

The Big Read **Middle Eastern politics & society**

How Israel lost America

An alliance that helped define the modern Middle East has reached crisis point

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made his relationship with US President Trump the cornerstone of his political persona © Julia Demaree/AP

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The announcement caught Israel by surprise. It was election day in America, and President Donald Trump made what appeared to be a casual comment: he would cut the annual $3.8bn subsidy that the US provides the Israeli military.

In peacetime, the assistance accounts for around a sixth of Israel's defence budget; it is also the sinew at the heart of the US-Israeli alliance, binding together the two countries' militaries.

Up until that morning, Israeli officials believed they were in the midst of negotiations to extend a 10-year memorandum of understanding for US military assistance, originally agreed by former president Barack Obama. Then came Trump's remarks on Fox News.

"Just like that, he killed it?" exclaims an Israeli military official, who had just travelled to Washington to discuss the extension of the deal beyond 2028.

It was an extraordinary — and public — reverse for Israel, and especially its longtime prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made his relationship with the mercurial American president the cornerstone of his own political persona — but who may finally have overplayed his hand.

Both Dennis Ross, a former US negotiator with Israel, and Peter Welch, the Democratic senator for Vermont, tell the FT there has been a "sea change" in the two countries' ties — an alliance that has helped define the modern Middle East and beyond. Many other officials, both past and present, concur.

America, which rallied to Israel after the catastrophe of the Hamas attacks of October 7 2023, has recoiled from the country's conduct of its subsequent conflict in Gaza and the consequences of the Iran war that many in the US believe Israel orchestrated.



US special envoy Steve Witkoff, Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu and JD Vance on a billboard in Tehran. American anger over the war in Iran was a prime factor behind the Republicans' disastrous midterm results © Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images

The growing perception from the heart of the administration to the heartlands of the Midwest is that the world's paramount power has been manipulated by its smaller ally and drawn into a hugely costly conflict that it is struggling to exit.

American anger over the US-Israeli war against Iran was one of the prime factors behind the Republican Party's disastrous showing at last week's midterms, which was far worse than its expectations.

"The public in the United States always supported Israel," says Ross. "Now, for the first time, we have 60 per cent of the American public disapproving of Israel and its policy."

The rift goes far beyond Trump's announcement on military aid — whose practical implications are not yet clear — and Israel's declining ratings in US opinion polls. Swaths of both the Democrat and Republican parties are now openly critical of the US-Israeli relationship. The leading pro-Israel lobby, Aipac, became a political liability for some candidates in the midterms.

And more voices in the US — including in the heart of the Trump administration — are calling for a fundamental break with over half a century of US-Israeli ties.

Vice-president JD Vance, a frontrunner in the race for the 2028 Republican presidential nomination, has already blamed the war for his party's historic midterm defeats. In a post on X, he said that one of voters' top demands was that the US "change its relationship with Israel". Trump's son, Donald Jr, said he agreed "100, 100, 100".

Eric Levine, a pro-Israel Republican donor, laments in turn that "there's absolutely nothing Israel can do because the press and the media in America hates them. They cannot win the media war."

He does not blame the Israeli government for its actions in Gaza, where more than 74,500 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked the war with a cross-border attack, killing some 1,200 people in Israel and taking 251 hostages.

Instead, he argues that Israel has done a terrible job of explaining the rationale behind the destruction of civilian infrastructure and collateral damage. "People are appalled," Levine acknowledges.

A funeral procession in Gaza. More than 74,500 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas sparked the war with its October 7 2023 attack, which killed some 1,200 people in Israel © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

"The pictures are the pictures. But it requires an explanation to say 'we bombed that apartment building because Hamas had tunnels underneath there'."

The strain in the alliance had been building throughout a period in which Netanyahu has dominated Israeli politics, according to politicians and diplomats who had spent years nurturing ties.

Many officials and analysts say the rift is partly due to the Israeli prime minister's decision to break with his country's longstanding practice of bipartisanship, choosing instead to embrace Republicans like Trump at the cost of ties with Democratic presidents such as Obama and Joe Biden.

Others emphasise the role of the Iran war.

A few days after the midterms, where Trump's Republicans lost both the House of Representatives and the Senate to the Democrats, a television interviewer asked the president what he attributed the loss to. Trump was forthright.

Americans were unhappy about the war with Iran, unhappy about high gas prices, he told CBS. Then, he added one more reason. “There’s a great dislike, incredibly, for Israel,” he said.

A more than special relationship

For the better part of its near 80-year history, Israel has been able to count on the steadfast bipartisanship of its relationship with the US. It was underpinned by the seeming consensus in Washington that Israel not only deserved a unique partnership with the US, involving vast sums of American aid and support, but that it was essential to both nations.

Americans have shielded Israel from censure at the UN, defended it from its enemies and critics and funded and armed the Israel Defense Forces, while tolerating the civilian toll the Israeli military inflicts upon its neighbours and recognising at least some of its territorial claims over its neighbours’ lands, especially in the Syrian Golan Heights.

A public agreement guarantees that Israel will always have a “qualitative military edge” over its regional enemies, while a secret agreement, hammered out between Israeli prime minister Golda Meir and US president Richard Nixon, allows Israel to maintain an undeclared nuclear arsenal.

Overall, Israel has received more US foreign assistance than any other since the second world war — more than $300bn in bilateral assistance and missile defence funding when adjusted for inflation, according to the non-partisan Congressional Research Service.

Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger outside the White House in 1973. An agreement between Meir and Nixon allows Israel to maintain an undeclared nuclear arsenal © Glasshouse Images/Shutterstock

A mock-up 'bunker buster' weapon at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri. Washington sent Israel around $17bn in military aid between 2023 and 2025 © US Air Force/ABACA/Reuters

Between 2023 and 2025, the US provided around $17bn in military aid, based on CRS figures, as it airlifted thousands of bombs, aircraft parts and other essential war materiel to Israel. This included regular payments under the memorandum of understanding that Trump announced he was scrapping last week and emergency aid granted in 2024 and 2025.

Israeli leaders have been at odds with the White House in the past — over settlement construction in the occupied West Bank, military action in Lebanon and Gaza and the appearance of meddling in US politics. But never before has the country found itself at the centre of such a political storm, blamed for an epochal shift in US politics.

The turn in fortunes comes at a time when Israel is more isolated internationally than at any time in decades and even though Trump has declared himself the most pro-Israel US president in history.

In his first term, he recognised Jerusalem — whose status is disputed with the Palestinians — as the Israeli capital and the country's claim to sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, reversing decades of US policy. But even he has become increasingly frustrated with Netanyahu.

Ehud Olmert, who himself served as Israeli premier, emphasises Netanyahu's formation of the most far-right government in the country's history and his loss of the support of American Jews.

"The entire time I was prime minister, it was never taken for granted that Israel can enjoy the wholehearted support of the American people, the American government, the White House or in Congress," Olmert tells the FT.

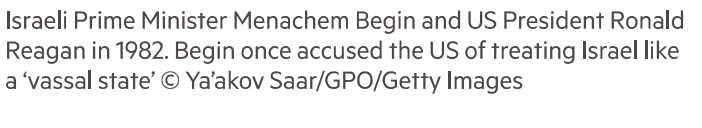
"It was something that needed very good care and a great deal of sensitivity — we were always aware that losing that support will have an important cost to our interests, to our security and our wellbeing."

That does not mean, Olmert argues, a complete obedience to Israel's patron, but a balance between Israeli national strategy and political principles and "making sure that there were never excessive measures taken by us beyond what was reasonable . . . and within the framework of what the friends of Israel can accept".

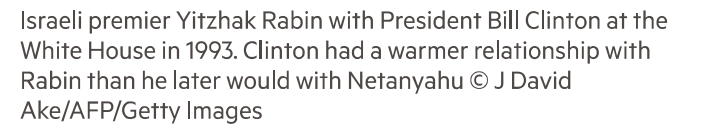
Now, however, the war with Iran has shattered the idea that a US-armed Israel is essential to keep oil flowing in an unstable Middle East, according to Welch, the Vermont senator.

"Netanyahu persuaded our dumb president to get into a dumb war with Iran, and the biggest threat to our oil — it turns out — is Netanyahu pushing Trump into a war that closed the Strait of Hormuz," he adds.

Others say it is premature to assume the current rift is permanent. Menachem Begin, the first Israeli prime minister from Netanyahu's Likud party, once complained that then president Ronald Reagan treated Israel like a "vassal state", and accused parts of the US administration of antisemitism in 1981.



Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and US President Ronald Reagan in 1982. Begin once accused the US of treating Israel like a 'vassal state' © Ya'akov Saar/GPO/Getty Images



Israeli premier Yitzhak Rabin with President Bill Clinton at the White House in 1993. Clinton had a warmer relationship with Rabin than he later would with Netanyahu © J David Ake/AFP/Getty Images

Towards the end of the last century, president George HW Bush delayed billions of dollars in loan guarantees over Israeli settlement expansion. His successor in the White House, Bill Clinton, reportedly thundered "Who's the fucking superpower here?" after a less-than-conciliatory meeting with Netanyahu.

But relations between the US and Israel began to take on a more partisan tone after Netanyahu returned to power in 2009 and threw in his lot with the Republicans.

The biggest fracture came in 2015 when he gave an address to the Republican-controlled Congress attacking Obama's efforts to reach a deal to curb Tehran's nuclear capabilities. The move enraged the administration, which went on to sign with other world powers an agreement that put strict restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief.

Trump ultimately ripped up the deal, to Netanyahu's satisfaction.

Officials say that the Israeli prime minister's manoeuvring caused long-lasting damage in Washington. When he last addressed Congress in 2024, some 50 Democrats boycotted the event or walked out.

“That was a massive misjudgement . . . If you want to have good relations with the administration, you don’t circumvent the administration and go to the Hill. You just don’t do that,” one former senior Israeli official says of the 2015 speech.

Michael Oren, who was Israel’s ambassador to the US during the early years of the Obama presidency, says he warned Netanyahu not to exacerbate the situation by antagonising the president, who had publicly called for a Palestinian state in his first major foreign policy address.

Oren, who is also a historian, adds that a longer-term trend was at play.

Netanyahu speaking to the US Congress in 2024. Some 50 Democrats boycotted the address or walked out © Drew Angerer/AFP/Getty Images

Israeli President Shimon Peres, second from left, and ambassador Michael Oren in Washington in 2011. Oren believes wavering American support for Israel is the culmination of a long-term trend © Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

By aligning itself with America during the cold war, Israel proved to be an indispensable beachhead in the Middle East while Syria and others were Soviet allies. But as Israeli politics shifted to the right, endangering a western strategic interest — the creation of a Palestinian state — western support began to waver.

He says: “This has all been a process that you’re seeing culminating right now.”

The next round

For decades, the US's pro-Israel lobby and the two countries' defence ties have undergirded the relationship.

Now much has changed.

Aipac, the biggest pro-Israel lobbying group, which has long been highly influential on Capitol Hill, spent some $70mn on the midterms through its main funding arm, the United Democracy Project, according to the non-profit OpenSecrets.org, which tracks money in US politics.

UDP spent about half of those funds in Michigan, where Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic senator-elect who is a fierce critic of Israel, triumphed — as did other prominent candidates Aipac opposed.

Aipac said last week that more than 245 of the candidates it backed won their contests, although 10 per cent had been defeated "in a wave election".

A protest in New York against the pro-Israel lobbying group Aipac. It spent about $70mn on the midterm elections, half of which went in Michigan © Edna Leshowitz/ZUMA/Reuters

Michigan Democratic senator-elect Abdul El-Sayed. He is a fierce critic of Israel and triumphed in spite of Aipac's heavy spending to oppose him © Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP

In a post on X, it added: “Our community will increase its support for Democrats and Republicans who recognise that a strong partnership with Israel helps keep both countries secure, advances peace and stability, promotes democratic values, and grows our economy through trade and innovation.”

But some US supporters say Aipac went too far with its aggressive campaign spending and public attacks. “I thought they never should have changed the way they operated before,” says one observer who wished to remain anonymous to avoid criticising a group they generally agreed with, adding that it would have been better for Aipac to remain in the “shadows”.

“Clearly this was not a good election for the pro-Israel community,” says Michael Makovsky, the CEO of pro-Israel think-tank Jinsa, adding that “it demands a lot of soul-searching” by the country’s supporters “about where they went wrong”.

Trump’s remarks about US military assistance, made just as Americans headed to the polls, also seemed to recognise a surge in anti-Israel sentiment, including the view that the alliance was at least partly to blame for the Iran war.

But if the remarks were intended to win votes, they failed. Some Republicans also question whether the US president, who is prone to making statements that surprise even his close aides, will stick to the plan he unveiled on Fox.

“Trump sometimes just says stuff, and then doesn’t follow through,” says Doug Heye, a Republican strategist.

The impact of cutting or withholding US aid has been hotly debated among Democrats in recent years, particularly as American liberals have recoiled from the images of suffering and destruction from Israel’s war in Gaza.

The militaries have co-ordinated closely during the Iran war and US officials say Israel provides valuable intelligence in the region. Because of the way the assistance is structured, Israel spends most of the money it receives from the US on purchasing American-made weaponry.

Former president Biden's more hawkish advisers argued that constraining US aid during Israel's war effort would have no impact on its behaviour, while other advisers — including human rights and Middle East experts at the state department — pointed to past occasions when Israeli leaders changed course under threat of cuts from their biggest benefactor.

The Israeli government and its backers in Washington routinely blame antisemitism for the criticism of the relationship in the US — even when the critics are American Jews.

Oren argues that in blaming Netanyahu for having lured Trump into the war with Iran, Vance was "recalling an antisemitic trope, that Jews somehow hoodwink innocent gentiles into things against their will".

Still, a majority of American Jews have long voted Democratic, a trend that has continued even as sharp critics of Israel, including El-Sayed and New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani, have won the party's backing.

A July poll by the Pew Research Center, a think-tank, found that 62 per cent of Americans had an unfavourable view of Israel's government, including an overwhelming majority of Democrats. A majority of Republicans aged 49 or under now have a negative view too, according to the survey. A Gallup poll in February indicated that for the first time more Americans sympathise with Palestinians than Israelis.

"The erosion in the status of Israel in the public opinion of America, not just amongst the Democrats but amongst the Jews themselves, is not only a result of the latest developments in Iran; it starts with Gaza," Olmert says.

That raises the question of whether Israel can reset its relations with the White House if Gadi Eisenkot, currently attempting to put together a coalition to oust Netanyahu, becomes the next prime minister.

President Trump with Netanyahu in the White House. Trump styles himself as the most pro-Israel president ever, but even he has become frustrated with the Israeli premier © Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Yashar party leader Gadi Eisenkot, left. If he can form a coalition to oust Netanyahu, Eisenkot may be able to reset Israeli relations with the US © Abir Sultan/EPA/Shutterstock

Some are hopeful. “If a new government comes in with a fresh approach and clearly does not have the Netanyahu approach to national security, or to our relations with the United States, and wants to restructure a more bipartisan relationship, I think it can be reversed,” says Jeremy Issacharoff, a former Israeli diplomat to the US.

Oren argues that Eisenkot could try to woo back at least some western support by halting settlement expansion and reining in Jewish settlers who are using state-sanctioned violence to chase Palestinians off their land in the West Bank.

“He could come out and say something that hasn’t been said for a long time — we are in the peace business, we are interested in peace,” Oren says.

But the former ambassador argues that there are limits to what Israel can do to deal with the turn in the tide. No matter who ends up as Israel’s next leader, he maintains, “we cannot change our fundamental security policy — nobody’s going to pull out of Lebanon, and no one’s going to pull out of Gaza”.

On the US side, Aaron David Miller, a former state department official now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is already looking to the next round of elections and the pressure that will put on politicians.

“What are the talking points that Democratic candidates for president need to use on the Israel issue?” he asks. “Once you see those . . . you’ll begin to get a sense of how much the US-Israeli relationship has changed.”

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