

An Overview of the First Weeks of the Trump Administration—Implications for Israel

Avishai Ben Sasson-Gordis, Jesse Weinberg, Esteban Klor | No. 1956 | March 16, 2025

Donald Trump assumed office as US president with a flurry of action. In these first weeks, his administration launched a series of unprecedented actions aimed at reshaping the United States through sweeping constitutional, political, and diplomatic changes. These efforts also sought to redefine the country's role on the global stage by altering the terms of alliances and agreements that for years had been pillars of the liberal order, with the US at its center. Many of these measures could directly affect the State of Israel—some expanding Israel's freedom of action, while others could undermine the stability of the international systems on which it depends.

Since entering the White House, President Trump has pursued his agenda at a breakneck pace. His administration has issued hundreds of executive orders and directives on a range of issues—from renaming geographic sites on official maps, to freezing the operations of government agencies, and modifying citizenship requirements. The president's reliance on executive orders, which allow him to direct executive branch activities without congressional approval (although still subject to law), has enabled the administration to bypass lengthy political negotiations that may have been required even with a Republican-controlled Congress. This approach reflects a broader view that the presidency should be relatively unconstrained by the other branches of government.

Among the measures taken by the Trump administration so far:

An attack on the professional civil service and the federal government—The president and his team have ordered budget freezes across the federal government, including plans to reduce the budget of the US Department of Defense by about 10%. At the same time, the administration seeks to end the employment of hundreds of thousands of federal employees, amounting to a significant portion of the federal workforce. In an effort to thin the ranks of the civil service, federal employees have received mass emails—of disputed legality—inviting them to retire under favorable conditions. President Trump also ordered an end to teleworking arrangements, and he and his representatives are attempting to shut down certain government agencies such as USAID and the Department of Education.

Additionally, the Trump administration has frozen nearly all federal foreign aid funding (with the exception of aid to Israel and Egypt). Research grants under the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—both critical sources of funding for scientific research in the United States—have also been halted, disrupting ongoing clinical trials and discontinuing programs to combat diseases such as AIDS. These steps were taken

despite congressional budget allocations and a Supreme Court ruling from the 1970s that prohibits the president from unilaterally withholding congressionally approved funds.

Immigration—Immigration was a central theme of President Trump’s reelection campaign, even though illegal immigration had declined during the latter part of Joe Biden’s presidency. Immediately after his inauguration, Trump declared a state of emergency on the southern border of the United States, deploying military forces along the border with Mexico and increasing enforcement against illegal immigration. He also clashed with the government of Colombia over his demand that it accept deportation flights and began transferring migrants to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay—where full constitutional rules that apply on US soil do not necessarily apply.

The administration also reduced federal funding for “sanctuary cities” that shelter undocumented immigrants and instructed authorities to deny citizenship to people born on US soil to non-permanent residents. This decision overturned the constitutional interpretation of birthright citizenship that has been in effect for more than a century.

Tariffs—True to his campaign promises to use protective tariffs as a policy tool, at the time of writing, Trump imposed a sweeping 25% tariff on steel and aluminum imports from all countries. Simultaneously, he levied a 10% tariff on goods entering the United States from China and ordered—although later temporarily suspended—a 25% tariff on imports from Mexico and Canada. This move has sparked a crisis with key US trading partners—including its neighbors Canada and Mexico, the European Union, and China—and effectively has launched a global trade war.

Personal “Score Settling”—In recent years, Trump has expressed resentment toward those he believes undermined his first presidency. As a result, portraits of individuals he dislikes, such as former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, have been removed from the corridors of the Pentagon. Additionally, their security details, along with those of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former National Security Advisor John Bolton, have been revoked, despite threats to their lives from Iran. The administration also rescinded the security clearance of former President Joe Biden and intelligence officials who had attested that Biden’s son had not compromised US national security. The US Department of Justice instructed a New York City prosecutor to drop criminal proceedings against the city’s mayor accused of corruption, who had publicly declared his support for Trump’s policies. The president further signed an order suspending enforcement actions against individuals suspected of accepting bribes from foreign governments, including some of his former advisors. Additionally, security clearances were revoked for attorneys from a firm that provided pro bono representation to the special prosecutor investigating him under the previous administration.

“Loyalty Tests”—The selection of key government officials also reflects the importance of personal loyalty to Trump over professional qualifications. Candidates for roles in the administration have been asked whether they believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Trump (as Trump claims) and whether they consider the events of January 6, 2021—when Trump’s supporters broke into the Capitol and rioted in protest of his defeat and

to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's victory—an attempted coup. Trump himself issued pardons for some 1,500 individuals indicted for their involvement in the Capitol riot, and his people in the Department of Justice and the FBI have signaled their intent to penalize investigators who had pursued legal action against the rioters.

In the upper echelons of government, Trump appointed Pete Hegseth, a former news host on Trump's favorite Fox television channel, as secretary of defense, despite Hegseth's objection to women in US military combat roles and his disregard for international law. Kash Patel, who had led efforts to prosecute the president's political rivals, was named director of the FBI, while a right-wing podcast host was appointed as Patel's deputy. Tulsi Gabbard, who had previously expressed support for the Assad regime and faced accusations of advancing Russian interests in the United States, was appointed Director of National Intelligence. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a vaccine skeptic who promotes conspiracy theories, was appointed to lead the US healthcare system. Although some Republican lawmakers expressed misgivings over these appointments, they won Senate approval—reflecting Trump's control over the Republican Party.

Simultaneously, Secretary of Defense Hegseth initiated a sweeping purge within the US military's top leadership. Among those dismissed were General Charles Q. Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (whom Hegseth had previously claimed was appointed solely because he is Black), the chief of naval operations, and a senior officer on the Air Force staff. In addition, military lawyers serving as the top legal figures for the Army, Air Force, and Navy were removed to prevent them from impeding the administration's use of the armed forces.

Culture war—A key tool for advancing the administration's broader agenda has been its assault on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Arguing that DEI has gained excessive influence, the president ordered the complete shutdown of all DEI-related programs and initiated proceedings to suspend or fire civil servants who had promoted them. A significant part of this effort included rescinding public recognition and services for transgender individuals, barring their participation in competitive sports that do not align with the sex they were assigned at birth, and seeking to block them from military service. The administration has also targeted programs to advance gender equality and minority rights initiatives. For example, displays celebrating women's achievements were removed from the NASA museum and from exhibits in federal government corridors. In line with his cultural-nationalist agenda, Trump also ordered the renaming of the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America" and reversed the name of the highest mountain peak in North America, located in Alaska, from its indigenous name "Denali" back to "Mount McKinley," after President William McKinley—known for imposing tariffs and achieving US territorial expansion.

A key figure in implementing this agenda is Elon Musk, whom Trump appointed head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE—a play on a digital currency Musk favors). Musk's team has been granted access to multiple federal agencies and now oversees critical information systems to identify "waste," including the US Treasury Department's payment systems, which can freeze fund transfers and track specific budget allocations based on criteria that suit the administration's objectives. Many of the

administration's moves reflect the platform of "Project 2025"—an action plan developed by think tanks aligned with Trump in the years leading up to the election. Some of its architects have assumed key positions in the administration, most notably Russell Vought, who was appointed to lead the influential Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

The Backlash

As expected, the administration's actions are seen as a serious threat by Trump's political opponents and those who have been harmed by them, as well as by the liberal public in the United States and around the world. For now, however, opponents have struggled to mount an effective resistance. Their primary strategy has been legal challenges, which have temporarily halted some of the administration's moves, such as transferring budgetary control to Musk's team, changing the rules for recognizing citizenship, and enforcing the broad freeze on federal funding.

In Congress, which is intended to serve as a check on the presidency, Democrats in the minority lack the power to impose meaningful restrictions on the president. Nonetheless, Trump prefers using presidential executive orders that bypass Congress altogether. Furthermore, Republican lawmakers have not blocked controversial nominations that have seemed unlikely to gain broad support, while party leaders have signaled that they do not see the president's actions on budgetary matters as encroaching upon the legislative branch's authority. Within the federal government, efforts are underway to limit Musk's team's access to sensitive systems. Public prosecutors in New York have resigned in protest after being ordered to drop corruption charges against the city's mayor. Across the United States, protests against the administration are beginning—although large-scale demonstrations have yet to emerge.

The administration, for its part, has dismissed its opponents. Some administration figures—including Elon Musk—have indicated that, in their view, the courts lack authority to impede the president's policies. This stance represents a reversal of the American right's historical position, which once regarded the Supreme Court (which has not yet ruled on the matters at hand, although some will inevitably reach it) and the judicial system as necessary checks on the power of Democratic presidents. Lawsuits have been filed in federal courts challenging several of the administration's actions, and some injunctions have been issued to halt implementation. However, statements from Trump officials suggest that the administration may not comply with certain court rulings. While President Trump has publicly declared that he believes court orders should be respected, it is too early to determine whether his administration will follow them in every instance. Indeed, there is already evidence that, in some cases, the administration has ignored judicial directives to restore funding. Open defiance of court rulings would precipitate a grave constitutional crisis—one the country has not seen in decades.

A Different United States—Domestically and Internationally

While the measures taken by the administration are highly significant, the real impact lies in their cumulative effect. Together, these measures—and the way in which they have been carried out—have fundamentally transformed the balance of power among the branches of

government—an arrangement that has evolved over many decades. Trump is attempting to solidify the presidency as a largely unchecked branch, free from congressional oversight, legal precedent, or judicial constraints. In the American system, Congress wields the “power of the purse” to constrain the executive branch through budgetary authority. Courts have previously upheld congressional legislation preventing a president from withholding funds allocated by Congress. Yet Trump and his supporters are now challenging this framework, using budgetary control as a primary tool to dismantle the federal government, advance their ideological agenda, and reject longstanding interpretations of the Constitution.

Alongside reshaping the balance of power among the government branches, Trump seeks to upend the administrative order within the government and revert it to a system from more than a century ago. His goal is to replace the United States’ professional bureaucracy—built on ideals of good governance and the rule of law—with a patronage-based system rooted in proximity to power, akin to the old “Spoils System.” At the end of the 19th century, the United States took steps toward professionalizing and depoliticizing the civil service. Today’s focus on loyalty, purges of civil servants, and downsizing paves the way for what Francis Fukuyama once called the “re-patrimonialization” of the public sector—transforming it into the leader’s personal domain, staffed at every level by loyalists, with rewards and punishments dispensed as the leader sees fit.

In the international arena, President Trump is signaling a return to an era when the United States refrained from acting as the protector of the liberal order, instead pursuing its objectives through raw power-based tactics. From Trump’s perspective, the current international system burdens and exploits the United States by imposing commitments to defend allies who do not contribute their fair share. His actions accelerate a departure from the free-trade vision the United States once championed, toward disengaging from coalitions and alliances that the United States led for decades, coupled with an openly declared intention to enlarge its territory (Canada, Panama, Greenland, the Gaza Strip). In addition, the dismantling of USAID effectively neutralizes Washington’s principal nonmilitary instrument of nation-building.

A speech by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Conference highlighted this transformation in US foreign policy, marking a shift from a transatlantic framework rooted in shared democratic values to an approach defined by transactional and mercantilist interests. Vance’s remarks—framing Europe’s greatest threat as internal issues, such as the censorship of right-wing voices and open-door immigration policies—were perceived by Europeans as a direct American attack on democratic values. Further fueling tensions, Vance refused to meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, instead opting to meet with leaders of the far-right AfD party—a move seen as blatant US interference in German politics during an election campaign, and as a political endorsement of a party widely discredited at home. These steps reflect the dramatic U-turn of the current administration regarding the liberal-democratic values that have underpinned American foreign policy since the Cold War. Another source of tension between the United States and European nations—one that undermines the foundations of NATO—is the president’s sharp policy reversal on the Russia–Ukraine War. His administration has suspended US aid to Ukraine, portraying Ukraine as refusing ceasefire

negotiations and as being responsible for the war that Russia itself launched, all while potentially pushing for a normalization of relations between Washington and Moscow.

Implications for Israel

1. **Reduction in American foreign aid:** To date, Israel has been largely exempted from the US administration's policy of reducing foreign aid. However, as the United States continues to scale back its support for foreign nations, Israel could eventually face a direct challenge to its national security interests—particularly in a worst-case scenario where these views influence negotiations over the new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the United States. Nonetheless, cutting US support for Middle Eastern countries could destabilize regional regimes, challenging core assumptions of Israeli national security. Several neighboring countries, including Jordan and Egypt, rely on US aid programs and cannot fully cover their expenses alone. Conversely, the president's willingness to use foreign aid as leverage could create opportunities for Israel that are difficult to predict in advance.
2. **Internal impact on great-power rivalries:** Republican Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, recently stated, "I have felt for a long time that USAID is, is our way to combat the Belt and Road Initiative, which is China's effort to really gain influence around the world." Closing USAID or drastically cutting its activities opens the door for US rivals, primarily China, to expand their global influence—including in Israel's neighboring countries and in African states that are vital to Israeli interests. This would serve as a counterweight to the regional influence of the United States, which skews in Israel's favor. Moreover, the fracturing of the liberal-democratic front could force Israel into a deepening dilemma between its closest ally in Washington and the European Union—its most significant trading partner and a key diplomatic partner.
3. **Economic effects:** The Trump administration's planned tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and China could disrupt the global economy—particularly if the administration extends tariffs to other countries, including those in the European Union. While it remains uncertain whether the administration intends to place similar tariffs on Israeli products, even if Israel is spared, a global trade war could harm the Israeli economy by slowing down international trade. Such a conflict would directly impede Israel's exports of goods. Although exports of goods (excluding diamonds) constitute only about 13% of Israel's GDP—a figure in continuous decline thanks to the rapid growth of overall GDP and the impressive rise of exports in high-tech services—these goods still account for roughly 45% of Israel's total exports. Any disruption here would significantly impact Israel's economic growth and the profitability of various sectors of the Israeli economy.

Beyond such direct harm, trade wars would likely fuel inflation in most countries, spur higher interest rates, and slow global economic growth—trends that would inevitably spill over into Israel's small and open economy. The result could be higher inflation

and interest rates—further worsening the cost of living, which has been one of the highest in the OECD for many years.

Cuts in American investment in science would also have both direct and indirect impact on Israel. Israel's academic community is one of the cornerstones of its economic success and, by extension, its national security. Israeli research institutions benefit from participation in programs funded by the NSF and NIH, and many researchers trained in the United States play key roles in advancing scientific research and education in Israel. Reductions in US research funding and the weakening of American universities will diminish Israel's ability to maintain its competitive edge in human capital, especially at a time when Israeli academia faces "quiet" boycotts around the world. However, the US administration's stricter approach to antisemitic and anti-Israeli activity on campuses may positively affect the campus experience of some Israeli and Jewish students.

4. Domestic American dynamics and their impact on Israel: The dramatic developments in American domestic politics could also affect Israel in several ways. First, American Jewry—an important link between Israel and US society—faces growing uncertainty. While the administration may restrict anti-Israel activism—which would be welcomed by many Jewish communities—there is concern that the United States could become less hospitable to non-white and non-Christian minorities, including Jews. Second, the administration's approach is expected to deepen partisan polarization in the United States around the issue of Israel. As Israel is perceived as closely aligned with the current administration, anti-Israel sentiment may grow within the Democratic Party.
5. Finally, in the broader ideological struggle between liberal democracy and non-liberal models, the current administration has decisively embraced illiberal-democratic tendencies, which could embolden similar voices within Israel. These developments could weaken the standing of liberal democracy worldwide and embolden populist elements—not only in the American system but also internationally and in Israel itself.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg