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Sixth Trump-Netanyahu Summit: Minor Differences Mask Strategic Consensus

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 29 December, American President Donald Trump hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida to discuss mechanisms for implementing his so-called "peace plan" for the Gaza Strip and moving to the second phase of the ceasefire agreement over the territory. The first phase had gone into effect on 10 October, after more than two years of Israeli bombardment. The plan is based on a 20-point, US-drafted "peace plan" which incorporated all of Israel's demands.

The Meeting in Context

Prior to the meeting, some Israeli journalists had suggested that it was likely to be difficult,¹ reporting that Netanyahu was obstructing the transition to the second phase, even as Trump worked to set up a "peace council" headed by himself, and to create a new, technocratic government in Gaza, backed by an international peacekeeping force.² Trump is seeking to move quickly towards a post-Hamas era without addressing thorny issues like disarmament. This is driven by his conviction that maintaining the status quo will mean that Gaza remains a persistent flashpoint, hindering the Abraham Accords normalization process between Israel and Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Yet Netanyahu maintains that any ceasefire with Hamas or Hezbollah will be unsustainable, and that such groups will not disarm voluntarily. Further disagreements have also emerged between the US and Israel regarding Syria. Netanyahu reportedly asked Trump to maintain certain Assad-era sanctions against the country, but his request was rejected.³ Trump signed the repeal of the Caesar Act on 19 December, after it had been approved by Congress.

Nevertheless, when they met, Trump and Netanyahu were careful to downplay these disagreements, which press outlets consistently exaggerate. Trump was keen to attribute his "achievements" in the Middle East to his cooperation with Netanyahu. He insisted he was "not concerned about anything that Israel is doing" and said it had adhered to the Gaza ceasefire plan "100 percent" – a clear contradiction of the facts.

This effectively means that the Trump administration is prepared to justify anything Israel does, even retroactively. Indeed, Trump went even further: he reiterated his call for Israeli President Isaac Herzog to pardon Netanyahu in the corruption and fraud cases he is facing, describing him as a "wartime prime minister at the highest level."⁴ These statements were widely interpreted as direct political support for Netanyahu in an election year. For his part, Netanyahu informed his host that

1 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu's Mar-a-Lago Visit 'Crucial' for Future of Gaza Deal," *Axios*, 26/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2ED>.

2 Alex Leary, Vera Bergengruen & Dov Lieber, "Trump Threatens New Military Action with Israel against Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2dk>.

3 Lazar Berman, "Trump and Netanyahu Present United Stance on Gaza, but will Hamas Agree to Go Along?" *The Times of Israel*, 31/12/2025, accessed on 6/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2t3>.

4 "Press Conference: Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu Hold a Joint Press Event," *Roll Call*, 29/12/2025, accessed on 4/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Xv>.

Israel would grant Trump the Israel Prize, the country's highest cultural honour, making him the first non-Israeli to receive it in nearly eight decades.⁵

Two Approaches to Interpreting the Trump-Netanyahu Relationship

While Trump and Netanyahu differ on certain issues, these differences are minor details within a strategic alliance and a shared vision for the region and the world, framed by the logic of power politics. Netanyahu did not take umbrage at Trump's remark, during their joint press conference, that he is "sometimes difficult,"⁶ as this serves both their interests with their respective electoral bases. Trump also needs to make such remarks to send a message to his Arab allies that he understands their position, and that Netanyahu does indeed embarrass him in some instances. Ultimately, however, the two men are in lock step regarding the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and vis-à-vis Israel's desire for another military escalation against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, with only minor differences over the details – notwithstanding more significant divergences over issues related to Türkiye and Syria.

In this context, two approaches are helpful in interpreting the relationship between Trump and Netanyahu. The first, and most plausible, assumes a degree of collusion between the two, whereby the US provides full support for Israeli efforts to "reshape the Middle East," based on the principle that the strong have the right to impose their will and define spheres of influence for themselves in an Arab region that has demonstrated profound weakness in resisting them.⁷

Seen through this lens, Israel aims to "tackle" Iran while the Arab world is preoccupied with its internal conflicts. This has allowed Israel to violate its commitments under the "first phase" of the Gaza ceasefire agreement, with tacit American approval. This is demonstrated in Trump's affirmation that Israel has fully adhered to the agreement, despite its ongoing, daily violations – including killing civilians, destroying what remains of the territory's infrastructure, and keeping land crossings, particularly the vital Rafah crossing, closed in order to prevent the entry of desperately needed humanitarian aid, despite the harsh winter conditions. The second approach suggests that Washington prefers to provide continuous public support to Israel, while imposing clear dictates behind closed doors. This assumes that Netanyahu has little room to resist demands that the US makes in closed meetings, and that "excessive compliments come with a price."⁸

5 Loveday Morris & Lior Soroka, "Trump Sends 'Wartime Prime Minister' Netanyahu Back to Israel with a Boost," *The Washington Post*, 30/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2WT>.

6 Tyler Pager & David M. Halbfinger, "Trump and Netanyahu Present a United Front, Showing Few Signs of their Strains over Gaza and Syria," *The New York Times*, 29/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F30L>.

7 Ori Goldberg, "Netanyahu's Mar-a-Lago win that wasn't," *Al Jazeera*, 30/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F34X>.

8 Morris & Soroka.

On the Agenda

During their meeting, Trump and Netanyahu addressed a variety of topics, including the transition to the "second phase" of the Gaza agreement, escalating violence by Israeli settlers in the West Bank, Israel's drive to annex parts of that territory, efforts to disarm Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, and growing tensions in Israel's relations with Syria and Türkiye.

1. "Phase 2" in the Gaza Strip

Leaks from the meeting suggest that Trump obtained Netanyahu's formal consent to move to the "second phase" of the ceasefire agreement.⁹ However, this will have little effect on the ground, as Netanyahu continues to demand that Hamas disarm as a condition for implementing the 20-point Gaza plan, and continues to insist that Trump agrees with him on this. The US President is expected to announce the launch of the second phase of the plan imminently, including the formation of the "Peace Council" and its first meeting – chaired by himself – as well as the formation of a new Palestinian government. This announcement may take place during the World Economic Forum in Davos, starting on 19 January. While Trump agrees with Netanyahu that Hamas is "going to be given a very short period of time to disarm [or] there will be hell to pay," multiple media reports suggest that Hamas has been given a two-month deadline to disarm, along with specific criteria defining what constitutes disarmament.¹⁰

Meanwhile, there is still no agreement on crucial details, such as how the disarmament will be carried out, the types of weapons to be targeted, and who will implement the task if Hamas refuses to give them up voluntarily. Hamas and other Palestinian armed factions insist that any such step can only be taken via a Palestinian government with a national, legitimate mandate. While Trump has claimed that some 60 countries will be responsible for forcing Hamas to disarm, these countries have shown no desire to take part in this effort or to engage militarily with the group in Gaza.

When it comes to the reconstruction of Gaza, Trump's rhetoric is contradictory and confused. On the one hand, he has expressed hope that reconstruction will begin soon after Hamas is disarmed. On the other, when asked if reconstruction might begin before that, he said, "I think it's going to begin pretty soon," adding that he and the Israeli premier were "looking forward to it."¹¹ US officials have said that their plans are geared towards launching reconstruction projects "within weeks," while acknowledging that the disarmament process will take much longer.¹² Yet the contradictions in Trump's rhetoric do not end there. He has reiterated his openness to the idea of "mass emigration" from the Gaza Strip, saying: "Let's see if that opportunity presents itself." He claimed after his

9 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Raised Possible 'Round 2' Strikes on Iran with Trump," *Axios*, 31/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2g2>.

10 *Roll Call*, "Press Conference."

11 Grace Gilson "Trump, hosting Netanyahu, says next phase of Gaza plan to begin 'as quickly as we can'", *J. The Jewish News of Northern California*, 30/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2nv>

12 "Netanyahu Wins Bigly from his Meeting with Trump," *The Economist*, 30/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2E8>.

meeting with Netanyahu that "half of Gaza would leave... [if they] were given the opportunity to live in a better climate, they would move."¹³

2. The West Bank

Despite to his efforts to demonstrate, in public, his alignment with Netanyahu on the situation in Gaza, Trump has clearly hinted at differences between them regarding the West Bank. That said, he has not asked Netanyahu to halt the expansion of Israeli settlements there, or to halt Israel's practices in Palestinian refugee camps, cities, and villages. Where they disagree is over the actions of Israeli settlers. Trump believes that escalating violence by settlers against Palestinian civilians, the Palestinian Authority's financial instability, and continued Israeli settlement expansion all undermine efforts to repair Israel's relations with European countries, as well as hindering the expansion of the Abraham Accords to naturalise Israel's relations with Arab and Muslim-majority states.¹⁴ Yet Trump's policies do not seem consistent with such concerns. Despite declaring in September that he opposed Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank in response to a wave of recognition by European states of the State of Palestine, his actions since his return to the White House at the start of 2025 run counter to this position; he has lifted the sanctions imposed by his predecessor Joe Biden against extremist settlers, and appointed prominent Christian Zionist Mike Huckabee, known for his staunch support for the settlement movement, as Ambassador to Israel.

3. Iran and Hezbollah

Also on the agenda at Mar-a-Lago was the possibility of new attacks against Iran in 2026. Netanyahu presented Trump with what he described as information on Tehran's efforts to revive its nuclear programme, which Israel and the US targeted in a joint attack last June. He also raised Israeli concerns over Iran's ballistic missile programme.¹⁵ Following the meeting, Trump said that he would support an Israeli attack on Iran if it attempted to rebuild what had been destroyed in the strikes, whether in terms of nuclear or missile capabilities. However, he voiced a clear preference for reaching a new nuclear agreement with Tehran rather than launching another military operation. His repeated statements that the US had "destroyed" Iran's nuclear programme have undermined his ability to justify further strikes against Iran, or to give Netanyahu a green light to do so. But his recent remarks that he is willing to intervene to "protect" protesters in Iran if the authorities use violence against could be interpreted in various ways. Regarding the question of Hezbollah, Trump supports Netanyahu's policies in Lebanon.¹⁶

¹³ *Roll Call*, "Press Conference."

¹⁴ Barak Ravid, "Trump, Top Aides asked Netanyahu to Change Policy in Occupied West Bank," *Axios*, 29/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2WK>.

¹⁵ Ravid, "Netanyahu Raised Possible 'Round 2' Strikes on Iran with Trump."

¹⁶ Amichai Stein, "'Hezbollah Must be Disarmed': Trump Tells Netanyahu he'll Back an Attack on Hezbollah – Exclusive," *The Jerusalem Post*, 31/12/2025, accessed on 5/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F36n>.

4. Türkiye and Syria

The most prominent points of contention during the meeting related to Türkiye and Syria. Israel strongly opposes Turkish participation in any so-called peacekeeping force – or any other Turkish role – in Gaza. By contrast, Washington views Türkiye as a regional power that cannot be ignored and must be given a role. Nor does Trump share Israel's concerns regarding Washington selling F-35 fighter jets to Ankara, which would end Israel's status as the only regional power with access to the aircraft – especially as the related technology varies from one buyer to another. During his press conference with the Israeli leader, Trump affirmed his respect for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, adding that "[Netanyahu] respects him, and they're not going to have a problem"¹⁷ – a clear attempt to downplay their disagreements.

On the topic of Syria, Israel argues that it cannot trust President Ahmed al-Sharaa due to his jihadist past, and is using this as a pretext to expand its occupation of further territory in the Golan Heights, impose a demilitarized zone in southern Syria, and continue bombing Syrian military sites. By contrast, Trump believes that Al-Sharaa can be trusted, and that the new Syrian leadership could pave the way to a more stable relationship with Israel. Netanyahu has acquiesced to Trump's request to resume talks with Syria over a potential security agreement, emphasizing that Israel must dictate the conditions even for engaging in negotiations with Syria, while simultaneously indicating his government's willingness to engage with the American vision on this issue, despite having publicly expressed reservations.¹⁸

Conclusion

Despite Israeli and US media outlets highlighting the differences between Trump and Netanyahu and predicting a difficult meeting, the proceedings and the joint press conference that followed demonstrated once again the high degree of alignment between the two allies. Any differences that do exist are over details within an overall strategic alliance and a shared vision for the region and the world – an alignment evident in the power politics pursued by both parties.

¹⁷ Morris & Soroka.

¹⁸ Ravid, "Trump, Top Aides Asked Netanyahu to Change Policy in Occupied West Bank."