



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Trump and Netanyahu, still a lethal double act



Donald Trump sidestepping Israel during his **trip** to the Middle East, his first foreign outing since taking office, is symbolic on many levels. Mostly, though, it highlights the empty boasts that he'd end the war in Gaza, made during his election campaign. He's staying away so as not to draw attention to failure.

In the Arab Gulf countries, Trump is lauded and fawned over, he gets to announce **deals** in the hundreds of billions, his most beloved number. And he gets a plane and a standing ovation for upending almost single-handedly America's policy vis-à-vis Syria.

In Israel, there's nothing for him. Benjamin Netanyahu and his hardliners make MAGA look amateurish. Also, Israel is one of the largest recipients of US military aid and even dares run a trade surplus with the US.

Sure, the country's far-right government is friends with all the right people, not just in Congress but also with the likes of Orbán and other Trump-friendly autocrats around the world. Yet, the close US ally is annoyingly aggressive, pernickety and cocky in throwing its weight around in the region.

Netanyahu is also on the verge of starving and further displacing and pummeling Gaza's population in his never-ending war against Hamas. Not a good look for Trump to be associated with right now.

On top of that, Israel also wants to project power into Lebanon and Syria, in opposition to other important Trump-leaning US allies, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

In Riyadh, Trump gave precedence to acting out his bromance with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and 'gifted' him the lifting of **sanctions** on Syria.

Probably the right policy decision

This was but the latest in a series of ostensible blows to the seemingly indestructible bond

between natural allies Trump and Bibi. Israel opposed lifting sanctions on Syria, at least until the country's new government proves it has sworn off Jihadism.

In fact, so had most of Trump's own officials. But now, on the say-so of MBS and Turkey's Erdoğan, he's **meeting** Syria's new president, one-time Jihadist Ahmed Al-Sharaa.

Despite Trump urging Al-Sharaa to play nice with Israel, it's bound to limit Netanyahu's freedom of action in Syria to some extent

Probably the right policy decision, even if for the wrong reasons. Despite Trump urging Al-Sharaa to play nice with Israel, it's bound to limit Netanyahu's freedom of action in Syria to some extent.

Trump had also made a deal with Yemen's Houthis that appears to have left Israel out in the cold and even called the release of the last remaining American-Israeli hostage in Gaza, a gesture of 'good faith' by Hamas.

Optical achievements, nothing substantial

Then there's the big kahuna, Iran. Trump is not at all keen to have Israel drag him into a hot war with Tehran. But that was never on the cards anyway. Instead, Trump has even made overtures to Iran, though they're unlikely to succeed.

The chances of this American administration making **progress** on freezing Iran's nuclear programme, are vanishingly small. Trump specialises in purely optical achievements, nothing substantial.

His much-vaunted Abraham Accords mostly just confirmed a reality that already existed. The same is true of all his supposed trade deals.

Greenlighting a Saudi civilian nuclear programme will be perceived in Jerusalem as another snub

Trump has already hinted at what he thinks might balance Iranian ambitions in the region; he has flirted with supporting a Saudi nuclear programme.

It's a signal to Iran and the rest of the region that the US will help counter Tehran, as long as it can turn a profit doing so. Though, greenlighting a Saudi civilian nuclear programme will be perceived in Jerusalem as another snub.

A chill between Trump and Netanyahu

Unsurprisingly therefore, there's been feverish speculation of a chill between Trump and Netanyahu. It wouldn't be surprising, because the veteran Israeli leader has been able to antagonise almost every American president he's dealt with.

Yet, such speculation is completely beside the point. On what is currently the most important issue facing Israel, Gaza, the US administration is sticking to its carte blanche for Bibi, which is only emphasised by Trump not visiting Jerusalem.

The only real bellwether of change in the current US-Israeli relationship is whether Trump will exert real pressure over Gaza. Not just to call off Netanyahu's promised expanded offensive, but also to allow in aid and limit the number of Palestinian civilian casualties.

Lacking that, Netanyahu can sit pretty and wait out the other issues. Though Trump might prioritise other American interests and his own in the region, a break is highly unlikely.

While Netanyahu might be content, Israel is doing less well

But while Netanyahu might be content, Israel is doing less well. The craters caused by the Houthi **missiles** at Ben Gurion airport and the repeated alarms for new incoming projectiles are evidence of the Netanyahu government's hubris in thinking it can wholly dominate the region and solve any outstanding security issues by starving, bombing and occupying Gaza.

As ever in the Middle East, this kind of policy is nothing more than a cruel game of whack-a-mole, with new sources of resistance emerging elsewhere or even in the same place. Also, the country is exhausted, and its new call up of reservists has it creaking at the seams.

New American thinking on the Middle East

This Israeli government is extremist and tends toward over-reach. It still sees the new Trump administration as a godsend, coming on the heels of its relative success against Hezbollah and Iran and on the heels of the fall of Assad in Syria. It will not give up its perceived advantage easily.

And the situation is fluid. This administration's thinking on the Middle East appears still not to be fully formed, six months in. It seems to prioritise negotiations with Iran and ties, economic and diplomatic, with the Gulf Arab countries.



If there is new American thinking on the Middle East, it might be gleaned from how the administration approaches other regions - Gaza

But when it comes to Israel and the Palestinians, there's a vacuum. Trump engages with the strong and lets them deal with the powerless as they see fit. The Palestinians are one of the parties on the receiving end.

Trump's outlandish 'Gaza Riviera' plan for relocating the Strip's population now looks merely to have been meant as a smokescreen to hide that void.

If there is new American thinking on the Middle East, it might be gleaned from how the administration approaches other regions. It has made clear both in Asia and in Europe that it expects local allies to do the heavy lifting.

In the Middle East, that means not only Israel but very clearly also Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and possibly even Egypt.

The Trump administration is still packed with pro-Israel hawks, thus much of the American diplomatic effort, such as it is, can be expected to keep supporting that country's position, despite Trump himself cozying up to other strongmen in the region.

In recent days one of those hawks, US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee, had to reassure increasingly worried Israelis that Trump still loves them. He **told** the right-wing Israeli outlet Israel Hayom that Israeli worries over Trump cold-shouldering them were "simply not grounded in reality."

The bottom line remains unchanged and is

likely to remain so. The Americans will in the end back Israel to the hilt, particularly this like-minded administration. The rest is just for show.