



Trump Takes on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Donald Trump's actions and announcements to date regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are reversing the decisions of previous administrations and strengthening Benjamin Netanyahu's political position. At the same time, they threaten the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. The deliberately ambiguous statements about the resolution of the crisis seem gauged to increase pressure on regional states and European partners.

Contingencies. The start of [Trump's second presidency](#) overlapped with changes in the political situation regarding Israel and its immediate neighbourhood. The day before the inauguration, a [truce between Israel and Hamas](#) went into effect, during the first phase of which the parties are to agree to the terms of its next phase, expected to include further hostage releases and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the Israeli army has stepped up [operations in the West Bank](#). By the end of January, the terms of [Israel's ceasefire with Hezbollah](#) were to be set, but it was pushed back to mid-February in the face of a stalled complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon caused by delays on the part of the Lebanese army in taking over the area. Israel has also consolidated its control over [areas on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights seized last December](#), declaring its intention to remain there indefinitely.

Trump's return to power affects [the Palestinian Authority's \(PA\) political situation](#). In recent months, it has taken measures calculated to improve its negotiating position. In terms of security, these include [operations](#) against armed groups fighting Israel (e.g., in Jenin) and, at the institutional level, identifying an interim successor for President Mahmoud Abbas [should he step down](#). In addition, the PA announced a review of the financial benefits system for Palestinian prisoners convicted of acts of terrorism in Israel, among other things, which has been an ongoing [demand of U.S.](#) and European authorities. The PA also participates in a limited way in implementing the truce in the Gaza Strip as one of the institutions controlling [the Rafah crossing](#).

Trump's Early Decisions. During the presidential campaign, Trump and his political camp strongly emphasised the need to [stop the hostilities and extinguish the crisis in the Middle East](#). Even before his second inauguration, the incoming president and his associates took part in the truce talks in the Gaza Strip. The pressure from them influenced the Israelis to be more flexible and implement the ceasefire. As [announced](#) before taking office, Trump made more than a dozen decisions in his first days in office directly or indirectly concerning U.S.-Israeli relations. He withdrew [sanctions on radical Jewish settlers and their organisations](#) imposed by the previous administration. He [again used an executive order](#) striking at the activities of the [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) in connection with the issuance of [arrest warrants against Prime Minister Netanyahu and others](#). Also, [he set the exit or curtailment of U.S. participation \(including financially\) in several international organisations and formats](#) (e.g., [UNRWA](#), Human Rights Council) and justified it by accusations they were anti-Israel. The new U.S. authorities announced the transfer of armaments to Israel withheld at the end of the Biden administration, including heavy bombs and military bulldozers.

Humanitarian aid as well as support for the non-governmental sector in Israel and Palestine will be affected by the suspension and audit of U.S. foreign and development aid initiated by the Trump administration. His presidency also means the previous criticism of the Israeli government on domestic policy issues, especially [attempts to politicize the judiciary](#), will cease.

Declarations and Calculations. During Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Washington in early February, Trump stated that the United States would "take control" of the Gaza Strip and rebuild it in its fashion. He suggested that the Palestinian population be displaced to neighbouring countries (e.g., Egypt, Jordan) or other territories in the Middle East and North Africa. In his subsequent statements, he added that this should take place after the cessation of hostilities without the participation of the U.S. military or the return of Gaza residents, as he initially claimed. In addition, he said that he would address the issue of [Jewish settlements in the West Bank](#) in a few days, as well as further efforts to expand [Israeli-Arab normalisation](#), primarily with [Saudi Arabia](#). The U.S. also announced a return to the [policy of "maximum pressure"](#) against Iran, with the American president dismissing the scenario of a joint Israeli-U.S. military operation against [Iran's nuclear programme](#), pointing to the priority of a diplomatic solution.

Trump's broad, vague statements implying direct U.S. involvement in the Gaza conflict and intention to carry out *de facto* ethnic cleansing in the form of forced relocation, were met with harsh criticism from the international community, especially from countries in the region, which strongly rejected any plans to remove the Palestinian population. Trump's words were more favourably received by Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli political scene, especially far-right groups, which advocate the reconstruction of Jewish settlements in Gaza and the annexation of settlements in the West Bank and make maintaining support for the government contingent on renewed fighting with Hamas.

Trump's primary purpose could be to force [a more significant commitment on the part of the countries of the region](#) and, to a lesser extent, Israel to develop a workable political plan for Gaza and assume the costs of its implementation. From the perspective of the presidential camp, this strategy worked well as the [so-called "Trump Plan" in 2020](#) and [Israel's stated intention to annex Jewish settlements](#), which in part led to the political compromise of [Israeli-Arab normalisation](#). The new statements, though, combined with other major decisions (e.g., withholding financial aid), risk the limited stability rendered by the ceasefire, especially since, from Hamas' perspective, Trump's words are tantamount to an intention to remove them from Gaza. Rather than pressure towards compromise, Trump's statements seem to have stiffened the

organisation's position in implementing the current phase of the truce and negotiating its next phase of the ceasefire, which in turn leads to more American pressure on the mediators.

Outlook. President Trump's statements introduce an element of deep uncertainty for the region due to their radical and contradictory aims. They are also at odds with [the president's previous policy line](#), which called for a reduction in U.S. involvement in the Middle East, especially a costly direct presence. Implementation of it in the form he has presented would require the U.S. to use enormous political and economic pressure on the countries in the region, which itself threatens to destabilise them and could ultimately lead to a breakdown in U.S.-Israeli-Arab relations.

Trump's backing temporarily stabilises Netanyahu's political position, especially in negotiations with the far-right, and that may translate into securing sufficient support for extending the Gaza truce. However, the declarations and indirect effects of U.S. actions may lead to radicalisation of public sentiment on both sides—increasing support for Hamas at the expense of Fatah and encouraging further settlement violence—and ultimately result in an escalation, including the breaking off of talks and renewed, expanded fighting. Additional risks are generated by the possibility of the U.S. [agreeing to the annexation of settlements](#), which would mean for Israel open conflict with the PA and a rupture of relations with Arab states ([renouncing annexation was a condition for establishing relations](#) in 2020). Attempts by the Israeli government to partially implement Trump's suggestions, including forcing departures of those wishing to leave Gaza or blocking the return of existing refugees, would have a similar effect.

Trump's statements regarding Gaza undermine his other stated goal of expanding Israeli-Arab normalisation. At this stage, this process requires [a much broader system of incentives](#) from the U.S. than during Trump's first term and may necessitate [areas beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#). The PA, though, seems willing to match the Trump administration's expectations with the goal to retain U.S. support and return to administering Gaza.

The situation calls for broader EU-Arab cooperation, whose stance will be most important for further action by the U.S. authorities. The EU should consistently support de-escalation mechanisms by maintaining its position against forced displacement of the Palestinian population and opposing annexation.