

South Africa and Israel: Rethinking Relations Amid Trump's Second Term

By Dr. Asher Lubotzky

1. Executive Summary

South Africa has been a vocal critic of Israel during the current war, engaging in legal and diplomatic efforts, including leading a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). While its anti-Israel stance remains deeply rooted within the dominant party, the African National Congress (ANC), recent developments offer potential avenues for moderation. The formation of a coalition Government of National Unity (GNU) after the May 2024 elections—including several parties sympathetic to Israel and the United States—the impending expiration of the United States' African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in September 2025, and the election of President Trump present an opportunity for reducing tensions between Israel and South Africa.

Israel should seize this opportunity and collaborate with the Trump administration to work toward ending South Africa's proactive hostility in international forums and to strengthen bilateral economic ties, ultimately aiming to normalize relations.

2. South Africa and the Israel-Hamas War

The government of South Africa, led by the African National Congress (ANC), has been one of the most critical voices against Israel during the current war. While it vaguely condemned the October 7 Hamas attack, South Africa immediately pointed to Israel's responsibility for the situation that led to the attack. Less than a week after the attack, it began focusing solely on criticizing Israel's conduct in the war, accusing Israel of the "starvation" of Gaza's population. By October 18, 2023, its rhetoric included describing the war as genocide.¹ Around the same time, South Africa's foreign minister, Naledi Pandor, held a phone call with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. In late October, Pandor visited Iran, and in mid-November, she traveled to Qatar. By early November, South Africa recalled all remaining diplomats from Israel (its ambassador to Israel had been recalled in 2018). In response to this critical line, Israel recalled its ambassador to South Africa for consultations in Jerusalem, where he remains.

South Africa's primary strategy to undermine Israel's war effort has been through international legal actions. Since mid-November 2023, it has appealed to international courts to hinder Israel's warfare, first to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and in late December, it filed and led the genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Some observers and analysts have claimed that Iran or Qatar funded the South African application to the ICJ (or even other ANC's needs). Still, all evidence in this regard seems to be circumstantial.² Since submitting its application to the ICJ, South Africa has actively participated in the ongoing legal deliberations, providing additional "evidence" at the court's request, with the most recent submission made in late October 2024.

South Africa has continued to criticize Israel, including for the assassination of Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah and strikes in Iran. However, apart from pursuing its legal case at the ICJ, it has not implemented additional practical measures against Israel. Despite a parliamentary vote recommending the government sever all ties with Israel, South Africa has so far refrained from doing so, allowing Israel to maintain a diplomatic and economic presence in the country. Trade between the two nations continues largely uninterrupted, even though El Al suspended its long-running direct flights between Tel Aviv and Johannesburg in January 2024 (primarily for economic reasons). For instance, ten Israeli companies recently participated in the Africa.Com 2024 telecom convention.³ South Africa remains Israel's primary trade partner on the African continent, even though trade volumes between the two countries have gradually declined over the past decade.⁴

The ANC's stance toward Israel during the war aligns with its broader shift to a distinctly pro-Palestinian position over the past two decades. Framing the Palestinian cause as a

¹ ["Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 18 October 2023."](#)

² ["South Africa, Hamas, Iran, and Qatar: The Hijacking of the ANC and the International Court of Justice"](#) (The Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy, 2024).

³ [Nava Getahun Feseha](#), Head of Israel's Economic & Trade Mission to Southern Africa.

⁴ ["דרום אפריקה: סקירה כלכלית"](#), משרד הכלכלה והתעשייה, יולי 2024

liberation struggle, the ANC considers its support for the Palestinians integral to its ideological identity and a reflection of its legacy as a leading liberation movement. South Africa has maintained ties with Hamas since at least 2007 and has permitted Hamas-linked fundraising networks to operate within its borders. The ANC adopted a BDS resolution as early as 2012 (though it was not binding on the state). In 2015, it hosted a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Mashaal. In 2018, South Africa recalled its ambassador to Israel during the “March of Return” clashes between Israel and Gaza, and in early 2023, it officially downgraded its diplomatic representation in Israel. For years, the ANC has labeled Israel an apartheid state and, in 2022, led the initiative to strip Israel of its observer status in the African Union.⁵ This pro-Hamas orientation is part of South Africa’s broader alignment with anti-Western forces in the Global South, including alliances with Iran.

3. Prospects for Change I: The Government of National Unity

Despite the strained relations between South Africa and Israel, recent political developments may offer opportunities for a shift, albeit modest and primarily de facto. The first turning point was South Africa's May 2024 general election, which ended the ANC’s decades-long monopolistic dominance over South African politics. For the first time since the end of apartheid, the ANC lost its absolute majority and was compelled to form a coalition Government of National Unity (GNU) with several other parties. Of the options available, the ANC chose to align itself with centrist and conservative forces rather than pursuing a coalition with more radical and anti-Western alternatives.

Four of its new coalition partners—the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Patriotic Alliance (PA), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the Freedom Front Plus (FF+)—have expressed sympathy toward Israel in the past and criticized the ANC’s hostile stance. The GNU coalition agreement, signed on June 14, 2024, notably avoided any explicit mention of the Israel/Palestine issue. Instead, the agreement’s foreign policy section emphasized broad principles such as “human rights,” “solidarity,” and fostering a “just, peaceful, and equitable world.”⁶ Given the ANC’s historic focus on Palestine, this omission could be interpreted as a positive sign for Israel. At the same time, the ANC has retained control over all cabinet positions related to foreign relations, effectively limiting the influence of its coalition partners in shaping foreign policy. To assess whether the presence of these four parties might still impact South Africa’s stance on Israel and the Middle East, it is essential to examine their positions on the issue before considering their potential influence under the GNU framework.

The **Democratic Alliance** (DA), formerly the main opposition party and now the second-largest member of the coalition (holding 87 of 400 seats after the May 2024 election), has

⁵ Na’eem Jeenah, “DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA’S RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL AND PALESTINE,” 2024.

⁶ [“Statement of intent of the 2024 Government of National Unity.”](#)

sought to maintain a balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The DA has a historical connection to Israel, with party leaders, including the current leader John Steenhuisen, who visited Israel in 2017 as part of an official delegation and met with then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁷ The party has consistently rejected labeling Israel as an apartheid state.⁸ The Western Cape provincial government, controlled by the DA, has been particularly open to official collaboration with Israel, especially in water technologies and management, despite the broader hostile and pro-BDS stance within other parts of the South African government.⁹ The DA also enjoys the support of a majority of South African Jews and counts two Jewish members of parliament (the only Jewish MPs in South Africa) among its ranks, both of whom appear sympathetic to Israel. The party's stance on Israel, like its foreign policy positions in general, is primarily shaped by its strong pro-Western orientation and its focus on strengthening ties with the United States.

After the October 7 attack, the DA unequivocally condemned Hamas and expressed support for Israel. This stance led to the resignation of three party members in the subsequent months, citing "concerns about the party's treatment of pro-Palestinian members."¹⁰ However, as the war lingered, party leaders reduced their statements on the issue, calling for a ceasefire, denying exclusive support for Israel, and emphasizing that "what's happening [in Gaza] needs to stop immediately."¹¹ Still, party leader John Steenhuisen avoided labeling the war as genocide and criticized South Africa's application to the ICJ. Additionally, senior DA member Helen Zille suggested that Iranian funding to the ANC was the primary motivator for South Africa's ICJ case.¹² Despite these criticisms, Steenhuisen acknowledged the importance of respecting the ICJ process, stating that even if he had the authority, he would not withdraw the case once it was under consideration.¹³ Throughout the war and after joining the coalition government, the DA has adhered to a general formula advocating a two-state solution, envisioning "an independent and sovereign and unoccupied Palestine living alongside a secure Israel." The party has largely avoided engaging in deeper discussions on the contentious issue. The DA holds six ministerial portfolios in the coalition government, primarily in economic and domestic areas: Agriculture, Public Works and Infrastructure, Environment, Basic Education, Social Development, and Small Business Development.

⁷ Ant Katz, "[An African day for Israeli Prime Minister](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, January 12, 2017.

⁸ Tali Feinberg, "[DA double speak: Steenhuisen trips over Gaza question](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, March 28, 2024.

⁹ Tali Feinberg, "[Growing agricultural partnership between Western Cape and Israel](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, January 6, 2020; Tali Feinberg, "[Israeli team brings water expertise to SA](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, July 6, 2023.

¹⁰ Andisiwe Makinana, "[Recently demoted Ghaleb Cachalia quits DA over Israeli-Hamas fallout](#)," *TimesLIVE*, January 18, 2024; "[SA opposition party denies supporting Israel](#)," *SABC*, March 5, 2024.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=965294424932766>; Tali Feinberg, "[DA double speak: Steenhuisen trips over Gaza question](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, March 28, 2024.

¹² Bongekile Macupe, "['We need to move on' instead of creating public spats: ANC hits back at Zille's latest remarks](#)," *News24*, November 4, 2024.

¹³ Tali Feinberg, "[DA double speak: Steenhuisen trips over Gaza question](#)," *South African Jewish Report*, March 28, 2024.

The three other parties in the GNU that hold strong sympathies towards Israel are much smaller:

The Zulu nationalist **Inkatha Freedom Party** (17/400 seats) holds the Ministry of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs in the coalition government. Historically, the party and its late leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, maintained positive relations with Israel.¹⁴ While not outspoken, the IFP has shown reservations about the ANC's one-sided approach. They condemned the Hamas attack and expressed disappointment with the ANC's alignment with Iran and Hamas during the ICJ application process. The party supports improving bilateral relations with Israel.¹⁵

The **Patriotic Alliance** (9/400 seats) is led by Gayton McKenzie, who has been unapologetically pro-Israel. McKenzie visited Israel in July 2023 and has voiced strong support for Israel several times since the October 7 attack, often citing his Christian faith as a basis for his position.¹⁶ McKenzie serves as the Minister of Sports, Arts, and Culture.

The **Freedom Front Plus** (6/400) is a right-wing Afrikaner party that has deep sympathies for Israel, grounded in historical, cultural, and religious ties. The FF+ has consistently expressed support for Israel since the October 7 attack and has been the most vocal critic among South African parties regarding the South African application to the ICJ against Israel.¹⁷ Its leader, Pieter Groenewald, currently serves as the Minister of Correctional Services.

Despite the generally sympathetic stances toward Israel by the DA, PA, IFP, and FF+, these parties have adhered to the coalition agreements and have not seriously challenged the continuation of South Africa's ICJ case against Israel. The ANC ensured that these parties were excluded from decision-making on foreign relations, resisting the DA's bid for the foreign ministry during coalition negotiations.¹⁸ After the coalition agreement was finalized, the ANC's Secretary-General reaffirmed that South Africa would continue to "show solidarity with the people of Palestine."¹⁹ The new foreign minister, Ronald Lamola, reflects mainstream ANC views on Israel and has maintained frequent and harsh condemnations of Israel (see graph). The coalition agreement also requires all members to support budget proposals, including those funding the ICJ case. While the FF+ voted against this funding, all other coalition members recently voted in favor.²⁰

¹⁴ See, for example, Buthelezi's [statement](#) in 2007.

¹⁵ ["Inkatha Freedom Party," South African Jewish Report](#), May 9, 2024.

¹⁶ Qaaitah Hunter, ["Will South Africa's new coalition gov't change tack on Israel-Palestine?"](#) *Aljazeera*, June 17, 2024; Ntlantla Kgatlane, ["Patriotic Alliance will not boycott Israeli products: Mckenzie," SABC](#), November 22, 2023.

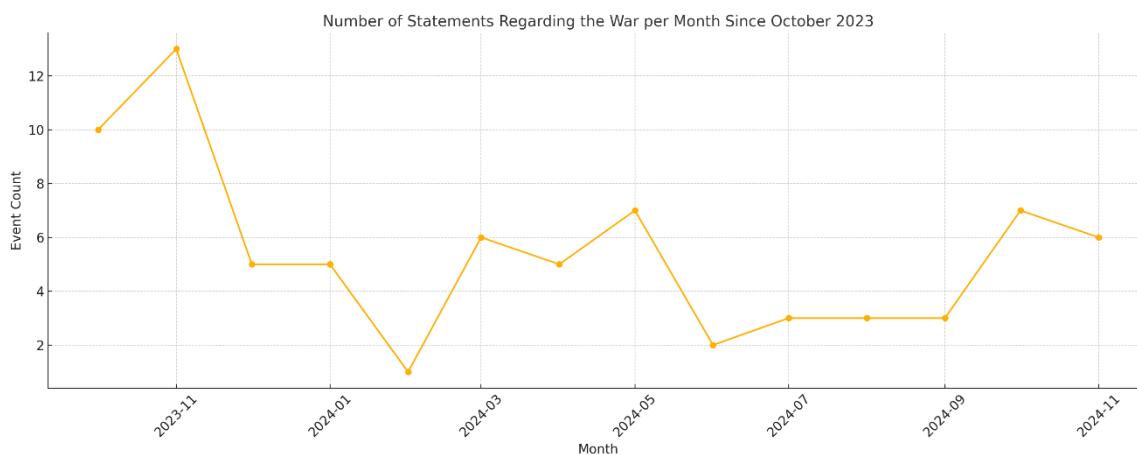
¹⁷ Pieter Groenewald, ["ICJ ruling on Israel once again highlights ANC's double standards,"](#) Freedom Front Plus website, January 26, 2024.

¹⁸ Macupe, ["We need to move on' instead of creating public spats: ANC hits back at Zille's latest remarks"](#).

¹⁹ Hunter, ["Will South Africa's new coalition gov't change tack on Israel-Palestine?"](#)

²⁰ Jan Gerber, ["National Assembly approves R95m for SA's ICJ case against Israel, with DA's support,"](#) *News24*, December 7, 2024.

Nevertheless, since the inception of the GNU (July 2024), South African cabinet discussions have featured fewer (critical) mentions of Israel compared to the previous administration. The presence of the four pro-Israel parties in the coalition may have influenced the government’s restraint in taking new measures against Israel. While continuing the ICJ case remains uncontroversial for most in parliament (including some members of these four parties), more drastic actions, such as fully severing ties with Israel, appear to have been sidelined during the GNU era.



Number of critical statements against Israel published by South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation (based on data published in: <https://dirco.gov.za/media-statements/page/2/>; analysis by the author).

The South African election campaign and its results bring into question the extent of popular support for the ANC’s activist anti-Israel stance. There is no clear consensus on whether the majority of South Africans support the ANC’s position on Israel. Outside of targeted campaigns in majority-Muslim areas, the Israel-Palestine issue did not appear central to the election campaign. In fact, some voices criticized the ICJ case as an unnecessary expense or a distraction from South Africa’s domestic challenges.²¹ Some polling suggests that a majority of South Africans hold neutral or indifferent views on the issue and generally view Hamas negatively.²² Explicit support for Israel exists within certain Christian groups, both black and white, but its scale is difficult to measure reliably.

However, while the ANC lost significant support in the election, this outcome likely had little to do with its stance on Israel-Palestine. A broader analysis of the results shows that, combined with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK)—two other parties with strong anti-Israel positions—approximately 65% of South African voters supported parties with anti-Israel stances. Additionally, the dominant sentiment in South African legacy media and on social media tends to be highly critical of Israel.

²¹ Qaaitah Hunter, “Will Israel’s war on Gaza sway South Africa’s election?,” *Aljazeera*, May 13, 2024.

²² Steven Gruzd, “South Africans seek balanced foreign policy, including on Israel,” *South African Jewish Report*, November 21, 2024.

4. Prospects for Change II: US-South Africa Relations

While the establishment of the GNU has not brought a noticeable change in relations with Israel, there is strong potential for a substantial shift in U.S.-South African relations, which could, by extension, influence South Africa's stance on Israel. Three developments make such a change plausible: 1) the GNU represents a South African cabinet that is more attentive to American interests and pressures; 2) the need to renew the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act, which has a significant impact on the South African economy; and, most importantly, 3) the election of Trump and his prospective cabinet, which appears poised to exert strong pressure on international actors who defy American interests.

While the DA has limited willingness and capacity to effect change in South Africa's official stance toward Israel, the country's relationship with Washington is a different matter. The primary dividing line between the ANC and the DA in foreign policy is not Israel/Palestine per se but their contrasting visions of the world order and South Africa's role within it. The ANC champions a strong pro-BRICS stance, actively challenging American international hegemony, whereas the DA envisions South Africa as an integral part of the West and the liberal world order. Their differing perspectives on Russia and its war in Ukraine underscore this divide. During the election campaign, the DA emphasized its support for democratic allies, NATO, and Ukraine, while expressing skepticism toward China. As a liberal, pro-Western, and pro-free market party, the DA has a vested interest in fostering strong relations with the United States.

Even beyond the DA's stance, South Africa has significant structural reasons to maintain good relations with the United States. The country benefits greatly from the trade advantages provided by the AGOA act. Over the past two decades, AGOA has boosted South African exports to the U.S., which totaled approximately \$10 billion in 2022, making the U.S. South Africa's second-largest export market. AGOA has also helped to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in South Africa, with its impact spanning diverse sectors of the economy, including vehicle manufacturing and agricultural products.²³

AGOA has been a multi-year program, last renewed in 2015, and set to expire in September 2025. For over a year, the U.S. Congress has been working on the program's next extension, aiming to extend it until 2041. Under AGOA's rules, the U.S. can periodically review (and, if necessary, revoke) any beneficiary country's eligibility to participate in the program. Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war and South Africa's explicit anti-Israel stance, bipartisan U.S. legislators called for an "out-of-cycle" review of South Africa's eligibility. Such a review could end with a warning note, threatening to discontinue South Africa's participation in AGOA. The U.S. concerns extended beyond South Africa's anti-Israel stance to include its close ties with Russia and China, as well as its consistent anti-American positions in international forums. Senator Chris Coons (Democrat), who drafted the

²³ ["AGOA: An essential lifeline to South Africa,"](#) Solidarity Research Institute, June 2024.

discussion version of the AGOA Renewal Act in November 2023, included a mandatory requirement for “an immediate out-of-cycle review of South Africa,” an idea that was supported by some Republican lawmakers as well.²⁴

These congressional concerns alarmed the South African government, prompting diplomatic engagement with the U.S. to mitigate threats to its AGOA membership. Working with the then-Democratic-controlled Senate, South Africa achieved some success. In April 2024, before the South African elections and the formation of the GNU, the demand for an immediate out-of-cycle review of its AGOA status was removed from the revised version of the proposed bill.²⁵ It is unclear whether South Africa made any concessions to the U.S. in exchange for dropping the review requirement. However, the fact that South Africa has not initiated additional measures against Israel may be indirectly related. The removal of the review requirement reflects the Biden administration’s relatively soft stance toward South Africa, as the White House has sought to avoid an open clash with Pretoria, possibly due to broader strategic interests in Africa and competition with China on the continent.²⁶

Despite the South African success in mending the AGOA renewal draft (led by the Senate), the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act on June 14, 2024, requiring the President to conduct a “review of the bilateral relationship” between the two countries. The review must “explicitly [state] whether South Africa has engaged in activities that undermine United States national security or foreign policy interests” within 30 days of enactment.²⁷ This amendment passed in the House with 272 votes in favor (211 Republicans and 63 Democrats) versus 144 against,²⁸ and it currently awaits consideration in the Senate. While not directly part of AGOA, this legislation could impact South Africa's future participation in the program.

The third factor influencing South Africa’s evolving stance toward the U.S. is the election of President Trump and the anticipated appointments in his new administration. Trump and his team have articulated a low tolerance for countries perceived to undermine American interests. Key members of the incoming administration—Secretary of State Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor Michael Waltz, and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Elise Stefanik—have all criticized South Africa’s international behavior over the past year.²⁹ Both Waltz and

²⁴ Sen. Chris Coons, [“AGOA Renewal Act of 2023”](#); Michael Walsh, [“The Contested Eligibility of South Africa for AGOA Benefits,”](#) Wilson Center, November 16, 2023.

²⁵ Peter Fabricius, [“US senators drop plans to mandate immediate review of SA’s eligibility for Agoa.”](#) *Daily Maverick*, April 11, 2024.

²⁶ Charles Ray and Michael Walsh, [“Incoherence, incongruence, inconsistency, and indecisiveness are derailing the US-South Africa reset,”](#) the Center for African Studies, Howard University, July 5, 2023.

²⁷ [“H.R.7256 - U.S.-South Africa Bilateral Relations Review Act,”](#) *Congress.gov*; [“US Congress Reviews South Africa Ties: Implications for Trade and Diplomacy,”](#) *Explain*, July 11, 2024; [“H. Rept. 118-551 - AND AN ACCOMPANYING RESOLUTION; AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES,”](#) *Congress.gov*.

²⁸ [Roll Call 277 | Bill Number: H. R. 8070.](#)

²⁹ Julian Pecquent, [“Trump taps staunch South Africa critics for top US diplomatic posts,”](#) *The Africa Report*, November 12, 2024; Eric Mthobeli Naki, [“Rocky road for SA-US ties as Rubio takes over?”](#) *Citizen*, November 22, 2024.

Stefanik, as members of the House, also voted in June for the amendment requiring a full review of U.S.-South Africa relations.³⁰ An example of the shifting dynamics between the incoming administration and South Africa is the latter's swift response to Trump's recent threat to impose high tariffs on BRICS countries that consider replacing the U.S. dollar. Shortly after the threat, the South African government publicly denied any plans to create a common BRICS currency, signaling an attempt to avoid further tensions with Washington.³¹

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

A convergence of factors provides potential—even if limited—for a positive shift in South Africa's stance toward Israel in 2025. The inauguration of Trump's new administration, the expiration of AGOA in September, and the inclusion of pro-Western parties in South Africa's coalition government present opportunities to mitigate South Africa's hostility toward Israel and even improve specific aspects of bilateral relations.

Israel's objectives regarding South Africa should be twofold: (1) the cessation of South Africa's hostility in international forums, particularly at the ICJ; and (2) the gradual strengthening of bilateral economic relations (also as a gateway to enhance economic ties across Africa), ultimately aiming for normalization and the signing of a Free Trade Agreement. While ambitious, these goals could be achievable with strategic support from the Trump administration.

The most effective approach to achieving these goals involves leveraging American incentives and pressures. The upcoming renewal of AGOA offers an opportunity to emphasize that undermining American interests and allies could result in substantial economic costs, while aligning with them can bring significant benefits. This aligns with the Trump administration's priorities to maximize American gains from economic deals and effectively counter China's growing influence in Africa. Such a strategy also resonates with the principles of the Abraham Accords, where the U.S. incentivized normalization of relations with Israel to promote world peace and collaboration among its allies.

Additionally, Israel should actively pursue expanded cooperation with South African officials and businesses. Reinstating Israel's ambassador to South Africa should be considered. Establishing ties with government departments managed by pro-Israel coalition partners (the DA, PA, IFP, or FF+)—such as the Departments of Agriculture or Sports, Arts and Culture—could help dismantle the de facto boycott of Israel by South African institutions. Non-governmental trade and research collaborations should also be encouraged and incentivized. Israeli expertise in agritech, water management, fintech, cybersecurity,

³⁰ [Roll Call 277 | Bill Number: H. R. 8070.](#)

³¹ Clive Ndou & Gareth Cotterell, ["SA responds to Trump's tariff threat, denies Brics currency talks,"](#) *Citizen*, December 2, 2024,

medical technologies, and renewable energy can address South Africa’s pressing needs and foster long-term partnerships.

However, any policy toward South Africa must recognize that a shift in its stance toward Israel, if it occurs, will likely be gradual and low-profile. The ANC’s anti-Israel stance is not merely tactical but deeply rooted in its ideological identity as a former liberation movement and a leader in the Global South. The ICJ case, in particular, carries significant prestige for the ANC. Excessive or overt pressure could backfire, pushing the ANC to form an alternative coalition with more radical parties like the MK or EFF and doubling down on anti-American policies.

Therefore, a careful, nuanced, and determined diplomatic approach—balancing carrots and sticks—is essential. Such a strategy should allow the ANC to quietly scale back its anti-Israel activism and foster low-profile ties with Israel, presenting the most realistic path for achieving meaningful change in South Africa’s stance in 2025.

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