

regional posture. By early 2020, the relationship had moved beyond economic pressure. The US strike that killed General Qassem Soleimani marked a decisive escalation and fundamentally altered regional deterrence dynamics. Subsequent reporting suggested that some American officials believed Israeli preferences had contributed to an increasingly confrontational policy trajectory. Accounts published after the strike also describe concern within the administration about the possibility of becoming committed to a wider regional conflict under circum-

stances that Washington did not fully control. Several officials later expressed concern that unilateral Israeli actions could create circumstances in which the US would face overwhelming political or military pressure to intervene directly.

Derailing the 2026 memorandum

The negotiations surrounding the memorandum of understanding in Islamabad earlier this year illustrate how these historical dynamics continue to shape regional diplomacy. Public disagreements over the

memorandum soon extended beyond the negotiations themselves. Senior officials in both Washington and Tehran accused outside actors of attempting to undermine political support for the agreement. During an interview on The Joe Rogan Experience earlier this month, US Vice President JD Vance stated: "There are some people within [the Israeli] system, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt, who are manipulating and trying to change American public opinion to keep the war going on indefinitely." Vance accused Israeli cabinet-linked networks of funding American

political actors and intentionally framing the negotiation as a "surrender" to make it politically toxic. Information operations also became part of the diplomatic contest. Israeli media reporting has described Israeli digital influence capabilities directed towards Persian-language online discourse presenting the memorandum as humiliating to Iran. Iranian officials have recently stated publicly that these activities sought to amplify domestic polarisation and weaken political support for negotiations. I have reviewed only a portion of the historical record, one

that reveals a recurring pattern in diplomatic efforts to manage US-Iran differences — efforts in many of which I played a leading role. After more than four decades of direct involvement in efforts to prevent these fundamental differences from erupting into active hostility and all-out war, I have reached an inescapable conclusion: attempts to manage tensions between Washington and Tehran have repeatedly unfolded within a broader strategic contest. That context has been shaped not only by repeated US failures to honour its commitments, but also by the

actions of regional actors with profoundly different conceptions of what constitutes stability in the Middle East. The historical record suggests that successive Israeli cabinets have repeatedly viewed sustained US-Iranian confrontation as strategically preferable. Recognising and countering this systemic manipulation of intelligence, media, and domestic politics on both sides of the divide is essential if future diplomatic initiatives are to avoid the fate of so many previous efforts.

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How Netanyahu lost America



By Said Arikat
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OPINION

As Benjamin Netanyahu began his latest visit to Washington, DC, to reaffirm Israel's indispensable alliance with the United States, a public opinion survey offered a remarkable measure of how profoundly that relationship has changed. An Economist/YouGov poll released on July 28 found that 49 percent of Americans believe the Israeli prime minister should be arrested under the warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. Even more striking, 47 percent said they believe the prime minister has committed war crimes in Gaza. Only a decade ago, such findings would have been politically inconceivable. Today, they are the clearest evidence that Netanyahu has accomplished what generations of Israeli leaders worked to avoid: transforming Israel from a bipartisan cause into one of the US's most polarising foreign policy issues. That transformation did not begin with the October 7, 2023, attack, nor solely with the genocide and devastation in Gaza. Those events accelerated a process Netanyahu set in motion years earlier. His greatest strategic failure was political. By tethering Israel ever more tightly to one US party, treating Republicans as permanent guarantors while dismissing Democratic concerns, he undermined the broad bipartisan consensus that had anchored the relationship for decades. For generations, Israeli leaders understood that Israel could never afford to become a partisan issue. The alliance endured because both parties regarded Israel as a strategic partner whose security transcended domestic politics. That consensus was as valuable as any military aid package. Netanyahu inherited that asset. He is now in danger of squandering it. Ironically, few Israeli politicians knew America better. Educated partly in the US, fluent in its political language and deeply connected to Washington's establishment, he understood how power operated. Yet that familiarity bred miscalculation. Convinced that demographic and ideological changes favoured a permanently ascendant Republican Party, Netanyahu abandoned his predecessors' careful balancing act and invested

heavily in one side of the US's widening partisan divide. The decisive rupture came in 2015, when he accepted a Republican invitation to address a joint session of Congress in open defiance of president Barack Obama during the Iran nuclear debate. Conservatives celebrated the speech as an act of courage; strategically, it marked a watershed. Never before had an Israeli prime minister intervened so directly against a sitting president. Millions of Democrats concluded that Israel's leader had chosen sides, and the consequences outlasted the Iran deal. Donald Trump's presidency appeared to vindicate this strategy. He recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moved the US embassy, recognised Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement, abandoned pressure over settlements and discarded demands for a Palestinian state. Netanyahu mistook those victories for proof that bipartisan support had become obsolete, believing Republican loyalty could permanently replace Democratic consensus. That belief was strategically short-sighted. Alliances survive because they are rooted in institutions, shared values and broad legitimacy — not because they depend on one administration. By allowing Israel to become identified with Republican politics, Netanyahu weakened the alliance precisely when it needed to remain strongest. Israel's genocidal war on Gaza exposed the consequences. President Joe Biden, despite unprecedented pressure from his Democratic Party, extended extraordinary military, diplomatic and political support to Israel after the October 7, 2023, attacks. He visited Israel during wartime, accelerated military assistance, defended it at the United Nations and absorbed fierce domestic criticism. Netanyahu answered with repeated public confrontations, accusing Washington of withholding weapons, rejecting US proposals for post-war governance, resisting humanitarian access and contradicting the White House on strategic questions. Even as Biden invested enormous political capital, Netanyahu appeared more intent on demonstrating independence to his domestic base than preserving the confidence of Israel's most important ally. Meanwhile, the conduct of the



war fundamentally altered global perceptions. Relentless bombardment devastated Gaza, destroying hospitals, schools, universities and entire neighbourhoods, while severe humanitarian restrictions produced warnings of famine. Senior ministers openly advocated permanent displacement, collective punishment and indefinite military control. Whether the alleged conduct meets the legal definition of war crimes will be determined by courts; politically, the verdict is already forming — not only worldwide but increasingly within the US.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks about Iran during a joint meeting of the United States Congress in the House chamber at the US Capitol in Washington, D.C., on March 3, 2015. Republican representatives are seen sitting to his left.
● WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES.



The poll findings are significant beyond Netanyahu personally. The fact that nearly half of Americans believe the Israeli prime minister should be arrested, and nearly half believe he has committed war crimes, reflects a profound shift in how Americans view Israel under his leadership. Polls fluctuate; strategic realignments do not. Once public attitudes harden across generations, rebuilding trust becomes extraordinarily difficult. The political consequences are visible. Within the Democratic Party, unconditional support has given way to demands that military assistance be made conditional on compliance with international humanitarian law. Younger voters discuss the conflict in terms of occupation, apartheid and universal human rights rather than traditional alliances. Members of Congress once reluctant to criticise Israel

Pro-Palestine protesters demonstrate outside the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., on July 24, 2024. Protesters are demanding the arrest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
● JONATHAN FERNANDES/SIPA USA

now openly challenge successive cabinets. Even Republican support can no longer be assumed to be permanent; younger conservative populists have become sceptical of unconditional foreign commitments. The bipartisan consensus that once protected Israel is steadily giving way to a far more volatile environment. Netanyahu's governing coalition has deepened that crisis. By empowering ultranationalist ministers who openly advocate annexation, reject Palestinian self-determination and defend collective punishment, his cabinet has blurred the line

between extremist rhetoric and official state policy. Settler violence and the near absence of accountability have further eroded Israel's standing. Most revealing is the complete absence of any serious political vision for ending the conflict. Netanyahu has consistently rejected meaningful discussion of Palestinian statehood, opposed the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza and offered no credible framework for reconstruction beyond prolonged military control. Nor is this simply Netanyahu's project; a clear majority of Israelis and virtually all mainstream political leaders share these convictions. Military power can destroy infrastructure and weaken armed groups; it cannot by itself resolve a national conflict rooted in competing claims to land, sovereignty and self-determination. By refusing a viable political horizon, Netanyahu has made perpetual conflict appear not as an unintended consequence but as official policy. History may be kinder to tactical victories than to strategic failures. Netanyahu secured significant diplomatic gains during favourable administrations, but those achievements rested on a foundation built over decades: bipartisan confidence that Israel remained both a strategic ally and a democratic partner. That foundation is now visibly cracking. The timing of the poll could scarcely be more symbolic. As Netanyahu met US leaders to reinforce the alliance, nearly half of the American public viewed him not as a trusted ally but as a leader who should face arrest, while almost as many regarded him as a war criminal. These numbers suggest that Netanyahu's political strategy has fundamentally altered Israel's standing in American public life. Military superiority can deter enemies. Political legitimacy cannot be manufactured once lost. Trust, credibility and bipartisan support are strategic assets accumulated over generations and squandered far more quickly than they are rebuilt. If future historians search for the moment when Israel's unrivalled position in Washington began its most consequential decline, they will not begin in Tehran, Gaza or Beirut. They will begin in Washington itself — and with the decisions of Netanyahu.

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