

Israel must lock in US backing for wartime territorial gains before window closes

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 14.05.2026

On April 14, 2004, President George W. Bush sent a landmark letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in support of the disengagement plan from Gaza. The letter praised Sharon's political courage and described the initiative as "bold and historic," with the potential to advance Israeli-Arab peace.

Three principles stood out in Bush's message. First, he stated that it was "unrealistic" to expect a full Israeli return to the 1949 armistice lines, recognizing the "new realities on the ground," particularly the major settlement blocs in Judea and Samaria. Second, Bush rejected the Palestinian demand for a "right of return" into Israel, asserting that the refugee issue should be resolved within the framework of a future Palestinian state. This position reinforced American recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Third, Bush emphasized Israel's right to "secure and recognized borders" in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

The Bush letter enabled Sharon to present the disengagement as a strategic exchange: Israel evacuated territory while securing American recognition of key Israeli interests in Judea and Samaria.

Yet this achievement proved fragile. With Barack Obama's entry into the White House, American policy shifted considerably. Obama returned to the formula of negotiations based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed land swaps. His administration argued that Bush's letter constituted a political position rather than a legally binding commitment.

During Donald Trump's presidency, however, several of the principles embodied in the Bush letter were revived and even expanded. The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, relocated its embassy to the city, and acknowledged Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

The current war has created a new territorial reality across several fronts. In

Gaza, Israel reestablished control over the Philadelphi Corridor in order to prevent Hamas rearmament, restored the Netzarim Corridor separating northern and southern Gaza, and expanded buffer zones along the border.

In Lebanon, Israel maintains positions and security zones near the frontier. Reports indicate an expansion of Israeli control up to, and in some areas beyond, the Litani River. Large parts of southern Lebanon have been devastated, making the return of many residents unlikely in the foreseeable future.

In Syria, following the collapse of the Assad regime in 2024, Israel seized buffer zones and strategic positions on the Syrian Hermon, citing concerns over jihadist infiltration and the security vacuum that emerged. Reports further suggest that Israel seeks the demilitarization of southern Syria from Iranian and jihadist presence.

Israel has not formally stated its intention to annex these territories. Still, a new reality of buffer zones, military control, and sustained strategic presence has undeniably emerged. Senior Israeli officials have also expressed support for renewed Jewish settlement, particularly in Gaza.

Simultaneously, American officials throughout the conflict have repeatedly praised Israel's role in the broader confrontation with Iran. Trump himself declared that "Israel won the war," while Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described Israel as "a determined and capable partner."

Against the backdrop of growing European estrangement from Washington's policies toward Iran, Israel's contribution to the American-led regional effort has become increasingly significant. Yet Israel has learned from past experience that diplomatic praise alone does not ensure lasting strategic support. Changes in political leadership or international circumstances can rapidly transform warm commitments into distant or even hostile policies.

For this reason, Israel must move quickly to translate its military and territorial achievements into explicit, long-term American commitments. The atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, the refusal of Hamas and Hezbollah to disarm, and Iran's continued insistence on advancing its nuclear program provide Israel with strong justification for its strategic demands.

However, growing domestic opposition within the United States to the

administration's policies, the erosion of American leverage over its allies, and the approaching congressional elections all suggest that Israel's diplomatic window may be limited. Israel should therefore seek to anchor American commitments through formal memoranda of understanding and congressional legislation, rather than relying solely on presidential declarations.

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