

How Trump Can Remake the Middle East

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If he uses his major regional leverage to curtail the Iranian nuclear threat and end the Gaza war, he will be well-placed to resume other important tasks that have been sitting on the back burner—including Israeli-Saudi normalization.

Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and military theorist, famously noted that war is an instrument, not an end in itself. Only in circumstances in which one is fighting a war of survival can military means be said to overshadow political considerations.

After the Hamas onslaught on Oct. 7, 2023, with the country and its leadership and military in a state of shock, Israelis found themselves fighting a war of survival. They would frequently say that without destroying Hamas's military and guaranteeing that it no longer controls Gaza, Israel could not survive in its own neighborhood. Politics was not top of mind.

Since that time, Israel has destroyed Hamas as a fighting force and eradicated most of its military infrastructure in Gaza. And Israel's military and intelligence achievements went well beyond what it has done to Hamas: No one outside of Israel believed that it could decimate Hezbollah, decapitating its leadership, dismantling its command and control system, and destroying 80 percent of its missiles. Similarly, few people thought **Israel could destroy** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/29/iran-israel-strikes-missiles-air-defense/>) all of Iran's strategic air and missile defenses and 90 percent of its ballistic missile producing capability on the night of Oct. 26, 2024.

Finally, almost no one would have predicted that Israel's defeat of Hamas and Hezbollah would set in motion Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's attacks that would lead to the ouster of the Assad regime in Syria. Without Syria, Iran no longer has a land corridor to resupply and rebuild Hezbollah, the crown jewel of its "**axis of resistance**

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/08/iran-assad-syria-axis-resistance/>).”

As a result, Iran’s strategy for making Israel unlivable—surrounding it with violent proxies intent on its destruction—has been dealt a fatal blow. A massive investment by the Islamic Republic is yielding nothing. Israel’s military achievements have fundamentally changed the balance of power in the region.

But were Clausewitz alive today, he would ask how these remarkable military gains will translate to political outcomes. Israel remains in Gaza. But **having rejected**

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/05/13/israel-gaza-hamas-counterinsurgency/>) Gen. David H. Petraeus’s strategy of “clear, hold and build,” the Israel Defense Forces must go back into Gazan neighborhoods such as Beit Hanoun and Jabalya for the fourth or fifth time. Without an alternative to Hamas—which Israel cannot create—Gaza might remain a drag on Israel, not a victory.

Moreover, because of Iran’s losses and current vulnerability, some in the country now believe they must restore their deterrent by pursuing a nuclear weapon. With Iran’s accumulation of **near-weapons-grade** **(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/04/10/iran-nuclear-bomb-iaea-fordow/>)** fissile material, this is a real danger.

Israel might feel it will have both an opportunity—and the need—to attack Iran’s nuclear infrastructure to forestall this threat. But here again, force must not be an end in itself. Force can reduce the threat, but strategy must play a role in establishing a new political reality.

Such a strategy should be guided by two concrete objectives in 2025: Israel must end the war in Gaza and, provided the hostages are released, withdraw militarily. And it needs Iran’s nuclear infrastructure reduced to the point that a weapon is no longer an option. On its own, Israel cannot produce either of these outcomes. With an active American role, both might be achieved, in turn transforming the Middle East.

President-elect Donald Trump will enter office with that outcome as a real possibility. But he also enters with something else: leverage. At the outset of his administration, Israeli and key Arab leaders alike will fear the cost of saying no to him. That might be precisely what is needed to fully end the war in Gaza. (The temporary **ceasefire and hostage deal** (**<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/01/15/israel-war-gaza-ceasefire-hostages-news-hamas/>**) announced Wednesday is already a reflection of the Trump effect.)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is reluctant to withdraw from Gaza as long as Hamas remains in control politically. The UAE, Egypt, Morocco and some European nations—with American support—are prepared to set up and run **a transitional administration** (**<https://www.reuters.com/world/uae-in-talks-with-us-israel-about-provisional-government-post-war-gaza-2025-01-07/>**) in Gaza to take the place of Hamas, prevent a power vacuum, restore law and order, and begin the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction. However, these partners will not engage unless Israel withdraws. And, because they want to appear to be rescuing Palestinians and not providing cover for Israel, they want the Palestinian Authority to play some role—a scenario **Netanyahu has rejected** (**<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-palestinian-authority-current-form-should-not-run-gaza-2023-11-12/>**). Trump’s pressure can help bridge this gap.

Trump is also keen to see Saudi Arabia normalize relations with Israel. But the Saudis will not do so as long as the war continues and Israel remains in Gaza. The death and destruction in Gaza have soured attitudes toward Israel in the region. Until the war is over and the process of reconstruction has begun, the Saudis will hold back.

As for the nuclear question, Iran’s economic weakness combined with its military vulnerability now provide Trump with leverage here as well. No doubt, he will apply pressure economically. But he might also use the likely threat of Israeli force—or our own—to compel Iran to negotiate. The Iranians might not agree to reduce the size and character of their nuclear program to the extent necessary through negotiations alone. But having the use of force on the table

as a starting point will make the Iranians understand very clearly the risks should they move toward developing a weapon.

Trump should keep in mind that the issue of Iran is sufficiently important to both Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman that each side will concede many other things—on Gaza or Palestinian politics on one hand, and on Saudi recognition of Israel on the other. If Trump can show he has essentially removed the Iranian threat, much will be possible.

Can Trump do it? That remains to be seen. If he does, Clausewitz would surely approve.

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