all a geopolitical enabler. His repeated support in multilateral forums, his opposition to international investigations against Israel, and his general endorsement of Israeli military operations in Gaza – together with the lifting of sanctions on radical settlers – have expanded Israel's political latitude at a time of growing international isolation.

Representatives of the settler movement greeted Trump's election victory in November 2024 with euphoria. Yisrael Ganz of the Yesha Council described it as a unique opportunity to strengthen Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank.¹⁸ Shai Alon – head of a regional council in one of the settlements – proclaimed “a golden age for the settlements”,¹⁹ while National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir – leader of the far-right Otzma Yehudit party – expressed similar sentiments in the Knesset. Trump's policies provide backing for national-religious agendas, which – in parts of Israel's right wing – have been interpreted as an invitation to pursue far-reaching territorial and legislative measures that are driven not only by ideology, but also by reaction to the recognition of a Palestinian state by several European countries. Trump's public rejection of formal annexation plans and his regional peace initiative – presented in late September in Netanyahu's presence – were not welcomed by all members of the Israeli government.

International perceptions of Trump are markedly more critical than those prevalent in Israel.

By contrast, centrists and the left-leaning opposition take a more differentiated view of Trump. Opposition leader Yair Lapid has emphasised in interviews that while Trump is unquestionably pro-Israel, he is also impatient, transactional, and uninterested in Netanyahu's controversial domestic agenda. In his view, the US-Israel alliance remains strategically indispensable but is currently “as bad as it has ever been” under Netanyahu.²⁰ Lapid criticised Israel's exclusion from key Trump administration decisions, including the ceasefire with the Houthis and negotiations with Iran and Syria, all of which were conducted without close consultation with Israel. In the Knesset, he accused Netanyahu directly: “You've lost Trump.”²¹ Within the opposition, Trump's interference in Netanyahu's ongoing corruption trial has also been strongly criticised. Such

tensions have deepened Israel's internal polarisation in its dealings with the United States.

Strategic self-reflection and international dependence

Alongside the political debate, Israel is engaged in an internal discussion about strategic autonomy. The growing perception that the Trump administration is making decisions over Israel's head – sometimes calculated, other times unpredictable – has prompted debate about how the country should position itself in the future. In a policy paper published in January 2025, the INSS warns of the risk that US support under Trump has become increasingly politicised. Israel – it argues – risks being perceived in the United States as a “Republican cause” – a development that undermines the long-term sustainability of the alliance, particularly since support for Israel is also eroding within parts of the MAGA movement.²² This perception is supported by recent polling from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which shows that although a Republican majority continues to back Israel's war against Hamas, a growing share of Americans believe that US assistance to Israel in the Gaza conflict has gone too far.²³

At the same time, international perceptions of Trump are markedly more critical than those prevalent in Israel. In Germany, for example, almost 80 per cent of respondents in a March 2025 survey expressed a negative view of Trump – including 48 per cent whose opinion of him had worsened since the start of his second term.²⁴ Such trends illustrate the deepening alienation between Israel and parts of Europe, which is linked above all to the strong criticism voiced by many European governments of Israel's conduct in Gaza following the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023.

These developments have led in Israel to a range of practical considerations that have resulted in the increased prominence of expanding the domestic defence industry, diversifying diplomatic alliances, and strengthening cooperation with European countries. There is also hope that with the continuation of the ceasefire in Gaza and the further implementation of Trump's peace

plan, European perspectives on Israeli policy might gradually shift, thereby potentially easing Israel's growing international isolation.

Outlook

Israel thus faces a delicate balancing act both externally and internally. Close cooperation with the United States under Trump guarantees short-term military freedom of action, but this action is not without political and strategic risks. The high level of public approval for Trump's actions among parts of the Israeli population should not obscure the fact that Israel's relationship with the United States is precariously poised between a pragmatic political partnership and structural dependence. In both countries, the outcome of these developments remains uncertain. If the situation in the Middle East fails to stabilise – despite Trump's considerable efforts and his associated peace plan – and if the political climate in Washington or Jerusalem shifts, as could well happen given next year's elections for the US House of Representatives and the Israeli Knesset, the alliance and its current closeness could in many respects come under question.

This article reflects the state of affairs as of 28 November 2025.

– translated from German –

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