



By: Shlomo Ben-Ami

# Is Israel still the central pillar of US foreign policy in the Middle East?



Israel's government **decided** last week to expand its military offensive against Hamas – an effort that, it notes, may include “seizing” Gaza.

It is a brutal plan, devised in full awareness of its certain results, including the loss of the Israeli hostages who remain in Hamas's tunnels, the deepening of the humanitarian catastrophe faced by two million defenseless Palestinian civilians, and the erasure – rather than resolution – of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But there is one thing Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu did not anticipate: the fracturing of his relationship with US President Donald Trump.

With his choice to drag an exhausted Israeli people and military into the indefinite occupation of Gaza, Netanyahu is sacrificing vital Israeli strategic interests, including the Israeli-Saudi normalization that seemed highly likely just a few years ago, as part of a grand US strategy for the Middle East.

That is just fine with Netanyahu, who ultimately cares about only one thing: ensuring his government's survival.

Netanyahu long viewed Trump as the US president of his dreams, who would eliminate any daylight remaining between Israel and the United States, thereby strengthening Netanyahu's hold on power.

But for all his unpredictability, Trump has remained steadfast about ending the era of US military entanglements in the Middle East. And nobody – not even a close ally – can make Trump do something he does not want to do.

Trump will do nothing to stop Israel from pursuing its forever war in Gaza, as long as it does not compromise American interests. (As a true friend of Israel, former President Joe Biden might have tried to save the country from itself.) But nor will Trump allow the US to be dragged into the effort.

## Trump has split with Netanyahu on Iran

Trump has also split with Netanyahu on Iran. Netanyahu persuaded Trump to withdraw in 2018 from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear deal that Iran, the US, and other world powers had concluded three years earlier.

But as soon as Trump abandoned the JCPOA, Iran's race to the bomb was back on, and upon returning to the White House, he was faced with a US adversary that is rapidly approaching nuclear-power status.

Netanyahu awaited the green light, which he believed was imminent, from the US to attack Iran's nuclear installations. Instead, Trump initiated negotiations with the Islamic Republic.

**Trump is happy to wield the Israeli military threat as leverage in talks**

For Trump, striking a quick deal he can tout as a great victory always matters more than the agreement's substance. But he is surely feeling pressure to secure better terms than his political foil, former President Barack Obama, did in 2015.

To that end, Trump is happy to wield the Israeli military threat as leverage in talks – the **prospect** of a US military offensive against Iran is less credible – but he will not tie his political fate to the worldview of Netanyahu and his theocratic-fascist allies.

## Trump's handling of the Houthis

And then there is Trump's handling of the Houthis, Iran's proxy in Yemen.

Despite Israel's success in eroding the ring of Iranian proxies that surround it, the Houthis have proved indomitable, repeatedly launching ballistic missiles at Israel.

Early this month, one such Iran-supplied missile struck Israel's main airport, spurring most international airlines to suspend flights.

### The US was firmly on Israel's side in confronting the Houthis

The US was firmly on Israel's side in confronting the Houthis, even carrying out its own airstrikes on Houthi-linked sites in Yemen in response to the group's attempts to disrupt traffic in the Red Sea.

Then the Trump administration abruptly announced a ceasefire agreement: the Houthis would stop attacking ships in the Red Sea, in exchange for an end to US strikes. Israeli **officials** were "completely shocked."

### A dramatic departure from the status quo

Last week, Trump undertook a grand tour of the Middle East, but Israel was not on his itinerary. This trip was focused on trade and investment – and, as usual, moneymaking opportunities for himself, his family, and his friends.

Deals were signed guaranteeing what the White House **says** is "over two trillion" dollars of Saudi, Qatari, and Emirati investment in the US and purchases of advanced American arms.

Moreover, the US may agree to help Saudi Arabia develop the commercial nuclear-energy program that it has long coveted (and that could serve as the first step toward developing nuclear weapons).

### Trump's moves in Iran and his arms deals with Gulf states mark a dramatic departure from this status quo

Until now, Israel's enduring understanding with previous American administrations was

"no surprises" on matters of national security, and an ironclad commitment by the US to ensure Israel's military superiority in the region.

Trump's moves in Iran and his arms deals with Gulf states mark a dramatic departure from this status quo. Israel was not consulted, and it is inconceivable that Israel's military edge could be maintained if such massive arms deals materialize.

### Historic shift

Israel had long been the central pillar of US foreign policy in the Middle East. Now it is Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. All the "credit" for this historic shift goes to Netanyahu.

Under the Biden administration, such deals were supposed to be linked to a grand strategic plan that included the normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations and the establishment of a NATO-like alliance in the Middle East, centered on an Israel committed to some form of Palestinian statehood.



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Such a deal could win broad support in the US Congress and open the way for a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia.

Such a grand deal would, however, almost certainly cost Netanyahu the support of the most extreme elements of his coalition.

Since that is not an option for Netanyahu, Trump is moving on without him. There is too much money in the Gulf for Trump to concern himself with Israel's domestic politics.

Neither Trump nor the Gulf monarchs and emirs want wars, not even with Iran.

Leaders in the Middle East, including the former al-Qaeda commander and Syria's president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, whom Trump met on this trip, want economic development, not conflict. They, too, have no patience for an Israeli prime minister who sees only threats where they see opportunities.

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