

Fast Forward

How Donald Trump and Kamala Harris differ (and agree) when it comes to Middle East policy

Trump says he will keep Israel safe. Kamala Harris promises to preserve an alliance.

By [Ron Kampeas](#) October 22, 2024



Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump. (Getty Images)

[\(JTA\)](#) — WASHINGTON — With just weeks to go before the election, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump have both tried to use Israel as a wedge issue: Trump has said the country [will not exist in two years if he is defeated](#), and Harris' campaign [has called his rhetoric on Israel antisemitic](#).

Trump and Harris do disagree on a range of Israel-related topics, from how Israel should fight its battles to their starkly different visions of America's role in the world.

But there are also key issues where — in the big picture — they agree.

Both Harris and Trump support Israel's multi-front war against a range of adversaries, from Hamas in Gaza to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Both want the war in Gaza to end soon. Both want to expand the normalization deals between Israel and its neighbors. Neither is a big fan of the phrase "two-state solution." And, in an especially notable patch of common ground, both want to move on from the Obama-era nuclear deal with Iran.

Their disagreements tend to appear in the fine print of those policies, and in the style with which each delivers their message. And each candidate has given pro-Israel voters reasons for pause: Trump has taken a turn toward isolationism, while Harris has made efforts to appease critics of Israel in her party.

We combed through speeches and campaign materials and spoke to supporters of both nominees to understand their rhetoric, proposals and outlooks.

Trump says Israel's security depends on him. Harris vows to safeguard the alliance.

The two candidates both pledge to support Israel, but characterize that support in different ways. Trump's promise is wrapped up in his persona, and Harris hews to the traditional language of valuing the United States' alliances.

[In an interview this week with Al Arabiya](#), a Saudi-owned channel, Trump said he would be able to achieve peace in the Middle East based on the respect he commands and relationships he has built there.

"I want to see the Middle East get back to peace and real peace, but a peace that's going to be a lasting peace, and that's going to happen," he said. "I think the election is going to make a big difference, but I was respected over there, and [had] great relationships with so many."

He has said Israel's future also depends on his success. Speaking to the Israeli-American Council in September, Trump styled himself as Israel's "protector" — and said the country would cease to exist if Harris wins the

election — a repeated prediction that [has made Jews across the political spectrum uneasy.](#)

“If we continue down our current path, with four more years of Kamala, Israel will be faced not just with an attack, but with total annihilation,” he said. “And I hate to say it so much, it’s total annihilation. That’s what you’re talking about. You don’t have a protector. You have a big protector in me.”

Harris has emphasized the longstanding alliance between the U.S. and Israel. On the anniversary of the Oct. 7 attack this year, she and her Jewish husband Doug Emhoff marked the anniversary of Hamas’ attack by planting a pomegranate tree at the vice president’s residence, a symbol of the alliance’s permanence.

“On this solemn day, I will restate my pledge to always ensure that Israel has what it needs to defend itself,” she said then. Tom Nides, a surrogate for the campaign who served as President Joe Biden’s ambassador to Israel, said Harris’s support would make it easier for Israel to make its own decisions.

“If you’re Israel and you’re making a determination of what you should do, to know that the Americans have got your back, that’s pretty important,” he said. “They’re very vulnerable, and they need our help, and we’re going to help them.”

Harris and Trump both want no more fighting in Gaza ...

Both nominees want a quick end to the war.

Harris tends to cast her vision for the war’s end in terms of sympathy to both its Palestinian and Israeli victims — an attempt to bridge the divide in her party over the fighting.

“I am working to ensure it ends, such that Israel is secure, the hostages are released, the suffering in Gaza ends, and the Palestinian people can realize their right to dignity, freedom and self-determination,” she said in a call with Jewish leaders during the High Holiday season, a formulation she has repeated across her campaign stops.

Trump has, for months, also advocated for a prompt end to the war. In March, he said, “You have to finish it up and do it quickly.” He’s repeated versions of that call in the months since.

“I did encourage him to get this over with,” Trump said at an August press conference, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “It has to get over with fast.”

He added, “Get your victory and get it over with. It has to stop, the killing has to stop.”

... but Harris stresses a ceasefire while Trump emphasizes Israeli victory.

Harris has focused her Gaza policy on seeking a ceasefire. Trump has cast an end to the war as Israel’s decision — though he’s also said he’d like negotiations.

Harris surrogates said she shares Israel’s goal of degrading Hamas and Hezbollah, but her push for a ceasefire in Gaza has come while Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war. And Harris, mindful of her pro-Palestinian constituents, has also expressed sympathy for the tens of thousands of civilians killed and injured in the war — and called on Israel to allow more aid to enter Gaza.

“Israel must urgently do more to facilitate the flow of aid to those in need,” [she said last week](#). “Civilians must be protected and must have access to food, water, and medicine. International humanitarian law must be respected.”

Harris has spotlighted the experiences of Israeli hostages abducted last Oct. 7, as well as victims of the attack. She’s made a point of highlighting sexual violence during the attack, screening a documentary on that topic at the White House in June.

“We cannot look away and we will not be silent,” Harris said ahead of the screening. “My heart breaks for all these survivors and their families and for all the pain and suffering from the past eight months in Israel and in Gaza.”

Trump frames the end of the war in terms of Israel winning, though he hasn't detailed what victory might entail. He has ridiculed Harris' ceasefire calls as a constraint on Israel.

“From the start, Harris has worked to tie Israel’s hand behind its back, demanding an immediate ceasefire, always demanding ceasefire,” Trump [said at his August press conference](#). A ceasefire “would only give Hamas time to regroup and launch a new Oct. 7-style attack.”

But speaking to Al Arabiya, he also said he thinks negotiations are possible, and agreed with the interviewer when she said “Prime Minister Netanyahu listens to you.”

“He does listen to me, and I have a call with him tomorrow,” Trump responded. He added his most frequent speculation on Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack and its aftermath — that it never would have happened if he had been in office.

“It’s so sad to think that, if I were president, that war would have never started,” he said. “You wouldn’t have all those dead people, all those, you know, just demolished cities and areas.”

Those conversations with Netanyahu may not always be pleasant. Kirsten Fontenrose, a former Trump National Security Council staffer, said Trump could get impatient if he saw Israel as standing in the way of a grand deal.

“I don’t expect him to air the dirty laundry at first. He’ll have those conversations behind the scenes,” she said in an interview. But she predicted that Trump would tell Netanyahu, ““If you can’t get your cabinet behind what we are trying to lead, then there will be repercussions in terms of the level of American support.””

Trump barely mentions the Palestinians — except when he has used the term as a [pejorative against political figures such as Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer](#).

And regarding the hostages, in the Al Arabiya interview he speculated repeatedly that “many of them have been killed,” adding, “There are very few hostages” still alive.

They have both moved on from the Iran deal ...

One of the sharpest foreign policy distinctions between Trump and Biden, four years ago, concerned the Iran nuclear deal, inked in 2015 when Biden was vice president and Barack Obama was president.

The deal curbed Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, and was reviled by Netanyahu. Acting on Netanyahu’s behest, Trump pulled out of the deal in 2018. Biden, in his first months in office, sought to restore it.

Iran is now [said to be at the point where it could activate a nuclear weapon within a week](#). The Trump and Harris campaigns blame each other for that state of affairs — but neither wants to rejoin the agreement now.

Many of the accord’s provisions are lapsing, or have already lapsed, and Harris no longer even mentions the deal. Earlier this month, she named Iran as the “obvious” chief adversary of the United States.

“I don’t think anyone would think that we’re going to be reviving the JCPOA as it was constructed,” said Nides, using the agreement’s acronym. “Neither Trump or Harris.”

Trump says one of his proudest moments was pulling out of the JCPOA, but he now says he wants to strike a different deal with Iran, though he does not provide details.

“We have to make a deal, because the consequences are impossible,” [he said last month at a press conference](#). “We have to make a deal.”

... but they have different takes on how Israel should strike Iran.

Since Iran barraged Israel with more than 180 missiles at the beginning of October, talk has abounded of Israel’s retaliatory strike. The United States is signaling that it supports an Israeli response, and Harris said in her High

Holidays call that [“all options are on the table.”](#) Her surrogates said that includes U.S. involvement.

“We’ve got Israel’s back and actions speak louder than words,” Nides said. “We’re at an inflection point.”

When he was president, Trump ordered the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, a leading Iranian general. But he is famously war-averse, and has not said whether he would countenance U.S. involvement in a strike now.

In his interview with Al Arabiya, Trump said of Iran that “they won’t acquire” a nuclear weapon, though he declined to say how he’d accomplish that. He has said that Israel should strike Iran’s nuclear facilities.

“It’s the biggest risk we have, nuclear weapons, the power of nuclear weapons,” [he said at a campaign stop this month.](#) “Hit the nuclear first and worry about the rest later.”

They both want to expand the Abraham Accords.

A rare area of agreement between Biden and Trump was in their support for the Abraham Accords, the 2020 agreement that normalized relations between Israel and four neighboring Arab countries. That remains on the agenda for both nominees, even in the shadow of war.

“Vice President Harris has been strongly advocating Israel’s integration into the region and adding onto the Abraham Accords to include other countries including Saudi Arabia,” said Jeremy Bash, a top defense and intelligence official in the Obama administration who is acting as a Harris surrogate.

Trump, in the Republican Party platform, has pledged to “seek peace in the Middle East.” Trump’s son-in-law and former senior adviser, Jared Kushner, [reportedly is still encouraging Saudi Arabia’s buy-in to the accords,](#) something Biden also pushed hard for prior to the Oct. 7 attack.

In his interview with Al Arabiya, Trump predicted that he would bring Iran into the Abraham Accords along with at least a dozen other countries — something that, if it were to happen, would entail a major realignment in

which the top regional adversary of Israel and the United States becomes an ally. Trump did not detail how that shift would occur.

“I think we would have had something. I think we would add something very special, we’ll still have something,” Trump told Al Arabiya.

Neither mentions the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu’s government has rejected the possibility of a Palestinian state, particularly since the Oct. 7 attack. And that outcome — once a bipartisan aspiration in Washington — is also absent from Trump and Harris’ speeches.

Harris does not mention “two states” or Palestinian statehood in her speeches, sticking to the vaguer formulation of “self-determination.” But Bash signaled that two states is still the preferred solution.

“American foreign policy has not changed with respect to our interests in the Middle East,” he said.

Trump has depicted his sidelining of the Palestinians as one of the triumphs of his presidency. He has also boasted of shutting down the Palestinian mission to Washington and moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, actions reviled by Palestinian leaders. The peace proposal he unveiled in 2020 left Israeli West Bank settlements intact — and was dismissed out of hand by Palestinian leaders.

“I defunded the Palestinian Authority and choked off all of the money to Hamas, don’t forget, nobody ever did that,” he said last month at the Israeli American Council conference. (U.S. funds never reached Hamas.)

Trump, though, remains unpredictable: He rattled Netanyahu in July when he publicly thanked Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas [for wishing him a full recovery from his attempted assassination](#). Shortly afterward, he had a warm meeting with Netanyahu.

Harris has rattled Israel supporters with her nods toward pro-Palestinian activists...

Harris' sympathy for the right of pro-Palestinian protesters to speak out at her events can unsettle pro-Israel activists — and has provided attack fodder for the Trump campaign.

This week, speaking in Milwaukee, protesters challenged her to call Israel's actions a "genocide." She would not, but repeatedly said that she wanted a ceasefire. After security escorted out the protesters, she told her supporters, "What he's talking about, it's real" and "I respect his voice."

That statement set off a firestorm among Republicans, who accused her of confirming that she believed Israel was committing genocide.

[Her campaign told Israeli media that she did not believe Israel was committing genocide.](#) "She didn't agree with defining the war as a genocide, and she has not expressed such a stance in the past, as this is not her position," an official said. The official characterized her words as "sympathy for the genuine feelings that the issue evokes in many people."

Trump supporters have highlighted other instances where Harris appeared to express understanding of Israel's opponents. And since last Oct. 7, they've made a point of noting that public protests against Israel generally come from the left, including on college campuses.

"You have the Democratic nominee who has given an interview saying she really understands where the anti-Israel, antisemitic protesters on campuses are coming from," said Richard Goldberg, who served on the NSC under Trump. "You have the Republican nominee, the former president, saying he's going to deport those people who are not American citizens, who are rabble rousing on college campuses. If you have children who are going to college in college, grandchildren, this contrast could not be starker."

...and Trump has worried the pro-Israel crowd with his move toward isolationism.

Since leaving office, Trump has grown closer to isolationists. His running mate, Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance, opposes assistance to Ukraine, and [held up an Israel funding bill because it had a Ukraine component.](#)

It is not a comfort to traditional conservative pro-Israel Republicans that Vance and others insist their opposition to foreign defense funding does not extend to Israel, noting that, for example, Russia and China both have links to Iran. And there are isolationists close to Trump who don't support continued aid to Israel, [most prominently Tucker Carlson](#), the conservative talk show host.

Twenty-one Republicans in Congress, including some of Trump's most ardent backers, [opposed emergency funding for Israel this year](#). In a post on his social network in February, Trump [proposed loans instead of direct assistance](#) to other countries; he did not name Israel specifically.

Goldberg, the former Trump NSC staffer, acknowledged that it is hard to anticipate where Trump will end up. "If anybody says they're going to predict Donald Trump, they should get out of foreign policy, get out of the media, get out of any business," he said in an interview this summer at the Republican convention.

Still, he noted that Trump had the final word [in shaping the Republican Party platform](#), which pledged to "stand with Israel, and seek peace in the Middle East" and to "rebuild our Alliance Network in the Region to ensure a future of Peace, Stability, and Prosperity."

Harris and her surrogates have portrayed her as a defender of the United States' traditional commitment to international alliances. Like Biden, her supporters say, she is committed to the continuation of defense assistance to Israel — despite calls from some Democrats to condition or end the aid.

"As vice president, Kamala Harris has been a strong supporter of military assistance for Israel," Bash said. "And I don't foresee that changing."