

# Trump's Saudi visit: Can it be 'game over' for Netanyahu?



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Things change quickly. In November, when Trump won the election, Netanyahu's eyes beamed. He hailed Trump's re-election as the "greatest comeback in history," and was the first foreign leader to visit the White House. The Trump administration's rhetoric, public crackdown on pro-Palestine protests in the US, along with the appointment of staunch pro-Israeli members in his Republican administration, made it seem like the friendship between the two leaders would be emboldened over the next four years. But Trump defines the nature of US interests abroad not through a friendship context, but rather a transactional trade frame. Ukrainian President Zelensky learned the hard way that Trump likes to "hold the cards." Netanyahu, as shrewd as he portrays himself to be, seems poised to learn the same.

On Tuesday, Donald Trump arrived in Riyadh, embarking on his first foreign trip as US president to the Gulf nations. During Trump's first term, he recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, unlike any other US president before. The president visited with the aim of normalising Israel's relationships with the powerful Gulf nations by sidelining the heart of the issues in the Middle East: the Palestinian cause—a win for Netanyahu. But for the Israeli government, this trip has an unprecedented atmosphere of panic surrounding it, with high stakes that could work against Netanyahu. On Monday, May 12, the Israeli scene witnessed remarkable media momentum that reflected escalating field tensions, internal political confusion, and clear disarray in the management of prisoners' files and negotiations with Hamas. Developments in the upcoming release of American-Israeli soldier Edan Alexander, as part of an uncoordinated US initiative with Tel Aviv, have dominated Hebrew media headlines, amid warnings of serious strategic repercussions for Israel's regional and international status.

Due to the strong bond between Israel and the US, we, Palestinians, could not easily believe that there might be any real dispute between Trump and Netanyahu. But it's important to realise that a dispute between Donald Trump and Netanyahu does not mean a dispute between the US and Israel.

The relationship between Netanyahu and Trump, the two leaders, was a tactical one,

but the relationship between the nations is a strategic one. We are also unaware to what extent the relationship has been affected, so we must understand one integral fact: the US can abandon Netanyahu, but they will never abandon Israel. The latter was deliberately created to serve the West's interests in the Middle East. It is true that Trump has shown patterns of causing disruptions with allies for his own gains, but Israel is home to a key US defence base, and Israel provides strategic US foothold and intelligence and technology partnerships in the Middle East. Previous US Presidents such as Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden did not share good relations with Netanyahu, but the US has steadfastly supported Zionism and undermined the Palestinian cause.

Before Trump was inaugurated, he imposed a deal on Hamas and Israel to stop the war, to agree to a ceasefire, which did happen. But immediately after they exchanged hostages, and Netanyahu was able to salvage some of his reputation within Israeli society, he turned his back on the deal. At first, we would have interpreted the continuation of the war to also be in Trump's interest, and that Netanyahu's betrayal was written on the walls given Trump and Netanyahu's cosy relationship. But today the situation is a bit different.

An adviser to Trump told *The Washington Post*, "In MAGA, we are not Bibi fans." Speaking on condition of anonymity, the adviser added, "Trump is adamant: He wants people to put the guns down." By contrast, Netanyahu has been adamant about war with Iran, which Trump has been vocal against. Last month, it was reported that Israel has not ruled out an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, despite President Trump telling Netanyahu that the US would be unwilling to support such a move. It is possible that US intelligence has discovered information that Israel is planning to hit an Iranian nuclear power plant—which has led Trump to bypass Israel.

Three recent moves by Donald Trump indicate signs of tensions with Netanyahu. First, Trump's direct negotiation with Hamas, bypassing Israel, to release American hostage Edan Alexander was embarrassing for Netanyahu. On Sunday, senior Hamas leader Khalil Al-Hayya said they would release Alexander following direct talks with US

officials. Netanyahu has long insisted that the war needs to continue to destroy Hamas, bring back the hostages, and secure peace in the Middle East—but now the US is showing a different pathway: they have the power to bring back the hostages; they can negotiate themselves.

Secondly, Trump has recently negotiated a ceasefire deal, mediated by Oman, with the Yemeni Houthis, to stop attacking US ships

The two leaders are no longer on the same page. The mood music has also conspicuously shifted, with US special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff—unlike the Biden administration's Antony Blinken—criticising Israel for prolonging the war and delaying the hostage deal. Trump has also shown his tendency to revere questionable "absolute leaders" whose shields of power cannot be threatened, as evidenced by his meeting with

Arab nations, and his main purpose is to gain some wins to burnish his image as a negotiator. Trump is seeking at least \$1 trillion in investments from Saudi Arabia, including arms purchases which have not yet been agreed upon. But in January, it was announced that plans were in place to expand trade and investment with the US by \$600 billion over the next four years, with potential for more.

The Gulf nations have similar interests in formalising their positions as indispensable partners for the US. They also want to extract as much benefit as they can. Last year, the US and Saudi Arabia came close to securing a mega deal which included a package of agreements that would have encompassed security, economic, and technological guarantees to the kingdom, as well as US support for its civilian nuclear programme. The deal also included normalisation of Israeli-Saudi relations and a component for a pathway to a Palestinian state. The deal would have consolidated the US position in the Middle East and given the US an upper hand in its superpower rivalry with China. But the deal was stalled over Saudi insistence that Israel commit to a path towards Palestinian statehood.

Normalisation of Israeli relations with Saudi Arabia is in Donald Trump's interest right now, as it would open the road for other Muslim countries. For Saudi Arabia, securing an end to the genocide in Gaza and recognition of Palestinian statehood will be high on the list of what they want from Trump. The public in Saudi Arabia supports the Palestinian cause, and continuation of the genocide in Gaza has harmed public support for Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS). Saudi Arabia would strengthen its position as a leader in the Middle East if it can bring an end to the genocide and make the US formally recognise Palestinian statehood as part of their negotiations with Trump. If MBS succeeds in achieving this, he would emerge as a hero for the Muslim world.

For Palestinians, the hope is that Saudi Arabia will not accept any deal that promises Palestinian statehood and an end to the war until it is delivered. History has never shown any precedent to suggest that the US will support Palestinians' right to self-determination beyond words.

But in order to deliver conditions related to Palestinian sovereignty imposed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations, Trump would have to break rank with Netanyahu and find an alternative Israeli leader who would obey the US. So, has the relationship between Trump and Netanyahu run its course? The results of the trip in the next few days will give us more signals. But make no mistake, Netanyahu's murderous career stands on thin ice, and it will crack, one day or another.



**US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman meet in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 13, 2025.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

in the Red Sea and disrupting trade routes in exchange for which the US would also stop bombing Houthis. The US-Houthi deal did not include Israel, and attacks between Israel and the Houthis continued. The third move, and perhaps the most nerve-wracking one for Netanyahu, has been Trump's direct engagement with Iran. In the Oval Office in April, Trump announced, much to Netanyahu's surprise, that the US would hold direct talks with Iran over its nuclear programme. A Trump adviser also told *The Washington Post* that influential MAGA voices and neoconservative Republicans have spent all spring working to resist efforts by pro-Israeli lobbying groups, who are overly sympathetic to Netanyahu and have pushed to install Iran hawks in the government. Trump recently sacked Mike Waltz as National Security Adviser, after Waltz mistakenly added the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic* magazine, Jeffrey Goldberg, to a Signal chat. Insiders told *The Washington Post* that Waltz upset Trump by adopting an increasingly hawkish stance regarding Iran and his "intense coordination" with the Netanyahu over the possibility of launching military strikes on Iran.

Kim Jong-un of North Korea. Netanyahu is in a deadlock situation—becoming increasingly unpopular in his country for continuing the war. But Netanyahu also cannot hold a ceasefire or end the war—which costs Trump money. Netanyahu's juniors, Smotrich and Gvir, would collapse the coalition if the war ends, which shows Netanyahu's leadership weakness. Trump is not a fan of weakness.

Now, the other issue is that the leaders in the Middle East, after October 7, with the atrocities taking place, have no trust whatsoever in Netanyahu as a person and especially as a leader. Although many Middle Eastern countries do not outrightly oppose normalisation with Israel, they are unlikely to agree to a deal with Netanyahu, who the Arab states accuse of committing collective genocide. Trump has, therefore, repositioned the historic lens of viewing US relations in the Middle East via Israel by pursuing direct engagements.

But we must not forget that Donald Trump is primarily a businessman, and he wants to make America "great again." In other words, he wants to make America rich again. He is now meeting with the richest people in the Middle East, and three energy-rich Gulf

## REPLANTING THE BONSAI

# Empowering Bangladeshi diaspora for a changing Gulf



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In the heart of Doha, a city where modernity meets tradition, the Earthna Summit 2025 was convened on April 23, in the iconic Msheireb Downtown—a district that has become a global model for fusing energy-efficient design with Qatari heritage. The event was not just a gathering of experts and policymakers. It was a moment of reflection for the Bangladeshi expatriate community, many of whom have carved out lives in the Gulf with both ambition and trepidation. As the world's leaders and innovators gathered to discuss climate change and sustainable development, the eyes of Qatar's Bangladeshi diaspora members were on a singular figure whose voice has long echoed their hopes: Chief Adviser to the Bangladesh interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus.

Chief Adviser Yunus' keynote address urged an end to the systemic barriers that restrict the potential of young people. He reminded the audience that limitations on growth often stem not from an individual's inherent capabilities, but from the structures that confine them. "A bonsai tree is not small because of its seed," he said. "It is small because of the pot it is placed in." His call to rethink these boundaries resonated across the room, but it was particularly poignant for those in attendance who have lived with the constraints of a system that too often limits opportunity.

While the 2022 FIFA World Cup brought a wave of opportunity and infrastructure development to Qatar, many Bangladeshi workers now find themselves navigating an economy that is increasingly prioritising high-skilled service industries. For those who arrived with expertise in construction and manual labour, pathways to career mobility



**Many workers fall prey to unethical recruitment practices, where agents promise jobs and charge exorbitant fees.**

FILE PHOTO: AFP

remain limited. The transition towards a more knowledge- and service-based economy has not been matched with inclusive upskilling or retraining efforts, leaving many migrant workers in uncertain and precarious employment conditions.

To grasp the layered and often invisible struggles shaping the lives of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Qatar, I sat down with Amin Rasul, secretary of the Bangladesh Community Qatar (BCQ) and a senior engineer at Qatar Electricity and Water

Company. Rasul, who has worked closely with Qatar's Ministry of Labor and international organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), provided valuable insights into the complexities of the situation. "The issue of managing such a large workforce is a multifaceted one," Rasul explained. "But at its core, it stems from the way recruitment operates. Many workers fall prey to unethical recruitment practices,

where agents promise jobs and charge exorbitant fees. Once they arrive in Qatar, they often find themselves either jobless, in unsuitable roles, or trapped in conditions where employers control their bank cards and access to wages. Legally, systems may appear compliant, but exploitation continues through informal practices."

labour conditions, the challenge remains one of awareness. "There is a hotline," Rasul noted, "but most workers are unaware of its existence. They are often victims of exploitation before they even have the opportunity to act."

Beyond legal reforms, there is also a pressing need for better access to education and skills development for the migrant workforce. Many Bangladeshi workers, even those in skilled professions such as engineering or healthcare, arrive in the Gulf with limited proficiency in the region's languages—Arabic and English. The result is a mismatch between the skills of the workers and the demands of the labour market. Opportunities in service sectors like hospitality remain limited for Bangladeshis, especially compared to other Asian diaspora communities such as the Indian, Pakistani, Nepali, and Filipino populations who are more integrated due to stronger language and communication competencies, said Zillur Rahman Biswas, a Bangladeshi educationist examining diaspora education in the Gulf. The reasons why other nations' diaspora schools have more institutional backing stems from many factors, including "larger and more affluent expatriate populations with longer establishments in the Gulf and a robust investor base," said Biswas.

"There is overwhelming demand for quality education among Bangladeshi families in Qatar," he shared. "We lack the space, trained staff, and institutional backing that schools of the Indian or Pakistani communities enjoy. This has long-term implications—not just for educational equity, but for the ability of our youth to compete in a global labour market."

During a visit to Qatar's Bangladeshi diaspora schools, which now serves around 1,800 students, I spoke with educators who highlighted the challenges they face. Overwhelmed by demand, the school had to introduce a second shift to accommodate the increasing number of students. Tuition fees remain low, ranging from QAR 350 to QAR 550 per month depending on grade level. Yet, despite the affordability, the school struggles with limited facilities, teacher training and

resources. In stark contrast, other Asian diaspora communities have schools with greater investment, better infrastructure, and broader institutional recognition.

Bangladeshi community representatives consistently express the need for better schooling options that are both affordable and internationally aligned, to ensure that students are prepared for a changing and competitive job market.

Qatar is one of the top 10 remittance source countries for Bangladesh. According to remittance landscape and trajectory, remittance from Qatar amounted to \$1.5 billion in FY2024. The scope for expanding the remittance portfolio in Qatar remains high, but the issue of skills development for Bangladesh's migrant workers continues to pose barriers. But this issue goes beyond the immediate needs of those living in the Gulf—it is tied directly to Bangladesh's larger aspirations on the global stage. As Bangladesh seeks to position itself as a manufacturing powerhouse—what some are calling the "factory of the world"—the need for a workforce that is both skilled and adaptable is more urgent than ever. Without a strategic investment in education, training, and language acquisition, Bangladesh risks falling behind in an increasingly competitive global market.

Dr Yunus' visit to Doha also marked a significant step forward in Qatar-Bangladesh relations. During his discussions with the Qatari government, issues such as workforce planning and the repayment of accumulated gas bills were on the table. These high-level engagements demonstrate a mutual commitment to strengthening bilateral ties, not just in economic terms but in ways that respect and invest in the people who form the backbone of both nations' growth.

Ultimately, the success of Bangladesh's diaspora depends on empowering its youth to not merely survive but to excel. The world of work is rapidly evolving, and the opportunities available to young Bangladeshis in the Gulf, or anywhere else, will be shaped by how well they are prepared to engage with a dynamic, complex global economy.