

The Trump Effect on Global Autocratization: Theory and Evidence from Israel and Türkiye

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In this article, we address how the retrenchment of United States democracy promotion under President Donald Trump has affected autocratization in US allies in the Middle East. We find that the degree and processes of US autocracy promotion differ depending on two domestic factors: political leaders' control over the state and domestic attitudes toward the US. We specifically analyze two US allies with preexisting processes of executive aggrandizement: Israel and Türkiye. We find that in both countries, the retrenchment of US democracy promotion has enabled autocratization, but to varying degrees and through different pathways.

Scholarship in political science has long conceptualized United States democracy promotion as a force that fosters democracy globally.¹ Yet the radical retrenchment of US democracy promotion during Donald Trump's second term as president calls for new research and theories regarding the ways that US international influence shapes regime outcomes globally. How has the decline of US democracy promotion affected processes of autocratization in US allies globally and in the Middle East particularly?

Early research theorizes that Trump's presidency may undermine democracy globally both through the effects of Trump's domestic governance (by inspiring copycats) and through his foreign policy (by reducing pro-democratic diplomacy).² Existing research has focused on the US side of the equation by theorizing that the government has adopted "an autocracy promotion agenda" or a "values-based foreign policy" oriented toward supporting right-wing ideological allies.³ We advance this research by focusing instead on how this decline of US democracy promotion interacts with other countries' domestic conditions.

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1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Seva Gunitzky, *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

2. Thomas Carothers and Oliver Steunkel, "How Will the Second Trump Administration Affect Global Democracy?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (April 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/united-states-trump-democracy-aid-cuts>.

3. Daniel W. Drezner, "Under Trump, the U.S. Has Adopted an Autocracy Promotion Agenda," Fletcher Russia and Eurasia Program (April 2025), <https://sites.tufts.edu/fletcherrussia/under-trump-the-u-s-has-adopted-an-autocracy-promotion-agenda/>; Oren Samet, "America Still Has a 'Values-Based' Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/27/us-values-based-foreign-policy-trump-ideology/>.

We theorize that the decimation of US democracy promotion creates a permissive environment and provides both symbolic and material support for autocratization. And yet, the degree and specific processes of US “autocracy promotion” — defined as an external actors’ support for autocratization or authoritarianism⁴ — depend on domestic political factors, creating distinct pathways toward executive aggrandizement.

The first domestic factor is the incumbent leader’s control over the state. Given a decline in international pressure against autocratization, domestic constraints such as an independent judiciary become even more important in shaping regime outcomes. When incumbents face domestic institutional constraints, the decline of US democracy promotion can proactively enable the dismantling of these constraints and transform into “autocracy promotion.” Conversely, when incumbents already wield control over state institutions, the primary effect of US policy is a “normalization of authoritarianism,” in which the US acquiesces to executive aggrandizement and legitimizes strongman rule as a norm.

The second domestic factor is public levels of pro- or anti-Americanism. We theorize that in countries with pro-American sentiment, external support from Trump furnishes symbolic and discursive resources that allow illiberal leaders to create what we call “symbolic alignment” with the US president and leverage US support as part of their domestic legitimation strategy. By contrast, in countries with anti-American attitudes, external support from Trump creates what we call “managed incoherence,” in which leaders take advantage of US acquiescence to autocratization while espousing anti-Americanism. By foregrounding pro- versus anti-Americanism as a variable, our analysis shifts the focus from material factors to symbolic politics, illustrating how global hierarchies and local identity projects intersect to produce divergent processes of regime change.⁵

We provide evidence for this theory by analyzing Israel and Türkiye, two US allies with preexisting processes of autocratization. The countries offer ideal cases for studying how domestic conditions shape the “Trump effect” on autocratization in US allies globally. While Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have both engaged in executive aggrandizement, Israel and Türkiye differ in their domestic conditions. First, at the start of Trump’s second term in January 2025, the incumbent’s control over the state was less established in Israel than in Türkiye. In Israel, despite a governmental effort to weaken the judiciary in 2023, independent state officials, such as the attorney general and head of domestic intelligence, were still in office as of January 2025. In Türkiye, by contrast, by January 2025, Erdoğan had eliminated checks on executive power from the judiciary, parlia-

4. Peter Burnell, “Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?” in *Promoting Democracy Abroad: Policy and Performance*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011). On the conceptual distinction between active and passive autocracy promotion and whether autocracy promotion requires intent, see Oisín Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion,” *Democratization* 23, no. 1 (2016): 141–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1095736>; Katsiaryna Yakouchyk, “Beyond Autocracy Promotion: A Review,” *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2019): 147–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918774976>.

5. Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Özlem Altan-Olcay, “Defining ‘America’ from a Distance: Local Strategies of the Global in the Middle East,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 1 (2008): 29–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701711796>.

ment, and other national institutions.⁶ Against this backdrop, the decimation of US democracy promotion has resulted in autocracy promotion in Israel by actively enabling Netanyahu's attacks on domestic constraints. In Türkiye it has led to a normalization of authoritarianism by acquiescing to Erdoğan's increased use of repression.

Furthermore, Israel and Türkiye are countries with sharply contrasting public attitudes toward the US: one is staunchly pro-American, the other steeped in anti-Americanism. According to a 2025 Pew survey, whereas 83 percent of Israelis held a favorable opinion of the US, 71 percent of Turkish respondents held an unfavorable opinion.⁷ Our case selection enables us to examine how these contrasting domestic conditions shape the processes through which international influences enable autocratization.

This research makes three central contributions. First, our theory refines existing accounts of the international dimension of democratic backsliding by highlighting how external signals interact with domestic conditions.⁸ External signals, whether restrictive or permissive of autocratization, are not simply transmitted; they are mediated by domestic political conditions and shape regime outcomes in turn. Second, our theory contributes to scholarly research on authoritarianism in the Middle East. Building upon scholarship arguing that US foreign policy has long engaged in "democracy prevention" by impeding democratization in authoritarian allies in the Middle East,⁹ we submit that today, the US is engaged in outright autocracy promotion by enabling autocratization in allies with some preexisting level of democracy. Finally, our research demonstrates the changing and relational nature of US hegemony, which, long studied as a pro-democratic force, may have changing effects depending on the state of US democracy.¹⁰ We further theorize that the exercise of US power depends significantly on how domestic publics perceive it in a world with varying levels of pro- or anti-Americanism.

6. Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1135732>; Berk Esen, "Judicial Transformation in a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: Evidence from the Turkish Case," *Law & Policy* 47, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12250>; Andrew O'Donohue, "Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (March 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/turkey-protests-erdogan-democracy-authoritarianism?lang=en>; Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/turkey-protests-erdogan-democracy-authoritarianism>.

7. Richard Wike et al., "Views of the United States," *Pew Research Center*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/11/views-of-the-united-states/>.

8. Jon Pevehouse, "With a Little Help from My Friends? Regional Organizations and the Consolidation of Democracy," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 3 (2002): 611–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088403>; Jon Pevehouse, *Democracy from above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Gunitsky, *Aftershocks*.

9. Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 139–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150140>; Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Amaney A. Jamal, *Of Empires and Citizens: Pro-American Democracy or No Democracy at All?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Sarah Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

10. Gunitsky, *Aftershocks*; Drezner, "Under Trump, the U.S. Has Adopted an Autocracy Promotion Agenda."

US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION FROM BIDEN TO TRUMP

Donald Trump's second term as president has severely diminished US democracy promotion worldwide. To understand how Trump's presidency is shaping autocratization in US allies globally, we first discuss the baseline of US democracy promotion under President Joe Biden, which was ambitious but inconsistent in seeking to exert international, pro-democratic pressure. We then demonstrate that President Trump has decimated US democracy support along three dimensions: rhetorically, financially, and institutionally. Finally, we show how the Trump administration has given a green light to autocratization in two US allies — Israel and Türkiye — and engaged in active autocracy promotion in Israel.

THE BIDEN BASELINE: US DEMOCRACY POLICY, 2021–25

Under President Biden, US democracy promotion was ambitious but inconsistent. Biden presented himself to be engaging in a revival of US democracy promotion following Trump's first term. Presidential rhetoric placed US support for democracy at the center of Biden's self-image and international agenda. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2021, the president asserted that his "galvanizing mission" was that "democracy will and must prevail."¹¹ Biden's Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, affirmed that "President Biden is committed to a foreign policy (...) centered on the defense of democracy and the protection of human rights."¹²

In addition to this rhetoric, the Biden administration advanced multiple policy initiatives to support democracy globally. As Thomas Carothers and Frances Brown argued, Biden's global democracy policy contained several distinct elements.¹³ The first pillar and "major thrust" of this policy focused on countering the transnational influence of authoritarian adversaries, namely China and Russia.¹⁴ Second, the Biden administration significantly increased funding for democracy aid, nearly doubling the annual request for congressional funding from \$1.7 billion in 2021 to \$3.2 billion in 2024.¹⁵ Third, the administration spearheaded new multilateral initiatives, hosting two Summits for Democracy, which notably excluded US allies such as Hungary and Türkiye.¹⁶ Fourth, Biden's foreign policy pushed back against democratic backsliding in

11. The White House, "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference," February 19, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

12. Antony J. Blinken, "Putting Human Rights at the Center of U.S. Foreign Policy," US Department of State, Press Release, February 24, 2021, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/putting-human-rights-at-the-center-of-u-s-foreign-policy/>.

13. Thomas Carothers and Frances Brown, *Democracy Policy Under Biden: Confronting a Changed World* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), 4, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/02/democracy-policy-under-biden-confronting-a-changed-world?lang=en>.

14. Carothers and Brown, *Democracy Policy Under Biden*, 5.

15. Carothers and Brown, *Democracy Policy Under Biden*, 10.

16. Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Scoop: Turkey and Hungary Not Invited to Biden's Big Democracy Summit," *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/biden-democracy-summit-turkey-hungary/>. Carothers and Brown, *Democracy Policy Under Biden*, 6–7.

specific countries, such as Myanmar, Brazil, and Guatemala.¹⁷ While no sanctions were imposed in response to the Netanyahu government's plans to weaken Israel's judiciary, Biden communicated his disapproval of Netanyahu's policy.¹⁸ Biden's strategy was built on a long history whereby democracy promotion was a major component of US foreign policy.¹⁹

However, while ambitious in its aspirations, US democracy promotion was inconsistent in practice.²⁰ While claiming to champion democracy globally, the Biden administration strengthened ties with numerous authoritarian regimes and backsliding democracies. Biden reconciled with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2022, rolled out the red carpet for India's illiberal Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2023, and launched a new strategic partnership with Vietnam's authoritarian regime in 2023.²¹ In the Middle East, the US maintained close relations with numerous autocratic security partners — namely Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.²² As Carothers argued, the inconsistency of US democracy policy “is a feature, not a bug, of the foreign policy of a superpower with an extremely complex array of global interests.”²³

TRUMP'S DECIMATION OF US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION, 2025—

Since January 2025, Donald Trump's administration has dismantled US democracy promotion across three dimensions: embracing rhetoric that glorifies strongmen, slashing financial support for democracy aid, and hollowing out the institutional architecture that sustained democracy promotion. First, at the level of presidential rhetoric, Trump has rebuked the idea of aiding democracy and repeatedly disparaged democratic allies. In May 2025, during an address in Saudi Arabia, Trump declared that the US would no longer be “giving you lectures on how to live or how to govern your own affairs.”²⁴ At the same time, Trump praised Mohammed bin Salman for his leadership style.²⁵ Meanwhile, Trump's administration has issued stinging criticism

17. Carothers and Brown, *Democracy Policy Under Biden*, 7–8.

18. Thomas L. Friedman, “Biden to Netanyahu: Please Stop Trying to Rush Through Your Judicial Overhaul. Build a Consensus First,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/opinion/biden-netanyahu-supreme-court-protests.html>.

19. Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad*; Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai, eds., *Democratization and Ethnic Minorities: Conflict or Compromise?* (London: Routledge, 2014).

20. Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*.

21. Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman, *Examining U.S. Relations With Authoritarian Countries* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), 56.

22. Carothers and Feldman, *Examining U.S. Relations With Authoritarian Countries*, 12.

23. Thomas Carothers, “Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (March 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/does-us-democracy-aid-have-a-future?lang=en>.

24. The White House, “In Riyadh, President Trump Charts the Course for a Prosperous Future in the Middle East,” May 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/05/in-riyadh-president-trump-charts-the-course-for-a-prosperous-future-in-the-middle-east/>.

25. Mary Bruce et al., “Trump Heaps Praise on Saudi Crown Prince MBS as He Touts Economic Development,” *ABC News*, May 13, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-heaps-praise-saudi-crown-prince-touts-economic/story?id=121758613>.

of democratic allies and even threatened some, such as Denmark and Panama, with territorial grabs.²⁶ Despite promises not to intervene in allies' internal affairs, Trump stridently called on foreign courts to drop charges against former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Netanyahu.²⁷

Second, the Trump administration dismantled US funding for democracy globally. The administration has gutted the three pillars of US democracy aid: the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). USAID and the State Department together account for 90 percent of the \$3 billion annual budget for democracy aid, while the NED accounts for the remaining 10 percent.²⁸ Starting in January 2025, the Trump administration halted democracy aid from USAID and the State Department through a freeze on all US foreign assistance.²⁹ The administration cancelled nearly 10,000 aid contracts and grants, and dismantled USAID by firing almost all of its employees.³⁰ Even though Congress approved funding for the NED, the Treasury Department refused to transfer those funds.³¹ Not only did Trump halt funding for democracy support, he also retroactively accused the Biden administration of using it to undermine his allies. In July 2025, the Republican-led House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary issued a report on "the Biden-Harris Administration's Funding of Anti-Netanyahu Non-Governmental Organizations," which accused organizations like USAID of funding protests against the Netanyahu government's judicial changes, which have been criticized as advancing autocratization in Israel.³²

This sudden withdrawal of funding has crippled the US non-profit organizations that conduct democracy support, including the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, and International Foundation for Electoral Systems.³³ Globally, the withdrawal of US funding has devastated thousands of organizations that received US democracy aid, such as human rights groups and media organizations.³⁴

Finally, institutionally, the Trump administration has slashed offices designed to support democracy abroad. In April 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio eliminated the State Department's senior-most human rights official, the undersecretary for civilian security,

26. Thomas Carothers, "A New Low on US Democracy Support," *Politico*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/new-low-united-states-democracy-support-donald-trump-saudi-gulf-trip-riyadh-ramaphosa/>.

27. Michael Pooler and Michael Stott, "Brazil Orders Curfew and Ankle Tag for Ex-President as Clash with US Escalates," *Financial Times*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/2cd9b632-7698-48e5-a453-d0de91896af5>; James Shotter, "Donald Trump Calls on Israel to Cancel Benjamin Netanyahu's Corruption Trial," *Financial Times*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/bfebcd73-b46d-47b6-8ba1-79751a3b4f67>.

28. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

29. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

30. Ellen Knickmeyer et al., "Trump Administration Says It's Cutting 90% of USAID Foreign Aid Contracts," *AP News*, February 26, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-usaid-foreign-aid-cuts-6292f48f8d4025bed0bf5c3e9d623c16>.

31. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

32. The Committee on the Judiciary, "Memo Reveals Biden-Harris Admin Misused Taxpayer Dollars to Fund Anti-Netanyahu Organizations," Press Release, July 17, 2025, <https://judiciary.house.gov/media/press-releases/memo-reveals-biden-harris-admin-misused-taxpayer-dollars-fund-anti-netanyahu>.

33. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

34. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

democracy, and human rights.³⁵ The Trump administration also scaled back the State Department's annual reports on countries' violations of human rights. Overturning decades of precedent, these reports will no longer condemn practices such as holding political prisoners, restricting "free and fair elections," denying freedom of peaceful assembly, or harassing human rights organizations.³⁶ In summary, the Trump administration has decimated US democracy support through changes in rhetoric, funding, and institutions.

Notably, Trump's second term has had much more radical effects on US democracy policy than his first. A key reason is that the US political establishment has been severely weakened as a constraint on the president.³⁷ In Trump's first administration, establishment political elites such as Jim Mattis, Mark Esper, and H.R. McMaster maintained some continuity in US foreign policy.³⁸ In Trump's second term, however, more independent establishment elites were systematically replaced with loyalty-based appointees. The appointment of Fox News host Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense epitomizes this trend. This dynamic of prioritizing loyalty in appointments hollows professional state institutions — a process that Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein described as the "assault on the state" — and endangers not only democracy but also the capacity of state institutions.³⁹ In addition to reducing constraints *within* the executive branch, there has been a collapse in constraints on the president from Congress. During Trump's first term, Congress quietly defended the budget for US democracy aid.⁴⁰ However, during Trump's second term, many Republicans in Congress have gone silent and allowed the president to freeze funding that Congress previously approved, including for USAID and the NED.⁴¹ The constitutional separation of powers formally persists, but in practice, a co-partisan Congress has given a green light to the president's decimation of US democracy support.

The discontinuity between Trump's first and second terms illustrates a core insight from comparative scholarship on autocratization. Constraints on illiberal executives are not solely fixed by formal institutions; they are endogenous to elite networks and partisan coalitions.⁴² When gatekeeping elites lose power and legislative oversight becomes partisan, the executive shifts from being a constrained populist to an unbound personalist. This transformation matters because it enables not just a policy shift, but

35. Michael Crowley, "Critics Call Rubio's Overhaul Plan a Blow to U.S. Values," *New York Times*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/22/us/politics/rubio-state-department-overhaul.html>.

36. Graham Smith, "The State Department Is Changing Its Mind about What It Calls Human Rights," *NPR*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/18/nx-s1-5357511/state-department-human-rights-report-cuts>.

37. Andrew O'Donohue, "The U.S. Judicial Crisis Is Uniquely Dangerous," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/26/trump-judiciary-courts-constitutional-crisis-executive/>.

38. Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017–2021* (New York: Doubleday, 2022).

39. Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future* (New York: Polity, 2024).

40. Thomas Carothers and Frances Z. Brown, "Can U.S. Democracy Policy Survive Trump?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Oct 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/10/can-us-democracy-policy-survive-trump?lang=en>.

41. Carothers, "Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?"

42. Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

what we call “normative retrenchment”: a redefinition of the US’ foreign policy identity from democracy promotion to autocracy promotion.

TRUMP’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL AND TÜRKIYE

The shift in US foreign policy during Trump’s second term has enabled autocratization in US allies by removing external constraints, legitimizing illiberal behavior, and endorsing impunity for executive aggrandizement. Per Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way’s theory of external linkage and leverage, US democracy promotion historically served as a source of normative and material pressure that increased the costs of democratic backsliding.⁴³ Under Biden and other US presidents, US linkage and leverage provided imperfect but nonetheless meaningful support for democracy through rhetorical condemnation, diplomatic distancing, and conditionality. Under Trump, these external signals are inverted.

Israel and Türkiye are two countries where the Trump administration is likely to have particularly acute effects on autocratization. Both countries have political leaders who have long pushed for “executive aggrandizement,” a process of weakening constraints on their power from the judiciary, legislature, media, and other accountability institutions.⁴⁴ Furthermore, both countries are US allies for whom a shift in US foreign policy can enable domestic changes, even when external factors are not the main driving force. The Trump administration’s policy has differed regarding these US allies, leading to active autocracy promotion in Israel and a more passive normalization of authoritarianism in Türkiye.

In Israel, US foreign policy has inverted from democracy promotion under Biden to autocracy promotion under Trump. In 2023, when Netanyahu’s government announced plans to weaken the power of Israel’s judiciary, the Biden administration repeatedly and publicly opposed those judicial changes.⁴⁵ In March 2023, Biden stated about the government’s judicial plan: “I’m very concerned (...) They cannot continue down this road.”⁴⁶ The Netanyahu government’s judicial proposals created a public rift between the US and Israel, with Biden saying he would not invite Netanyahu to the White House “in the near future” and Netanyahu rejecting “pressure” from the White House.⁴⁷

Trump, by contrast, has actively enabled Netanyahu’s executive aggrandizement. In March 2025, when the Netanyahu government passed legislation to increase the power of politicians over the selection of judges, the Trump administration was mute.

43. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

44. Oded Haklai, “Spokes of Regime Change in Israel,” *Israel Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (2024): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2024.390101>; Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey.”

45. Zeke Miller, “Biden Still Concerned about Judicial Overhaul as He Extends Invite to Meet with Israel’s Netanyahu,” *AP News*, July 17, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-herzog-israel-palestinians-d4a1525362fca812fc803996ed0a7fc3>.

46. Rob Picheta et al., “Biden and Netanyahu Trade Barbs over Plan to Weaken Courts as Israel Rejects ‘Pressure’ from White House,” *CNN*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/29/middleeast/israel-biden-netanyahu-judicial-overhaul-dispute-intl>.

47. Picheta et al., “Biden and Netanyahu Trade Barbs over Plan to Weaken Courts.”

Moreover, in June 2025, Trump called for Israel’s judiciary to cancel the long-standing corruption trial against Netanyahu, which Trump branded a “ridiculous Witch Hunt.”⁴⁸ In November 2025, President Trump sent a letter to Israel’s President Isaac Herzog calling upon Herzog “to fully pardon Benjamin Netanyahu” and end “the political, unjustified prosecution” against him.⁴⁹ Materially, US military assistance and intelligence cooperation has continued uninterrupted and indeed strengthened. The US joined Israel in attacking Iran in June 2025, and US-Israeli military cooperation deepened with a joint military campaign against Iran’s regime starting in February 2026. Thus, in Israel, US foreign policy has undergone a 180-degree turn from opposing to supporting executive aggrandizement.

In Türkiye, US foreign policy has transitioned from limited support for democracy to acquiescence to autocratization. This shift in US policy is particularly clear in the case of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. In December 2022, when a Turkish court convicted İmamoğlu in a highly politicized case, the US State Department publicly expressed that it was “gravely concerned and disappointed.”⁵⁰ Yet in March 2025, when the same mayor was *imprisoned* on separate, politicized charges, the State Department issued no such public statement.⁵¹ In effect, the Trump administration gave a green light to Türkiye’s repression. Meanwhile, US arms transfers and intelligence cooperation continue uninterrupted.⁵²

US foreign policy has therefore enabled autocratization through two mechanisms: signaling and legitimation. By reframing democratic erosion as either acceptable or justified, Trump reduces normative barriers. By abandoning rhetorical and diplomatic leverage, the US lowers the material and reputational costs of autocratization. This shift matters because external actors can shape regime trajectories not only through sanctions or aid but through symbolic alignment.

THE TRUMP EFFECT ON ISRAEL’S AUTOCRATIZATION

The case of Israel reveals how the Trump administration has provided Netanyahu’s government with rhetorical and political tools to advance a preexisting agenda of executive aggrandizement. Trump’s endorsement has intersected with domestic pro-Americanism and favorable attitudes toward Trump to facilitate an authoritarian drift manifested in an assault on the state, including the autonomy of the judiciary. While Netanyahu did not control the state apparatus to the same extent that Erdoğan did when Trump took office for the second time, he has leveraged Trump’s personalized support as part of his domestic legitimation strategy and created what we

48. Shotter, “Donald Trump Calls on Israel to Cancel Benjamin Netanyahu’s Corruption Trial.”

49. “Netanyahu trial ‘political and unjustified,’ Trump writes to Herzog in letter requesting pardon,” *The Jerusalem Post*, November 12, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/benjamin-netanyahu/article-873608>.

50. Ned Price, “Turkey’s Conviction and Sentencing of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu,” US Department of State, December 15, 2022, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/turkeys-conviction-and-sentencing-of-istanbul-mayor-ekrem-imamoglu/>; O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism.”

51. O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism.”

52. O’Donohue, “Why Türkiye Is at a Tipping Point Between Democracy and Authoritarianism.”

call symbolic alignment with the American president. Netanyahu thereby presented himself as the president's kindred leader. This symbolic alignment, in turn, has increased Netanyahu's capacity to justify an attack on the autonomous state apparatus and other constraints on executive power.

EXECUTIVE AGGRANDIZEMENT BEFORE TRUMP

The process of executive aggrandizement in Israel long precedes President Trump's reelection and has unfurled across multiple dimensions.⁵³ Efforts at executive aggrandizement include weakening the judiciary as well as legislative oversight of the executive. One important manifestation has been the regularity of changes made by Netanyahu to Israel's Basic Laws, which hold a constitutional status, intended to serve incumbents' immediate political interests.⁵⁴ Indeed, since 2014, as a result of a legislative amendment that inhibits the parliament's capacity to vote no confidence in the executive, it has become easier in Israel to pass constitutional amendments than to topple a government in a no-confidence motion, a feature very unusual in a parliamentary democracy.⁵⁵ Other dimensions of executive aggrandizement include weakening media autonomy and using legislation to hinder the capacity of political opposition and civil society to mobilize.⁵⁶

A key manifestation of executive aggrandizement has been Netanyahu's assault on state institutions, including the delegitimization of the professional bureaucracy and replacement of professional administrators with loyalists.⁵⁷ This process has led to regular attacks on the attorney general's office and the judiciary, painting them as "an enemy of the people."⁵⁸ These attacks have intensified following Attorney General Avi-

53. Haklai, "Spokes of Regime Change in Israel"; Neta Oren, *Israel under Netanyahu: Populism and Democratic Decline* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2025).

54. Amir Fuchs, "The Frequent Changes to Israel's Basic Laws," Israel Democracy Institute (2023), <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/39441>.

55. Ayelet Rubabshi-Shitrit and Sharon Hasson, "The Effect of the Constructive Vote of No-Confidence on Government Termination and Government Durability," *West European Politics* 45, no. 3 (2022): 576–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1914421>.

56. Naomi Chazan, "Israel's Democracy at a Turning Point," in *Continuity and Change in Political Culture: Israel and Beyond*, ed. Yael S. Aronoff et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021); Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), "'חוק שוברים שתיקה' (חוק 'Preventing Organizations from entering schools ('Breaking the Silence' Law)"), July 18, 2018, <https://law.acri.org.il/he/42027>; Guy Grossman, Yotam Margalit, Tamar Mitts, "How the Ultrarich Use Media Ownership as a Political Investment," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 4 (2022): 1913–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/719415>; Raffaella Goychman and Hagai Amit, "לא היה דבר כזה: עם מאות מיליונים, הערוץ שמאיים לשנות את המפה הפוליטית" ["Nothing Like This: With Hundreds of Millions of Shekels, Channel 14 Threatens to Change the Political map in Israel"], *The Marker*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/2023-01-27/ty-article-magazine/.premium/00000185-ee58-dcb6-ab9f-fff8a4800000>.

57. Hanson and Kopstein, *The Assault on the State*.

58. Dahlia Scheindlin, "Why Did Israel's Judiciary Become an Enemy of the People?" *The New Republic*, July 20, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/163005/israel-supreme-court-right-wing-enemy-people>; Oded Haklai and Andrew O'Donohue, "Is Israel Losing Its Last Democratic Safeguard?" *Journal of Democracy* (Nov 2024), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/is-israel-losing-its-last-democratic-safeguard/>.

chai Mandelblit's decision in 2019 to indict Prime Minister Netanyahu on three charges of corruption, breach of trust, and fraud. In turn, these attacks have led to a considerable decline in public trust in the courts from above 80 percent in the 1990s to around 40 percent in the 2020s.⁵⁹ This trend, therefore, precedes the Trump era.

Despite this executive aggrandizement, Prime Minister Netanyahu faced some constraints on executive power when Trump assumed office in January 2025. As recently as January 2024, Israel's Supreme Court struck down legislation to reduce the judiciary's powers, and the Netanyahu government suspended its contentious judicial plan after societal mobilization in 2023.⁶⁰ Independent state officials, such as Supreme Court judges, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, and head of Israel's domestic security agency Ronen Bar, occupied key state positions. Compared to Erdoğan, Netanyahu faced stronger domestic constraints on his power, and thus, Trump's autocracy promotion has provided an unusually potent resource. Since January 2025, Netanyahu has systematically removed independent-minded officials, including Bar.⁶¹

PLAYING TO A PRO-AMERICAN, PRO-TRUMP ELECTORATE IN ISRAEL

Although the process of executive aggrandizement in Israel precedes Trump's second term, the retrenchment of democracy promotion under Trump has enabled autocratization by allowing Netanyahu to leverage support from the US president to undermine constraints on executive power. Our first observation pertains to a change in the vocabulary used by Prime Minister Netanyahu, specifically his adoption of the terminology of the "deep state."

To be sure, reference to the so-called "deep state" is not new on the political right, and the attack on the professional administrative apparatus had been ongoing for years.⁶² Nevertheless, it was only after President Trump began his second term that Netanyahu himself embraced the terminology. Echoing Trump, Netanyahu explicitly used this terminology in reference to unelected officials that allegedly control the state and circumvent elected officials and thus the will of the people.⁶³ In one widely circulated video, Netanyahu declared that the deep state wants him "and the government to be a plant," pointing to a plant on the floor in the Prime

59. For the 1990s, see Scheindlin, "Why Did Israel's Judiciary Become an Enemy of the People?" For 2024, see Tamar Hermann et al., *The Israeli Democracy Index 2024* (Israel Democracy Institute, 2024), https://en.idi.org.il/media/27509/israel-democracy-index-2024-e_for_web_17-2-2025.pdf. For the 2020s, see Institute for Liberty and Responsibility, "Public Trust in the Judicial System," July 2025 Survey Highlights (Reichman University, 2026), https://www.runi.ac.il/en/research-institutes/government/libres/inst_measures/trust-in-law.

60. Haklai and O'Donohue, "Is Israel Losing Its Last Democratic Safeguard?"

61. Mark Mazzetti and Patrick Kingsley, "For Trump and Netanyahu, Similar Strategies With Similar Goals," *New York Times*, March 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/us/politics/trump-netanyahu-israel-political-strategy.html>.

62. Naomi Rachlis, "ההדיפ סטייט עולה לכותרות: מה מקור המילה ומתי נולדה התופעה?" ["The Deep State is in the Headlines: What is the origin of the word and when was the phenomenon born?"], *Channel 14 Online*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.c14.co.il/article/1158775>.

63. Shmuel Cogan, "נתניהו: 'ההדיפ-סטייט רוצים שנהיה עציצים, לא ניתן לזה לקרות,'" ["Netanyahu: 'The Deep State Wants Us to Be Plants, We Won't Let That Happen'"], *Channel 14 Online*, March 20, 2025, <https://www.c14.co.il/article/1153361>.

Minister's Office and declaring, "We won't let them."⁶⁴ Netanyahu goes on to explain that:

"[The] Deep State is the permanent bureaucrats, that hardly ever changes and sits deeply in the Israeli government and decides that it knows better than the voters. They always lean left, these guys. Let's say you voted for a right-wing government. They say, 'Hold on, what do you mean democracy? What does it mean they'll choose?' You don't really get to choose. You want to pass laws that they don't like? They'll rule them out. You want to make appointments? You can't."⁶⁵

Netanyahu's changing vocabulary has explicitly linked to American right-wing discourse. In a post on X in March 2025, Netanyahu wrote, "In America and in Israel, when a strong right-wing leader wins an election, the leftist Deep State weaponizes the justice system to thwart the people's will. They won't win in either place! We stand strong together."⁶⁶ By writing in English, Netanyahu is able to target audiences not only in Israel but also in the US. By using the language of standing together against the "leftist Deep State," Netanyahu signaled camaraderie with the US president. At the same time, by echoing Trump's message about the existence of a deep state in the US, Netanyahu also signaled to Trump that he is willing to disseminate the president's message, forging a mutually advantageous alliance.

Domestically, given the importance of Israel's alliance with the US and the Israeli public's favorability toward Trump and the US, Netanyahu's use of this language creates symbolic alignment with the US president, communicating to Israelis that Netanyahu is best suited to represent them internationally. Shortly before the 2024 presidential elections, surveys in Israel showed that the ratio of support among Israelis for Trump compared to his rival, Kamala Harris, was around 2.5 to 1.⁶⁷ At the start of Trump's second term, over 60 percent of Israelis were content with Trump assuming office, while only 28 percent were dissatisfied.⁶⁸ About 72 percent of Israelis expressed confidence that Trump would know to do the right thing in US-Israel relations, and 56 percent expressed confidence that Trump would do the appropriate thing in Israeli-Palestinian relations.⁶⁹ Aside from the supportive attitude toward Trump, Israelis persistently exhibit very high favorability toward the US; a 2025 Pew survey found that 83 percent of Israelis held a favorable opinion of the US.⁷⁰

Trump's intervention into the judicial proceedings against Netanyahu has reciprocated this camaraderie and been a key component of Trump's support for executive ag-

64. Cogan, "הדינתו" ["Netanyahu"].

65. Cogan, "נתניהו" ["Netanyahu"].

66. Benjamin Netanyahu - בנימין נתניהו [@netanyahu], "In America and in Israel," X/Twitter, March 19, 2025, 2:59 p.m., <https://x.com/netanyahu/status/1902434651597111337>.

67. Amnon Cavari, *How Israelis View the Presidential Candidates in 2024* (Institute for Liberty and Responsibility, Reichman University, 2024), https://www.runi.ac.il/media/u1qftr55/2024_10_isr_attitudes_us.pdf.

68. The Jewish People Policy Institute, *JPPI Israeli Society Index, January 2025: A Hostage Deal, and Confidence in Trump* (Jerusalem, 2025).

69. The Jewish People Policy Institute, *JPPI Israeli Society Index, January 2025*.

70. Cavari, *Attitudes of Israelis toward the Presidential Candidates in 2024*; Wike et al., "Views of the United States."

grandizement. As mentioned earlier, Trump not only characterized Netanyahu's trial as a witch hunt but also sent a letter to the Israeli president asking for a pardon. Additionally, in October 2025, Trump gave a speech before the Knesset appealing directly to the Israeli president sitting beside him, saying, "Mr. President, why don't you give him a pardon?"⁷¹ Notably, it was not only Trump but also his functionaries working to enable executive aggrandizement. For example, the US Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, attended Netanyahu's trial to openly express the US administration's support for the prime minister.⁷² In a further show of support and noting the kindred relationship between Trump and Netanyahu, Huckabee noted that "they had an extraordinary bonding."⁷³

In addition to symbolic support for autocratization, the Trump administration has added a thinly veiled threat of material consequences. Implicitly tying US aid to Israel to cancelling Netanyahu's trial, Trump proclaimed: "The United States of America spends Billions of Dollar [sic] a year, far more than any other nation, protecting and supporting Israel. We are not going to stand for this."⁷⁴ Trump added: "It was the United States of America that saved Israel, and now it is going to be the United States of America that saves Bibi Netanyahu."⁷⁵

Trump's symbolic and material support for Netanyahu has become more significant during the Gaza war, when support from Israel's other traditional democratic allies has declined. France, the United Kingdom, and Canada all recognized a Palestinian state in September 2025. The rising importance of US support for Israel, in turn, has created a paradox for the pro-democracy opposition. On the one hand, there has been great appreciation for Trump's putative support for Israel during troubled times. On the other, pro-democracy forces oppose Netanyahu's executive aggrandizement agenda, which President Trump has abetted. This contradiction was well illustrated in a rally held on October 11, 2025. Hundreds of thousands attended in support of the cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas. When Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, spoke, hundreds of thousands called out, "Thank you, Trump!" When Witkoff mentioned Netanyahu, those same masses jeered loudly.⁷⁶

In sum, the Trump effect on autocratization in Israel has included both symbolic politics and material support. First, Trumpian vocabulary has provided rhetorical resources in a domestic political environment in which pro-American and pro-Trump

71. The White House, "President Trump Delivers Remarks to the Knesset," October 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/videos/president-trump-delivers-remarks-to-the-knesset/>.

72. Jeremy Sharon and Nava Freiberg, "In Show of Support, US Ambassador Huckabee Attends Netanyahu's Criminal Trial," *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-ambassador-huckabee-attends-netanyahus-criminal-trial-in-show-of-support/>.

73. Sharon and Freiberg, "In Show of Support."

74. Ben Samuels, "'Let Bibi Go': Trump Implicitly Threatens U.S. Aid to Israel Unless Netanyahu's Criminal Trial Cancelled," *Haaretz*, June 29, 2025, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2025-06-29/ty-article/.premium/trump-threatens-u-s-aid-to-israel-over-netanyahus-trial/00000197-b906-de01-a39f-fbbe91670000>.

75. Natalie Melzer and Ibrahim Hazboun, "Trump's Vow to 'save' Netanyahu from His Corruption Trial Unnerves Some Israelis," *PBS News*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trumps-vow-to-save-netanyahu-from-his-corruption-trial-unnerves-some-israelis>.

76. Isabel Kershner, "Israelis Rally for Hostages in Gaza, Hoping It Will Be the Last Time," *New York Times*, October 11, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/11/world/middleeast/israel-hostages-square-rally.html>.

sentiments are prevalent. Second, the threat of material consequences in response to autocratization has been replaced with a thinly veiled warning meant to protect a kindred Israeli incumbent. The result has been US autocracy promotion, and the Netanyahu administration has felt emboldened to continue its attack on the autonomous institutions that had constrained it in the pre-Trump era. In 2025, the government voted to dismiss Ronen Bar as Head of Israel's General Security Service and Gali Baharav-Miara as Israel's attorney general. Although Bar ultimately stepped down amid the ensuing legal battle, he warned that the integrity and independence of the security services were at risk due to Netanyahu's desire for loyalty to himself above the courts.⁷⁷ While the move to dismiss Baharav-Miara was halted by Israel's Supreme Court, an intense delegitimization campaign against the attorney general amplified the symbolic effect of the government's decision.

"ISRAEL'S TRILEMMA": FROM FORSAKING TERRITORY TO SACRIFICING DEMOCRACY

A final observation about Trump's effect on autocratization in Israel pertains to what might be termed "Israel's trilemma." For decades Israel faced the problem of reconciling three policy objectives: upholding a Jewish state, maintaining the putative homeland territory, and sustaining a democratic regime.⁷⁸ The presence of a large Palestinian population has made achieving all three goals irreconcilable. On the one hand, if Israel was to be constituted as a Jewish state in the entire territory of the putative homeland, it could not maintain a democratic regime. On the other hand, if Israel was to maintain a democratic regime by extending political rights to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, it could no longer uphold its Jewish identity. In the 1990s and 2000s, the inclination was to address this trilemma by forsaking *de jure* control over the territory inhabited by the majority of Palestinians.⁷⁹

Under Netanyahu, Israel has instead increasingly sacrificed democracy in favor of territorial expansion. Autocratization under Netanyahu has seen a decline in support for territorial compromise and an uptick in support for illiberal norms.⁸⁰ While these shifts have been a longer-term process, after Trump's election in 2024, alignment with Trump provided momentum for supporters of territorial aggrandization at the expense of pro-democracy advocates. For example, support for the US president's February 2025 plan for Gaza — which would have entailed a mass exodus of Palestinians — was high. A survey in that same month revealed that close to half of Israelis viewed Trump's

77. Stav Levaton, Jeremy Sharon, and Sam Sokol, "Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar announces he will step down from his role on June 15," *Times of Israel*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-chief-ronen-bar-announces-he-will-step-down-from-his-role-on-june-15/>.

78. Oded Haklai, "The Decisive Path of State Indecisiveness: Israeli Settlers in the West Bank in Comparative Perspective," in *Settlers in Contested Lands: Territorial Disputes and Ethnic Conflicts*, ed. Oded Haklai and Neophytos Loizides (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 23–4.

79. Miriam Fendius Elman et al., "Introduction: Democracy and Peacemaking in Protracted Conflicts: The Israeli Case," in *Democracy and Conflict Resolution: The Dilemma of Israel's Peacemaking*, ed. Miriam Fendius Elman, Oded Haklai, and Hendrik Spruyt (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

80. Scheindlin, "Why Did Israel's Judiciary Become an Enemy of the People?"

plan for Gaza as feasible.⁸¹ Although that proposal was replaced by a cease-fire agreement in October 2025, it nonetheless normalized discussion of population relocation. This has been accompanied by a rise in displacement of Palestinian communities by settlers in the West Bank and additional steps entrenching Israeli rule over the West Bank Palestinians.⁸²

Thus, although the process of autocratization in Israel dates back to the earlier days of the Netanyahu governments, Trump's election has provided new discursive and symbolic tools for the already autocratizing regime. Creating an image of kindred leaders confronting unelected deep states has enabled Netanyahu to communicate to Israelis that the camaraderie between himself and the US president makes him best positioned to represent Israel internationally. This symbolic alignment offered Netanyahu external validation at a time of a major security crisis, the Gaza War, while otherwise facing waning domestic support. As a result, the Trump effect has been to enable autocratization in Israel.

AUTOCRATIZATION AND MANAGED INCOHERENCE IN TÜRKIYE

The case of Türkiye illustrates how the Trump administration's retreat from democracy promotion reinforced an ongoing process of autocratization under distinct domestic conditions. Under Erdoğan, Türkiye's democratic decline has unfolded through a series of critical junctures that transformed the country from a competitive, parliamentary democracy into a hyper-presidential regime marked by a systematic dismantling of institutional checks on executive power.⁸³ When Trump assumed office in 2025, Erdoğan already exercised sweeping control of Türkiye's state apparatus and needed only passive US acquiescence to autocratization, rather than active autocracy promotion. Trump's retrenchment of democracy promotion thus functioned as a reinforcing condition rather than a trigger, normalizing authoritarian practices and legitimizing executive aggrandizement as an accepted norm. Within Türkiye's already autocratic context, the Trump administration's normalization of authoritarianism further entrenched Erdoğan's dominance by reframing strongman rule as geopolitically acceptable. Essentially, the Trump effect in Türkiye is not one of initiation but of reinforcement: external silence and praise altered the symbolic and strategic environment in which Erdoğan's regime operates. Yet this permissiveness produced its own tension. While Washington's acquiescence eased external constraints on repression, deep-rooted anti-American sentiment at home limited Trump's value as a source of domestic legitimation, leading the Erdoğan regime to exploit foreign approval while simultaneously deflecting it to preserve its nationalist and anti-Western narrative.

81. Moshe Cohen, "סקר | ? והישראלים לעזה - טראמפ בתוכנית טראמפ לעזה - והישראלים | סקר" ["America does not Believe in the Trump Plan for Gaza, and Israelis? | Poll"], *Maariv Online*, February 9, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/article-1171398>.

82. Hagar Scheizaf, "The System: Outpost after Outpost, Settlers are Cleansing the West Bank of Palestinian Communities," *Haaretz*, October 29, 2025 <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/magazine/2025-10-23/ty-article-static/.premium/00000198-c80d-dc66-a9de-ec4d34440000>.

83. Pelin Ayan Musil, "How Incumbents Create Uneven Patterns of Competition during Autocratization: The AKP Case of Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 24, no. 2 (2024): 277–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2343426>.

EXECUTIVE AGGRANDIZEMENT UNDER ERDOĞAN

In Türkiye, Erdoğan's executive aggrandizement has been intensifying for well over a decade. Türkiye's 2010 constitutional referendum increased the executive's control over the judiciary through a restructuring of the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors.⁸⁴ This institutional capture was followed by the violent repression of dissent during the 2013 Gezi protests⁸⁵ In 2015, snap elections brought the collapse of the Kurdish peace process and the emergence of a nationalist-conservative alliance, fusing majoritarianism with a militarized discourse of national security.⁸⁶ The failed coup attempt in 2016 provided the pretext for unprecedented purges and rule by decree, enabling Erdoğan to govern through emergency powers.⁸⁷ The 2017 presidential system referendum then formalized hyper-presidentialism, undermining checks on executive power from the legislature, judiciary, and state institutions.⁸⁸ The March 2025 arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu over corruption charges exemplifies the weaponization of the judiciary to eliminate Erdoğan's most formidable rival — a vivid illustration of leveraging legal institutions as instruments of regime preservation.

Across these junctures of autocratization, Erdoğan's authoritarian toolkit has relied on controlling the political narrative through censorship, the imprisonment of journalists, and closure or acquisition of independent outlets.⁸⁹ Simultaneously, the regime has deployed economic patronage through confiscation of companies and assets linked to perceived opponents and the distribution of lucrative state contracts to loyalists.⁹⁰ Electoral manipulation has further ensured regime survival, with the rewriting of electoral laws, the instrumentalization of the Supreme Electoral Council, and high-profile decisions like the annulment of the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election, which demon-

84. Esen, "Judicial Transformation in a Competitive Authoritarian Regime"; Andrew O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy: Judicial Selection Institutions, Court Capture, and Democratic Backsliding," SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 4465840 (Aug 2023), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4465840>.

85. Esen and Gümüşçü, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey."

86. Ziya Öniş, "Turkey's Two Elections: The AKP Comes Back," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (April 2016): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0021>.

87. Josh Keller, Iaryna Mykhalyshyn, and Safak Timur, "The Scale of Turkey's Purge Is Nearly Unprecedented," *New York Times*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/02/world/europe/turkey-purge-erdogan-scale.html>.

88. Yunus Sözen, "Studying Autocratization in Turkey: Political Institutions, Populism, and Neoliberalism," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 63 (Nov 2020): 209–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2020.26>.

89. Bilge Yeşil, "Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 239–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2018.1487137>; Andrew O'Donohue, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky, *Turkey's Changing Media Landscape* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2020), 28.

90. Ümit Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: A Political Economy Analysis of Akp's Initial Decade," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 6 (2024): 972–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2024.2311489>; Evren Balta, Seda Demiralp, and Selva Demiralp, "Debating Voter Defection in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 5 (2023): 739–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2023.2200941>; Eda Bektas, "Neopatrimonial Rule through Formal Institutions: The Case of Turkey," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 3 (Jan 2025): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.36>.

strated the regime's willingness to override electoral outcomes to maintain power.⁹¹ In parallel, Erdoğan has relied on discursive strategies centered on anti-Westernism and accusations of foreign intervention to inflame nationalist sentiments, delegitimize opposition, and consolidate his base by portraying internal dissent as orchestrated by external enemies.⁹²

Yet, even after over two decades of Erdoğan's rule, Türkiye's authoritarian project has not consolidated. Inflation and massive unemployment, especially among the youth, and economic turmoil have eroded the regime's capacity to maintain patronage networks.⁹³ The unresolved Kurdish question continues to pose a fundamental challenge. Despite intensive repression, pro-Kurdish parties remain electorally decisive in many urban centers. Türkiye's civil society, while severely constrained, has proven unexpectedly durable. Feminist, LGBTQ+, professional, and local movements persist, utilizing digital platforms and protests to contest regime narratives.⁹⁴ Most critically, the opposition's electoral strength has been a check on authoritarian consolidation: after the 2024 local elections, opposition-led municipalities governed cities housing 70 percent of Türkiye's population and producing 85 percent of its GDP, offering subnational counterweights to the regime's hegemonic ambitions.⁹⁵

THE TRUMP EFFECT: NORMALIZING AUTHORITARIANISM ABROAD

It is within this context that the Trump administration's normalization of authoritarianism has had acute consequences. Under President Biden, US foreign policy placed at least some cost on democratic backsliding in Türkiye. After Mayor İmamoğlu was sentenced to prison in 2022 for allegedly insulting public officials by calling those who annulled the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election "fools," the State Department condemned his conviction as politically motivated.⁹⁶ The Biden administration's explicit criticism created material costs to repression by signaling that further autocratization could jeopardize Türkiye's standing as a US ally.

91. Bilge Yabanci, "Civic Opposition and Democratic Backsliding: Mobilization Dynamics and Rapport with Political Parties," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 2 (2025): 431–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.9>.

92. Evren Balta, "Populist Radical Right beyond Europe: The Case of Islamic Nativism in Turkey," *Journal of Language and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2023): 378–95, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.22130.bal>; Evren Balta and Seda Demiralp, "Paradox of Optimism: Opposition Coordination against Autocratic Incumbents in Turkey's 2019 and 2023 Elections," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2024): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2338504>; Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Mustafa Kutlay, and E. Fuat Keyman, "How Erdoğan Rules Through Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 4 (2023): 80–93, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-erdogan-rules-through-crisis/>.

93. Akçay, "Revisiting the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Neoliberalism."

94. Özge Zihniöğlü, "Women's Activism for Democracy in Turkey: Impact, Limitations, and State Responses," in *On the Front Lines: Women's Mobilization for Democracy in an Era of Backsliding* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

95. Kursat Cinar, "The 2024 Local Elections in Turkey: A Critical Juncture for Turkish Democracy?" *South European Society and Politics* 29, no. 1 (2024): 109–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2400055>.

96. "U.S. State Dept Says Troubled by Turkey's Jail Sentence for Opposition Mayor," *Reuters*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-state-dept-says-troubled-by-turkeys-jail-sentence-opposition-mayor-2022-12-14/>.

In stark contrast, the Trump administration's approach exemplifies the normalization of authoritarianism, which presents executive dominance as an acceptable practice in international affairs. By praising strongmen and signaling indifference to democratic backsliding, Trump has discursively aligned leaders like Erdoğan with a broader "post-liberal" trend, in which the executive's strength is privileged over institutional checks and balances. This normalization was not just rhetorical. The US retreat from democracy promotion, framed through a language of pragmatic partnership, encouraged the view in Ankara that democratic norms no longer carried strategic weight in its relationship with Washington. Such external signals reshaped the strategic calculus in Ankara, where policymakers increasingly interpret democratic norms as optional and perceive loyalty to shared illiberal values as rewarded.

The US silence after İmamoğlu's arrest in March 2025 — in contrast to the concern following his 2022 conviction — and its overall warm diplomatic gestures toward Erdoğan signaled that repression would not jeopardize bilateral ties. That silence allowed Erdoğan to present his domestic crackdown as both tolerated and understood by his most important Western partner. The absence of external costs transformed US indifference into implicit approval, strengthening the regime's ability to sustain repression. In Türkiye, authoritarian consolidation has thus been reinforced not only by domestic institutional erosion but also by the external normalization of illiberal governance as a legitimate mode of rule.

After the September 2025 Erdoğan-Trump summit at the White House, US ambassador to Türkiye, Tom Barrack, stated that the meeting was central to Trump's desire to give Erdoğan "legitimacy."⁹⁷ Pro-government media in Ankara immediately amplified the remark as proof of Türkiye's renewed global relevance, while opposition figures condemned it as a public endorsement of Erdoğan's authoritarian rule. The meeting between the two leaders cemented this new phase of permissive alignment. Trump praised Erdoğan as "a man who knows strength," avoided any mention of Türkiye's human rights record, and added pointedly, "he knows about rigged elections better than anybody."⁹⁸ This comment, delivered with Erdoğan seated beside him, openly linked the Turkish leader to electoral manipulation and signaled US acceptance, without any threat of consequences.

Material support accompanied US rhetorical validation. During the same visit, Trump indicated that he would lift restrictions on advanced fighter-jet sales to Türkiye, and within days Turkish Airlines announced an agreement to purchase up to 225 Boeing aircraft.⁹⁹ The convergence of diplomatic praise, defense promises, and commercial deals transformed silence into endorsement, conveying that authoritarian stability, rather than democratic reform, was now the preferred foundation of the bilateral

97. Raya Jalabi and John Paul Rathbone, "From dealmaker to diplomat: Trump envoy shakes up Middle East," *Financial Times*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/2b76ca00-bfd6-4e06-be99-f3fd80d3b7b4>.

98. "Trump cozies up with Turkey's Erdoğan over 'rigged elections,'" *Le Monde*, September 25, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/09/25/trump-cozies-up-with-turkey-s-erdogan-over-rigged-elections_6745747_4.html.

99. Can Sezar and Daren Butler, "Turkish Airlines completes deal to buy 225 Boeing planes after Erdogan-Trump talks," *Reuters*, September 26, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkish-airlines-agrees-225-boeing-aircraft-orders-subject-engine-talks-2025-09-26>.

relationship. Yet this validation also deepened contradictions in Erdoğan's domestic strategy: US approval bolstered his image of global indispensability but clashed with the nationalist, anti-American narrative that underpins his rule.

The Gaza war exposed these very contradictions. Turkish public opinion is overwhelmingly pro-Gaza and anti-Israel, yet Erdoğan appeared beside Trump at both the UN and the Arab leaders' Gaza meetings, presenting Türkiye as the indispensable broker giving a voice to Gaza. Trump's public praise for Erdoğan's unique role in easing the conflict lent Erdoğan symbolic legitimacy abroad but deepened domestic incoherence. Washington's endorsement clashed with Ankara's anti-American, pro-Palestinian rhetoric. Erdoğan framed this visibility as proof of Türkiye's centrality rather than alignment, using international recognition to reinforce his claim to moral and regional leadership. The paradox was evident in pro-government newspapers, which simultaneously celebrated Erdoğan's involvement in the Gaza talks while accusing the US of manipulating the Gaza cease-fire process.

ANTI-AMERICANISM AND EXTERNAL ENDORSEMENT

The impact of Trump's rhetorical endorsement is particularly complex in a country where anti-Americanism is a constitutive element of the political mainstream, cutting across ideological divides from pro-government nationalists to secular opposition constituencies.¹⁰⁰ An unpublished survey by the Ankara Institute of 2,015 Turkish citizens from February 2025 confirms this trend: over 70 percent of respondents described Trump's policies toward Türkiye as "negative," cutting across partisan lines.¹⁰¹ Even among supporters of the Justice and Development Party — Erdoğan's core constituency — positive perceptions of Trump's Türkiye policy did not exceed 15 percent, suggesting that Trump's endorsement for Erdoğan failed to translate into greater domestic legitimacy. A striking 78 percent of respondents agreed that "Trump poses a threat to the world."¹⁰²

This public distrust of the US has historical roots. Türkiye's collective memory of past US involvement in coups feeds into enduring anxieties that praise from Washington may portend hidden agendas. This perception undercuts Erdoğan's attempts to capitalize on Trump's signals as straightforward symbols of international support. Even as Erdoğan frames himself as the vanguard of Türkiye's sovereign resistance against imperial powers, external validation from Trump complicates his anti-Western narrative, forcing the regime to engage in a delicate balancing act of simultaneously exploiting and deflecting Western approval. This tension deepens the discursive paradox at the heart of Erdoğan's legitimation strategy.

These empirical patterns reveal that Trump's rhetoric has not provided Erdoğan with an unambiguous source of symbolic power as it has for Netanyahu. Instead, the result has been managed incoherence, in which anti-Americanism coexists uneasily with the strategic appropriation of Western praise. By personalizing the alliance with

100. Füsün Türkmen, "Anti-Americanism as a Default Ideology of Opposition: Turkey as a Case Study," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 329–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2010.506738>.

101. Panoramatr, "Türkiye'nin Günemi [Türkiye's Agenda]," Report No. 74, February 2025, unpublished report.

102. Panoramatr, "Türkiye'nin Günemi [Türkiye's Agenda]."

Trump, Erdoğan has sought to navigate the ambivalence inherent in receiving Western approval while sustaining a domestic discourse of sovereignty and resistance. Such personalization allows the regime to deflect accusations of hypocrisy by portraying positive external signals as personal rather than systemic, thereby depoliticizing the contradiction between anti-Western rhetoric and Western praise. Yet the limits of this approach are increasingly evident: as Türkiye's economic crisis deepens, and as international tolerance emboldens further repression, the regime's reliance on selective foreign endorsements risks exposing the contradictions of its anti-imperialist posture. In response, Türkiye's opposition leaders now seek to portray the government as the faction aligning with US interests.

By offering symbolic sanction for Erdoğan's repression while undermining the regime's anti-Western narratives, Trump's approach exemplifies the paradoxical effects of external signals in contexts of anti-Americanism. While overt American support can embolden Erdoğan in the short term by signaling tolerance for repression, it simultaneously corrodes the anti-Western, anti-imperialist narratives that underpin Erdoğan's domestic legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The radical retrenchment of US democracy promotion during Trump's second term has enabled autocratization in two key US allies, Israel and Türkiye, but in distinct ways depending on the domestic political context. Our comparative analysis has demonstrated that a permissive international environment interacts with domestic factors, especially the incumbent's control over the state and societal attitudes toward the signaling power, to shape the legitimation strategies of incumbents.

This research offers two central findings. First, in both Israel and Türkiye, the decline of US democracy promotion under Trump enables preexisting processes of executive aggrandizement and provides symbolic and material support for autocratization. The normalization of authoritarianism and downgrading of democracy as a norm in bilateral relations has manifested in three interrelated shifts: presidential rhetoric repudiating democracy promotion, dismantling of the financial architecture underpinning democracy support, and curbing of foreign policy institutions.

Second, our cases illustrate the contingent nature of the domestic effects of the normalization of authoritarianism. Whereas in Israel the incumbent had incomplete control over state institutions, in Türkiye the incumbent wielded vast control over the state. As a result, Netanyahu has sought to leverage US support to eliminate these domestic checks, and the Trump administration has engaged in active autocracy promotion. By contrast, Erdoğan has benefited from passive US acquiescence and a normalization of strongman rule.

Furthermore, in Israel, where pro-American sentiment runs deep, Trump's permissiveness has amplified executive aggrandizement by furnishing symbolic resources for Netanyahu's illiberal project while constraining the pro-democracy opposition. The latter has thus been forced to navigate between widespread public support for the US and Trump, on the one hand, and opposition to the symbolic alignment between the US president and Netanyahu. By adopting Trumpian vocabulary, most notably the "deep state" frame, Netanyahu embedded US endorsement into his legitimation strategy, presenting

himself as a kindred leader aligned with his US counterpart. Pro-Americanism magnified the utility of this framing, allowing Netanyahu to normalize attacks on judicial independence while maintaining the perception of strategic alignment with Washington. Here, external permissiveness reinforced domestic autocratization through what Levitsky and Way described as an authoritarian “linkage” effect.¹⁰³ Importantly, this linkage derived not just from economic and military interdependence but also from the symbolic currency of alliance politics.

In Türkiye, by contrast, anti-Americanism mediates the instrumentalization of external signals, generating managed incoherence. Autocratization was well advanced in Türkiye before Trump’s second term. Thus, the US effect is best understood as enabling authoritarian persistence — reducing external constraints and normalizing authoritarian stability. Trump’s retraction of democracy promotion removed external constraints but also complicated Erdoğan’s narrative of legitimation, which relies on opposition to the West. Public opinion data in Türkiye underscores this paradox. While the regime sought to leverage Trump’s approval as a sign of global stature, the majority of Turkish citizens viewed American policy toward Türkiye as negative. The result was a discursive balancing act: Erdoğan personalized his ties to Trump to extract short-term advantages and insulate his broader narrative of anti-imperialist resistance. This contradiction underscores the limits of international permissiveness as a resource for authoritarian consolidation in contexts where anti-Westernism constitutes a key axis of political identity.

These findings make several theoretical contributions. First, they refine existing accounts of the international dimensions of democratic backsliding by highlighting the interpretive dimension of external influence. External signals, whether permissive or restrictive, are not simply transmitted; they are mediated by domestic political cultures, historical legacies, and the narrative infrastructures of legitimation. Second, by foregrounding anti-Americanism as a systemic and dynamic variable, our analysis encompasses both material incentives and symbolic politics, illustrating how external signals and local identity projects intersect to produce distinct processes of regime change. Third, our findings underscore the relational nature of hegemony. US power is negotiated within the discursive and institutional fields of domestic politics, where its meaning may oscillate between a source of legitimacy and a liability. Finally, from a policy perspective, the analysis underscores the risks inherent in abandoning democracy promotion as a pillar of US foreign policy.

Future research could extend this inquiry by examining whether the conditional dynamics identified here generalize to other US allies exhibiting varied orientations toward the United States, and whether policy shifts under subsequent US administrations can reverse the normative and institutional effects of Trump’s second term. Such work is imperative at a moment when the global democratic recession intersects with great-power rivalry, rendering the international dimensions of regime trajectories more salient and more contested.

103. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.