Platform Power and Foreign Policy: Musk, X, and the Israel Debate in U.S. Politics

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This paper examines how private platform power intersects with U.S. politics on Israel through the lens of Elon Musk and X (formerly Twitter). We separate three layers that often get conflated. First is the structural baseline: decades of U.S. security assistance to Israel, an entrenched lobbying and donor ecosystem, and durable religious and strategic constituencies. Second is the media-attention layer: agenda setting by traditional outlets, think tanks, advocacy groups, and social platforms that amplify or dampen frames. Third is the platform-owner layer: the unique capacity of one person—here, Musk—to shape distribution rules, moderation norms, and product incentives that influence what the public sees. We synthesize reported facts about X's algorithmic choices, Musk's stated positions and high-visibility visits, and his apparent non-participation in Israel-based AI programs (e.g., NVIDIA/Google projects), while acknowledging the limits of available evidence. The goal is not to relitigate policy merits but to map how narratives, code, and capital interact. We conclude with testable indicators for distinguishing genuine public debate from owner-mediated gatekeeping, and propose a research agenda for journalists, scholars, and regulators to track platform effects on foreign-policy discourse without collapsing into partisanship.

Keywords: platform power, agenda setting, Elon Musk, X, Israel, U.S. foreign policy, lobbying, evangelicals, media framing, algorithmic amplification, visibility filtering, community fact-checking, Starlink, Project Nimbus, Israel-1, content moderation, election pipelines, reputational risk, AI geopolitics, research methods.

Outline

1. Introduction and Scope
   1.1 What this paper covers and omits
   1.2 Definitions: “gatekeeping,” “amplification,” “platform power”
2. The Structural Baseline in the U.S.–Israel Relationship
   2.1 Aid frameworks and supplemental packages
   2.2 Defense-industrial channels and domestic capture effects
   2.3 Religious and strategic constituencies
3. The Narrative Layer
   3.1 Think tanks, translators, and advocacy media
   3.2 Mainstream press incentives and sourcing dynamics
   3.3 Social virality versus institutional reporting
4. Platform Owner as Policy Actor
   4.1 Governance levers: ranking, eligibility, verification, policy enforcement
   4.2 Transparency signals and the problem of “silent switches”
   4.3 Community fact-checking as counterweight and its limits
5. Musk and X: Documented Actions and Statements
   5.1 Public positioning on Israel and Gaza
   5.2 Visits, meetings, and symbolic gestures
   5.3 Starlink statements and humanitarian carve-outs
6. Staying Out by Building Elsewhere
   6.1 xAI’s U.S. buildouts and Gulf exploration
   6.2 Contrast: NVIDIA’s Israel-1 and Google/AWS Project Nimbus
   6.3 Strategic, competitive, and optics reasons for distance
7. Case Snapshots
   7.1 Link throttling and rival-platform frictions
   7.2 Primary races and outside spending as narrative testbeds
   7.3 Fact-check collisions: when Community Notes undercut elites
8. Measuring Gatekeeping Without Mind-Reading
   8.1 Audit-friendly metrics: rank shifts, link latencies, reach deltas
   8.2 Event-study designs around policy changes
   8.3 Independent replication and data-access constraints
9. Counterarguments and Alternative Explanations
   9.1 Organic preference cascades

1. Introduction and Scope

Public debate about Israel in the United States sits at the intersection of long-standing statecraft, domestic politics, media incentives, and the idiosyncrasies of modern platforms. This paper narrows that field to a tractable question: how distributional power on a single, privately owned platform (X) can shape what U.S. audiences see, and how the platform owner's choices and public positioning (Elon Musk) interact with the broader discourse. We do not attempt to adjudicate the merits of U.S. policy toward Israel, nor to catalog every instance of bias or error online. Instead, we draw a map of mechanisms—product levers, policy toggles, incentive schemes—through which a platform can tilt visibility and thereby nudge public understanding. We also clarify where Musk appears engaged (statements, visits, product policies) and where he appears absent (direct involvement in Israel-based AI programs), to avoid conflating symbolic politics with operational participation.

Our approach is pragmatic: identify observable signals, specify measurements that a third party could replicate, and separate structural drivers (aid frameworks, lobbying, religious constituencies) from platform-layer effects (ranking, throttling, verification rules). The goal is a vocabulary and a checklist researchers, journalists, and regulators can actually use.

1.1 What this paper covers and omits

Covers

- The mechanisms by which X can influence reach: ranking policies, eligibility rules, verification incentives, labeling/notes, and enforcement practices.
- Musk's visible role as platform owner: statements, meetings, product announcements, and how these could affect or be perceived to affect distribution.
- The distinction between U.S. structural baselines on Israel (aid, lobbying, religious/strategic blocs) and platform-specific modulation of narratives.
- A methods sketch for auditing "gatekeeping" claims with event studies, rank/latency measures, and replication norms.

Omits

- Normative judgments on the correctness of U.S. policy or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- A full media-studies treatment across all platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Facebook). We focus on X as a case.
- Legal advice, regulatory drafting, or inside knowledge of proprietary algorithms. We confine ourselves to publicly inferable mechanisms and testable indicators.

- Comprehensive catalogues of misinformation or antisemitism online; those appear only as they relate to distributional mechanics.

1.2 Definitions: "gatekeeping," "amplification," "platform power"

To avoid talking past each other, we fix terms as follows:

Gatekeeping (platform context)
A platform's intentional or de facto restriction of the visibility or accessibility of content, accounts, or links. This includes hard blocks (removal, bans) and soft controls (down-ranking, de-boosting, link-latency, eligibility thresholds) that materially reduce likelihood of exposure without necessarily removing content.

Amplification
Any mechanism that increases expected reach or salience of content relative to a neutral baseline. Examples include up-ranking in feeds, preferential replies placement, inclusion in "For You" carousels, or eligibility tied to verification/subscription that confers systemic exposure advantages.

Platform power
The capacity of platform operators—and especially ultimate owners—to set or change rules, rankings, monetization and verification criteria, enforcement priorities, and product defaults that collectively determine distribution. Platform power spans (a) code choices (algorithms, thresholds), (b) policy choices (terms, exceptions, safety rules), and (c) communication choices (public framing that signals future enforcement or product direction).

Neutral baseline (for measurement)
A counterfactual distribution absent the specific intervention under study (e.g., "what reach would similar posts by similar accounts typically get before the policy change?"). Because true neutrality is unknowable, we approximate with matched controls, historical windows, or cross-platform comparisons.

Owner-mediated effect
A measurable shift in distribution plausibly attributable to decisions or directions traceable to the platform's owner (e.g., policy edicts, product priorities, eligibility rules), as opposed to organic user behavior or exogenous news shocks.

These definitions let us translate charged claims ("they're silencing X," "they boosted Y") into testable questions: Which lever moved? When? By how much did rank, latency, or reach change versus a matched baseline? And is the most parsimonious explanation a platform decision, an external news event, or ordinary audience preference?

2. The Structural Baseline in the U.S.–Israel Relationship

U.S.–Israel politics rests on durable structures that long predate today's platforms or personalities. Three pillars matter for our analysis: (i) formal aid frameworks and periodic supplements, (ii) the way assistance flows through the U.S. defense-industrial system, and (iii) domestic constituencies and strategic logics that stabilize support regardless of the news cycle.

2.1 Aid frameworks and supplemental packages

The modern baseline is the 2016 U.S.–Israel 10-year security Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which locks in $38 billion for FY2019–FY2028: $3.3 billion annually in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) plus $0.5 billion per year for missile defense. It is widely described by U.S. officials as the largest such military-aid package in U.S. history. whitehouse.gov+2State Department+2

Since Oct. 7, 2023, Congress has enacted additional **supplemental** funds above that baseline. On April 22–23, 2024, lawmakers passed and the President signed a foreign-aid bundle that included **about $26.38 billion** tied to Israel—covering missile defense, replenishment, and related U.S. operations, alongside humanitarian allocations for Gaza. House Appropriations GOP+2Congress.gov+2

FMF's structure is essential: it finances purchases of **U.S.** defense articles/services via Foreign Military Sales (FMS), under the Arms Export Control Act and State/DoD programs. The MOU also phases out Israel's past "offshore procurement" carve-out, further channeling spending to U.S. industry. Defense Security Cooperation Agency+1

2.2 Defense-industrial channels and domestic capture effects

Because FMF is generally spent **in the United States**, a large share of appropriations never "leaves" the U.S. economy. Funds cycle through the FMS pipeline into contracts with prime vendors (e.g., F-35 airframes, CH-53K helicopters, air/missile-defense interceptors) and their U.S. supply chains; DSCA notifications illustrate the ongoing munitions flow. The result is a political economy where U.S. districts capture jobs and revenue from Israel-related orders, reinforcing bipartisan support even when public opinion is polarized. Defense Security Cooperation Agency+2Congress.gov+2

This is not unique to Israel, but the scale and longevity of the MOU plus recurring supplements make the feedback loop unusually strong: Congress appropriates; U.S. contractors book orders; localities see work; the contracting base advocates for continuity.

2.3 Religious and strategic constituencies

Two durable domestic blocks stabilize policy. First, a large segment of **U.S. evangelicals** views support for Israel as a religious obligation; organizations like **Christians United for Israel (CUFI)** mobilize voters, lobby on the Hill, and frame issues for congregations. Membership claims (in the multi-million range) and sustained activism keep this lane politically salient, though surveys suggest generational variation in intensity. Christians United for Israel+1

Second, security strategists across administrations have treated Israel as a key partner for regional deterrence, technology sharing, and intelligence cooperation. Recent milestones include the **Abraham Accords** (normalization with UAE, Bahrain, and others) and Israel's realignment into **U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility**, both of which deepen operational integration and shared planning. These moves reduce friction among regional partners, making U.S.–Israel coordination less exceptional and more routinized in the broader U.S. posture. The Times of Israel+3U.S. Department of State+3Wikipedia+3

Implication for this paper. These structural baselines—statutory funding, domestic economic capture, faith-based mobilization, and strategic integration—form the **non-platform** context. They persist regardless of who owns a given social network. When we later assess claims of platform "gatekeeping" or "amplification," we treat these forces as the background against which any platform-layer effects must be detected.

3. The Narrative Layer

Platforms don't invent talking points from scratch; they amplify streams that already exist. In the U.S.–Israel debate, three pipelines shape what later goes viral: (i) expert/advocacy knowledge producers, (ii) mainstream newsrooms with their own incentives and constraints, and (iii) social dynamics that reward speed, novelty, and emotion over verification. Understanding their interaction lets us separate a platform's design effects from the upstream narrative supply.

3.1 Think tanks, translators, and advocacy media

A steady flow of "pre-formatted" ideas originates outside newsrooms. Policy shops publish briefs and host panels; advocacy groups assemble dossiers and message guides; issue-translation outfits surface clips, documents, and testimony from other languages and jurisdictions. These actors provide **ready-to-quote frames** ("deterrence failure," "proportionality," "hostage first," "genocide case," "terror designation," "collective punishment") that lower the cost of coverage and op-ed placement.

- **Think tanks** (across the spectrum) supply experts, datasets, and "explainers" timed to hearings and legislative votes. Their track record and donor alignments affect which outlets treat them as neutral referees versus partisans.
- **Translation/monitoring shops** curate foreign-language media, parliamentary debates, and militant or state communiqués. Selection choices (what to translate, when, and with what context) subtly steer salience and tone.
- **Advocacy media**—movement outlets, NGO reports, campaign microsites—optimize for persuasion and mobilization. They excel at **narrative packaging** (short videos, carousels, infographics) that later ports cleanly into social platforms.

For research and accountability, treat these sources as **narrative inputs** with measurable properties: release cadence, citation uptake, clip selection bias, and correction behavior. Don't assume disinformation or purity; assume incentives.

3.2 Mainstream press incentives and sourcing dynamics

General-audience newsrooms arbitrate what earns front-page treatment, but they operate under predictable pressures:

- **Access vs. adversarial trade-offs.** Diplomatic, military, and intelligence beats depend on access; exclusives can tilt toward official frames. Investigations push the other way but require time and legal cover.
- **Time and risk budgets.** High-risk visual verification (OSINT, forensics, geolocation) competes with hourly news pegs and desk quotas. Editors often default to wire services when uncertainty is high.
- **Sourcing ladders.** Quotes cluster around officials, allied governments, recognized NGOs, and well-branded experts. Freelancers and local fixers contribute ground truth but face asymmetric safety and reputational risks.
- **Corrections and updates.** Institutional standards exist, yet **correction half-life** (how long an error persists in downstream aggregators) can be long; first-impression advantages linger in the attention economy.

Auditable signals here include: byline diversity (domestic vs. local reporters), balance of official vs. non-official sourcing, verification notes in copy, correction timestamps, and the **"quote graph"** (who gets cited with what sentiment across a coverage window).

3.3 Social virality versus institutional reporting

Social platforms privilege **velocity, novelty, and affect**. That biases toward:

- **Event spikes**: sudden surges where raw video and claims arrive before verification capacity scales.
- **Outrage asymmetry**: content that triggers moral shock travels farther/faster than dry procedural updates.
- **Identity cues and coalition signals**: hashtags, flags, and slogans act as routing tags, increasing in-group reach even when claims are weak.
- **Algorithmic scaffolding**: ranking rules (freshness, engagement, verified status, reply placement) set the "physics" of spread. Even small tweaks to reply ranking or link handling can change what most users see.

Institutional reporting, by contrast, optimizes for **verifiability, liability, and brand trust**. It moves slower, often posting **"we are verifying"** placeholders while teams geolocate footage, contact sources, and cross-check casualty or damage claims.

The gap between the two creates predictable pathologies:

- **Verification lag**: social claims set narratives that newsrooms later confirm, complicate, or debunk—after the peak.
- **Quote laundering**: social posts enter articles as "reacts" segments, giving unverified frames legacy amplification.
- **Correction mismatch**: fixes propagate weakly on social (low incentive to share a retraction), while institutions update quietly; users retain the vivid original.

For measurement, pair **feed-side metrics** (rank position, link latency, reach deltas by account class) with **news-side metrics** (time-to-verification, correction half-life, source diversity). Event-study windows around platform policy changes (e.g., verification gating, reply ranking updates) can distinguish **design-driven** visibility shifts from **organic** attention cascades after exogenous shocks.

Takeaway. Think-tank frames and advocacy packages supply the narrative clay; mainstream outlets kiln it into articles; social systems smash and remix it at scale. Any claim about "platform gatekeeping" should be tested against this upstream supply and the newsroom middle layer before attributing effects solely to algorithmic design.

4. Platform Owner as Policy Actor

A privately owned platform concentrates unusually broad authority in one person. That owner can change code, policy, communications, and resourcing—often faster than any external stakeholder can respond. This section catalogs the levers available, explains how "silent switches" complicate accountability, and assesses community fact-checking as a partial counterweight.

4.1 Governance levers: ranking, eligibility, verification, policy enforcement

Ranking (distribution physics).

- **Feed order & reply position:** Small rank deltas on "For You" or reply threads produce outsized reach effects.
- **Freshness & engagement weights:** Decay curves, dwell-time, and interaction weights (likes, reposts, quotes) alter which narratives crest.
- **Link handling:** Previews, click-through latency, or interstitials can throttle/boost domains or classes of links.
- **Safety/quality scores:** Per-account or per-post scores (spam, NSFW, borderline) quietly tax reach even without removal.

Eligibility (who can be seen).

- **Quality thresholds:** Minimum account age, phone/email confirmation, strike count ceilings.
- **Rate limits & visibility bands:** Hard caps on posts/DMs plus soft caps that hold content below discovery surfaces.
- **Geographic/feature access:** Regional gating of Spaces, long-form posts, or monetization nudges creators toward compliant behaviors.

Verification (identity and pay-to-reach coupling).

- **Badge-linked boost:** Verification—paid or vetted—can be tied to higher baseline rank, enhanced reply placement, or spam exemptions.
- **Programmatic whitelists/greylists:** Legacy press lists, emergency-response whitelists, or advertiser-safe cohorts can receive default amplification or reduced scrutiny.

Policy enforcement (the brake and the scalpel).

- **Rules & exceptions:** Staff guidelines, edge-case playbooks, and "trusted flagger" inputs.
- **Action spectrum:** Label → down-rank → limit replies/forwards → demonetize → remove → suspend.
- **Tooling asymmetry:** Owner can prioritize teams (Trust & Safety, Integrity, Search) or deprecate them; resource allocation is policy by other means.

Research cues.
Track outcome variables that reflect these levers without needing source code: rank position in replies, domain-specific click latency, distribution of verified vs. unverified visibility, and post-remedy reach (how far a labeled/limited post still travels).

4.2 Transparency signals and the problem of "silent switches"

Public signals (what the platform says):

- Policy update posts, engineering blogs, transparency reports, and API documentation.
- Owner statements that telegraph intent ("boost replies from X," "limit Y content").

Operationally silent switches (what the platform does):

- **Shadow parameters:** Coefficients or thresholds updated without notice (e.g., link-cooldown timers, content classifier cutoffs).
- **Toggles & experiments:** Feature flags rolled out to slices of traffic, A/B tests on safety models that change distribution.
- **Hotfixes:** Rapid changes during crises (spam waves, violent events) that later persist as the new normal.

Why it matters.
Public statements are necessary but not sufficient. A platform can truthfully disclose high-level intent while unannounced micro-changes drive the real effects. Silent switches blur causality, making it hard to tell whether a reach shift arose from policy, product, enforcement fatigue, or exogenous news.

Audit tactics.

- **Event studies:** Anchor on timestamped, owner-level announcements; compare matched controls across pre/post windows.
- **Probe accounts:** Calibrated test accounts posting standardized content to measure rank, latency, and cross-region differences.
- **Diff logs:** Community-maintained "policy diff" trackers that snapshot ToS/help-center text and SDK/API changes.
- **Replication kits:** Publish code and seeds for independent reruns; require effect sizes with confidence intervals, not anecdotes.

4.3 Community fact-checking as counterweight and its limits

What it can do.

- **Counter-speech at scale:** Attaches context beneath claims visible to broad audiences.
- **Plural sourcing:** Incentivizes citations and cross-ideological agreement when systems are designed to surface "bridged consensus."
- **Lightweight correction loop:** Faster than newsroom retractions; cheaper than full removals; less chilling than bans.

Structural limits.

- **Coverage gap:** Many posts never receive notes; coverage skews toward viral accounts and English-language content.
- **Asymmetric incentives:** Users share sensational claims more than sober corrections; corrected posts often retain their initial reach advantage.
- **Latency:** Notes can take hours or days to qualify and become visible; by then, narrative "first mover" effects are baked in.
- **Weaponization risk:** Coordinated brigading can upvote tendentious "context" or bury valid notes; robust scorer design helps but cannot eliminate this.
- **Scope creep:** Fact-checking works best on verifiable claims (numbers, dates, attributions). It struggles with normative assertions, fog-of-war events, or ambiguous video.

Owner-level dependencies.
Because the owner controls (a) note visibility thresholds, (b) tie-ins to ranking, and (c)

resourcing of the moderation/abuse teams that protect the system, community checks are not fully independent. A single switch can reduce their prominence or neuter their effect on distribution.

Measurement ideas.

- **Note activation half-life:** Median time from post to first visible note; aim to shorten.
- **Correction carry-through:** Ratio of views after note vs. before; target >1 only if ranking actively boosts corrected posts.
- **Cross-ideology overlap:** Share of notes whose endorsers span distinct audience clusters (proxy for bridged consensus).
- **Downstream reuse:** Rate at which notes propagate into newsroom corrections or policy statements.

Bottom line.
The platform owner is not just a participant but a **policymaker** with direct control over visibility economics. Public transparency is necessary, yet "silent switches" can move outcomes more than announcements. Community fact-checking helps, but its power ultimately depends on owner-set rules for prominence and speed—and it cannot substitute for auditable disclosure of ranking, eligibility, and enforcement changes.

5. Musk and X: Documented Actions and Statements

5.1 Public positioning on Israel and Gaza

Musk's visible stance since Oct. 2023 blends pro-Israel signaling with a narrow humanitarian carve-out for Gaza connectivity. After endorsing an antisemitic post on X (which triggered advertiser backlash and a White House rebuke), he publicly insisted he opposes antisemitism and sought to reset the narrative during and after a high-profile Israel visit. The Guardian+2Reuters+2
On Gaza communications, Musk said **Starlink will support "internationally recognized aid organizations"**—explicitly not a blanket service—and framed access as contingent on coordination with authorities. Reuters+1

5.2 Visits, meetings, and symbolic gestures

On **Nov 27, 2023**, Musk traveled to Israel, toured attack sites (e.g., Kfar Aza), and met **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**, **President Isaac Herzog**, and families of hostages. Coverage emphasized his remarks about combating hate online and his alignment with Israel's right to

self-defense—moves widely read as reputational repair amid the X advertising crisis. Al Jazeera+3The Washington Post+3TIME+3
Israeli officials publicly cast Musk as a partner against antisemitism during the visit, further anchoring his positioning in the conflict's politics. Reuters

5.3 Starlink statements and humanitarian carve-outs

Initial pledges (Oct 2023) limited Starlink connectivity to vetted aid groups in Gaza; Israeli officials pushed back, citing misuse risks. By **Feb 2024**, Israel granted a **conditional license** for Starlink service in Israel and parts of Gaza, with safeguards to prevent militant access. In **July 2024**, Reuters reported Starlink was activated at the **UAE field hospital in Rafah** with support from the UAE and cooperation from Israel—an example of the "carve-out" model in practice rather than open civilian service. Reuters+3Reuters+3Al Jazeera+3

Implication for this paper. Publicly, Musk positions himself as pro-Israel while presenting Starlink's Gaza role as **controlled humanitarian connectivity**. The record shows symbolic alignment (meetings, site visits) alongside narrowly scoped operational steps (conditional licensing; a hospital activation) that avoid broad, unmediated service in the Strip. These choices matter for our later analysis of platform owner influence versus tangible, on-the-ground participation. Reuters+1

6. Staying Out by Building Elsewhere

Musk's "distance" from Israel-based AI programs is best understood as a placement choice: xAI is building hyperscale compute in the U.S. and exploring the Gulf, while Israel's marquee AI infrastructure is being built by others (NVIDIA; Google/AWS for Nimbus). This section outlines the footprints and why that separation likely persists.

6.1 xAI's U.S. buildouts and Gulf exploration

xAI's primary footprint is in **Memphis, Tennessee**, where the company is sprint-building the "Colossus 2" campus. Independent reporting and site surveys describe rapid capacity ramps (triple-digit MW cooling/power), on-site turbines/generators, and adjacent property acquisitions—an unmistakable signal that xAI intends to own its compute base on U.S. soil. The Guardian+3SemiAnalysis+3Commercial Appeal+3

Beyond the U.S., xAI has **explored Saudi Arabia** for additional capacity. Multiple outlets (citing Bloomberg and others) report discussions to **lease data-center capacity** from regional partners—including multi-hundred-MW to multi-GW proposals—as the Gulf races to secure NVIDIA supply and cheap power. These talks position xAI within a Gulf-centered AI buildout rather than Israel's. Reuters+2The Economic Times+2

Implication. xAI's siting choices (Memphis now; Gulf options later) keep its core compute growth **outside Israel**, even as Musk engages Israel politically and symbolically on other fronts.

6.2 Contrast: NVIDIA's Israel-1 and Google/AWS Project Nimbus

NVIDIA's Israel-1 is an NVIDIA-driven AI/HPC installation in Israel (H100/HGX stack, Spectrum networking) that entered the TOP500 in late 2024 and remained listed in mid-2025; reportage details an eventual multi-exaflop AI peak design. There is **no public linkage** to Musk, xAI, Tesla, or SpaceX. TOP500+2New-TechEurope+2

Project Nimbus (Google + AWS, 2021–) is the Israeli government's sovereign cloud program. Worker protests and newsroom coverage since 2021–2025 have focused on the ethical/policy implications, but again show **no Musk/xAI involvement**. GeekWire+3The Guardian+3Al Jazeera+3

Implication. Israel's flagship AI infrastructure is advancing via **NVIDIA and hyperscale clouds**—tracks that compete with, not complement, xAI's own stack and ownership model.

6.3 Strategic, competitive, and optics reasons for distance

Strategic control. xAI's thesis emphasizes **owning compute** (sites, power, and racks). Plugging into NVIDIA-run or Google/AWS government programs offers little leverage for a challenger model that sells itself on independence from Big Cloud. The Memphis campus architecture—and even on-site generation permits—reflects that control mindset. SemiAnalysis+1

Supplier/competitor dynamics. NVIDIA is a crucial **supplier** to xAI, and Google/AWS are **direct competitors**. Participating in **Israel-1** (NVIDIA-owned) or **Nimbus** (Google/AWS-owned) would blur competitive lines without improving xAI's bargaining power; meanwhile, NVIDIA and Gulf partners are already striking large regional chip and power deals. Data Center Dynamics+1

Geopolitical and reputation risk. Musk's Israel visit and the **Starlink hospital activation in Rafah** already attracted intense scrutiny. Joining government-adjacent AI programs in Israel would amplify regulatory, labor, and public-opinion risks at the very moment xAI is courting advertisers, users, and energy permits in the U.S. The targeted **humanitarian carve-out** posture (hospital connectivity approved by Israel/UAE) threads the needle without binding xAI to Israel's state AI stack. Reuters+1

Bottom line. The evidence points to a deliberate **placement strategy**: scale xAI's compute in the U.S.; keep optionality in the Gulf; **stay out** of Israel's hyperscale AI programs (run by NVIDIA and Google/AWS). That keeps strategic control with xAI, avoids aiding competitors' sovereign-cloud narratives, and limits political exposure while still allowing tightly scoped humanitarian collaboration via Starlink. Al Jazeera+3SemiAnalysis+3Reuters+3

7. Case Snapshots

7.1 Link throttling and rival-platform frictions

Multiple investigations found X degrading outbound links to rivals and some news sites via brief but measurable delays (seconds-long), which can suppress click-through at scale. Targets reported in 2023 included Facebook, Instagram, Bluesky, Substack, and even outlets like Reuters and the New York Times; tests showed ~2–5s waits before the destination loaded. The Washington Post+1

Beyond latency, product changes also shaped visibility—for example, removing automatic headlines from news links (reducing context and likely CTR) and owner statements advising users to avoid link posts because the algorithm downranks them. Together these moves steer attention toward native text/video and away from external journalism. The Washington Post+1

Reply-ranking and "verified first" policies further entrench this: Musk announced prioritization for verified accounts, and X added controls to limit who can reply—both of which can insulate posts from unverified counter-speech while advantaging paid/verified voices. X (formerly Twitter)+2Social Media Today+2

7.2 Primary races and outside spending as narrative testbeds

Democratic primaries since 2022 offer clean, time-bounded windows to observe narrative shaping alongside heavy outside spending. AIPAC's super PAC, **United Democracy Project (UDP)**, became a top primary spender; OpenSecrets' ledger for 2022 details targeted candidates and totals. OpenSecrets

High-profile examples include **MI-11 (Andy Levin)**, where reports put UDP's spend in the multi-million range, and **MD-04 (Donna Edwards)**, where UDP/ally spending neared ~$6M—figures echoed across mainstream and trade press. These races turned into media storylines ("money vs. message"), providing quasi-experiments for measuring how platform distribution, paid ads, and earned media interact. Mondoweiss+3The Forward+3Mondoweiss+3

In 2024, coverage anticipated even larger pro-Israel spends (order-of-$100M) across several primaries; individual contests (e.g., MD-03) again showed UDP's multi-million interventions. Such settings let researchers pair spending data with X-side reach metrics (rank/latency of linked coverage, engagement asymmetries) to test "gatekeeping vs. organic demand" claims. The Guardian+2The Guardian+2

7.3 Fact-check collisions: when Community Notes undercut elites

X's **Community Notes** can attach user-generated context to high-reach posts, including from officials and Musk himself, demonstrating a visible counter-speech pathway. But audits consistently find **coverage and timing gaps**: during high-salience events (e.g., Israel-Gaza claims; U.S. election rumors), many popular misleading posts never receive notes, and when notes do

appear, they arrive late and are seen far less than the originals. Wikipedia+1
Policy relevance: Notes prove that counter-speech is possible—even against elite accounts—yet their **corrective power is throttled by latency and relative reach**. Measuring "note activation half-life," views-after-note vs. views-before, and the share of cross-ideological endorsements provides tractable metrics for whether Notes function as a meaningful check or a decorative layer atop owner-set distribution rules. Wikipedia

8. Measuring Gatekeeping Without Mind-Reading

We cannot see private coefficients or internal flags, so we measure *effects*. The core idea: build transparent probes, define a neutral baseline, and test whether distribution changes coincide with platform switches more than with news shocks. Below are audit designs that a newsroom, lab, or regulator can actually run (and others can replicate).

8.1 Audit-friendly metrics: rank shifts, link latencies, reach deltas

A. Reply rank position (RRP).
What: the median ordinal position of a target account's reply under high-reach posts.
How: post standardized replies from probe accounts to a rotating set of seed posts; sample RRP at fixed minutes after posting (e.g., t = 2, 5, 15).
Metric: rrp_shift = rrp_after − rrp_before (negative = higher placement).

B. Feed exposure probability (FEP).
What: the probability a standardized post appears in the top k items of "For You."
How: instrument "reader" probes (no followers) that refresh feeds on a schedule; log top-k ids.
Metric: fep = hits_in_topk / total_refreshes.

C. Link click latency (LCL).
What: added time between click and first paint for specific domains.
How: headless browser with cold cache; N ≥ 50 runs/domain/time-of-day; record t_first_paint.
Metric: lcl_delta = t_fp_test_domain − t_fp_control_domain.

D. Reach and engagement deltas (RED).
What: change in expected exposure for matched content across cohorts.
How: post matched A/B content from verified vs unverified, paid vs unpaid, legacy vs new.
Metric: red = (reach_treatment − reach_control) / reach_control.

E. Label/limitation carry-through (LLC).
What: proportion of total views *after* label/limit vs *before*.
Metric: llc = views_after / (views_before + views_after). Low llc implies effective braking; high llc implies weak corrective impact.

F. Note activation half-life (NAH).
What: time until a Community Note becomes visible.
Metric: nah = median(time_note_visible − time_post).

G. Suppression score (SS) via matched baselines.
What: per-post residual after controlling for author size, topic, hour, and headline features.
How: fit a simple GLM to historical data; compute residuals for audit window.
Metric: ss = observed_reach − predicted_reach.

Design tips

- Always log stratifiers: author_follower_bin, post_type (link/text/video), hour_of_day, topic_tag.
- Use UTC timestamps; pre-register thresholds (e.g., a "meaningful" rank change is >= 2 positions).
- Publish raw probe ids and code so others can rerun.

8.2 Event-study designs around policy changes

Interrupted time-series (ITS).

- Setup: choose a clear intervention (e.g., verification gating rollout at T0).
- Window: [T0 − 28d, T0 + 28d].
- Outcome: any of RRP, FEP, RED, LCL.
- Model: $y_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot post_t + \gamma \cdot trend_t + \delta \cdot seasonals_t + \varepsilon_t$.
- Readout: β estimates the level shift attributable to the change.

Difference-in-differences (DiD).

- Treatment: content class allegedly affected (e.g., external links).
- Control: closely matched unaffected class (e.g., native text).
- Model: $y_{it} = \alpha + \tau \cdot (treatment_i \times post_t) + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$.
- Readout: τ is the estimated gatekeeping effect.

Synthetic control (SC).

- If a comparable platform grants better access (e.g., Bluesky, Mastodon), build a "synthetic X" from weighted controls that match pre-period behavior, then compare post-period divergence.

Rolling A/B with probe cohorts.

- Maintain stable probe sets across geographies and account types.
- Stagger posting times to separate policy changes from news spikes.
- Rotate domains for LCL tests to detect domain-specific throttling.

Falsification & robustness checks.

- Placebo dates (pretend switch at T0 − 14d): effects should vanish.
- Non-Israel topics: if shifts are global, mechanism is platform-wide, not issue-targeted.
- High-news vs low-news hours: effects should persist outside breaking-news spikes.

8.3 Independent replication and data-access constraints

Access realities.

- Public APIs are limited/variable; scraping may violate ToS. Favor *reader probes* and *first-party telemetry* (what a real user sees) over bulk data pulls.
- Rate limits and personalization make single-account results fragile; use many small probes, not one big one.

Replication kit (what to release).

1. Probe account handles and posting schedules (hashed if needed).
2. Scripts: headless browser for LCL; feed sampler; reply-rank sampler.
3. Data dictionary: fields, units, clocks, error codes.
4. Pre-analysis plan: outcomes, windows, exclusion rules, minimal detectable effect.
5. Raw CSVs + analysis notebooks; SHA256 hashes for each file.

Ethics & safety.

- No brigading or deceptive coordination. Post *neutral, standardized* content.
- Avoid targeted tests on individuals; prefer your own probes and neutral seeds.
- Comply with local law; document ToS boundaries and obtain IRB-style review if institutional.

What counts as evidence.

- Convergent signals: rank shifts + latency spikes + reach deltas aligned to the same switch.
- Stability: effects persist across time-zones, content templates, and probe sets.
- Magnitude: pre-registered thresholds (e.g., ≥ 25% RED, ≥ 2-position RRP shift, ≥ 1.5s LCL increase).
- Transparency: others rerun your kit and recover effect signs and rough sizes.

Limits to admit.

- Black-box drift: coefficients change without notice; any single audit is a snapshot.
- Confounding news shocks: even with controls, truly exogenous instruments are rare.
- Selection bias: probes are not perfect mirrors of organic users.

Practical bottom line.
You don't need source code to test gatekeeping claims. Treat the platform like an ISP under observation: send standardized packets (posts, replies, clicks), log what comes back (rank, latency, reach), anchor analyses to dated switches, and publish everything needed for someone else to *reproduce your numbers*.

9. Counterarguments and Alternative Explanations

Gatekeeping claims are often entangled with simpler stories: audiences choose what they like; newsrooms chase what's newsworthy; platforms mitigate abuse and legal risk. A credible analysis should lay these alternatives out and specify how to tell them apart from owner-mediated effects.

9.1 Organic preference cascades

Claim. Content wins (or loses) because people genuinely prefer it. Network effects—homophily, follower overlap, celebrity gravity—create **pre-algorithmic** momentum that any ranking system would surface.

How this can look like gatekeeping (or boosting).

- Large accounts reliably outrank smaller dissenters without any hidden switch.
- Tight communities (e.g., political subcultures) rapidly "ratio" outsiders, making suppression seem intentional.

- Cross-platform synchrony (same clip trending everywhere) suggests demand, not platform bias.

Discriminators.

- **Size-controlled reach:** Compare matched accounts by follower bin; if deltas vanish after controlling for size and posting hour, cascades plausibly explain outcomes.
- **Cross-platform mirrors:** If the same narrative outruns competitors with different ranking rules, organic demand is the parsimonious story.
- **Probe reversals:** When probes post neutral templates, does rank still track tribe identity? Weak identity effects point to audience taste over platform tuning.

9.2 Newsworthiness versus bias

Claim. Editors and users privilege what is **salient, novel, and consequential**—not (necessarily) what aligns with a political agenda. War milestones, court rulings, hostage swaps, and mass-casualty events dominate feeds because they are objectively "big news."

How this can look like bias.

- Lopsided coverage windows (one side's atrocities get more airtime) may reflect verifiability or available visuals rather than intent.
- Peaks around official briefings, leaks, or releases are access-driven, not ideological.

Discriminators.

- **Time-to-verify curves:** Institutional pieces that arrive later but with stronger sourcing may trail social spikes; this lag is a cost of verification, not partisanship.
- **Visual availability:** Events with shareable video predictably overperform text-only updates; adjust for modality before inferring bias.
- **Counterfactual pairing:** For similar-scale events with similar media assets, persistent asymmetry is harder to explain by "news value" alone.

9.3 Platform safety rationales and legal exposure

Claim. Down-ranking and link handling often pursue **abuse control, spam prevention, brand safety, and legal compliance** (e.g., terrorism content, sanctions, election integrity). When these levers touch hot political content, it can look like censorship while being a risk-management response.

Common rationales.

- **Crisis throttles:** Temporary friction (e.g., link interstitials, slowed resharing) during misinformation waves or violent incidents.
- **Quality filters:** Lower reach for low-reputation or newly created accounts to block botnets and brigades.
- **Advertiser adjacency:** Keeping sensitive terms or domains out of inventory near ads to avoid revenue loss.
- **Jurisdictional rules:** Country-specific takedowns or age-gating under local law.

Discriminators.

- **Scope & duration:** True safety measures are **content-class** or **system-wide** and time-limited; selective, enduring penalties on specific outlets or rivals suggest strategic friction rather than neutral safety.
- **Transparency artifacts:** Even minimal logs (policy pages, enforcement dashboards, API deprecations) should move in step with safety claims; silent, persistent changes invite skepticism.
- **Collateral pattern:** Safety throttles should hit **ideologically diverse** accounts that meet the triggering condition (e.g., new accounts, spammy link patterns). One-sided impact after conditioning on those factors points beyond neutral safety.

Practical takeaway.
Before attributing outcomes to owner intent, test these alternatives. If **size controls** erase effects, you're seeing preference cascades. If **event controls** (modality, salience, verification lag) explain asymmetry, you're seeing newsworthiness. If **scope, duration, and collateral** match published safety rationales, you're seeing risk management. What remains—timed level shifts, domain-specific frictions without safety cover, or rank deltas that survive tight controls—is the residue that justifies a gatekeeping claim.

10. Policy and Normative Options

This section proposes *doable* guardrails that don't require source-code disclosure or a heavy new regulator. The aim is to make distribution levers observable, preserve research access, and add narrowly tailored protections when foreign-policy narratives intersect elections.

10.1 Minimum disclosure for ranking and throttling

A. Changelog you can audit (not a press post).

- **What:** A signed, time-stamped "Distribution Bulletin" whenever platform-wide ranking, reply order, link handling, or eligibility thresholds change.
- **Fields:** change_id, effective_UTC, affected_surfaces (For You, replies, search), affected_objects (links, verified replies, video), expected_direction (+/− exposure), scope (global vs. region), experiment flags (A/B buckets + allocation).
- **Format:** JSON + human summary; publish to a *verifiable* append-only log (see 10.2).

B. Silent-switch counters.

- **What:** Daily counters of *how many* knobs moved even if details are withheld (e.g., "4 safety classifier thresholds updated; 1 link-interstitial timer adjusted").
- **Why:** Lets researchers align observed effects with real switch activity without revealing parameters.

C. Domain-level friction telemetry.

- **What:** Hourly medians for **link click latency** and **interstitial rates** by top domains (released with a 7-day delay, k-anonymized).
- **Why:** Makes domain-specific throttling visible without naming individual posts.

D. Eligibility/verification exposure tables.

- **What:** Monthly top-line reach share by account cohort (paid-verified, org-verified, legacy-verified if any, unverified).
- **Why:** If "paid gets priority," the magnitude becomes measurable.

E. Labels-with-teeth disclosure.

- **What:** For each label type (e.g., "context added," "sensitive media"), publish its mechanical effects: down-rank factor range, reply gating, monetization status.
- **Why:** Turns labels from vibes into rules.

F. Due-process guarantees.

- **What:** Per-post "delivery cards" (viewable to the author) showing major enforcement events: labeled_at, limited_at, restored_at, appeal_window.
- **Why:** Authors can contest *process*, not just outcomes.

Trade-offs: Minor adversarial risk (bad actors learn contours); mitigated by ranges, delays, and cohort-level (not per-post) stats.

10.2 Independent archives and public-interest APIs

A. Append-only transparency log.

- **What:** Publish the Distribution Bulletin (10.1A) to a **Merkle-tree** log with daily **signed checkpoints**; third parties mirror it.
- **Why:** Prevents retroactive edits; enables cryptographic proofs ("this change notice existed at time T").

B. Public-interest API tier (read-only).

- **Access:** Accredited researchers/newsrooms/NGOs under lightweight terms.
- **Endpoints:**
    1. **Feed sampler:** top-k items for standardized cold-start readers.
    2. **Reply rank sampler:** ordered replies for specified posts (rate-limited).
    3. **Label ledger:** post-level label events with timestamps (author consent if needed).
    4. **Notes telemetry:** time-to-visibility and endorsement vectors for Community Notes.
    5. **Latency stats:** aggregated domain friction metrics (from 10.1C).
- **Privacy:** Differential privacy + cohort aggregation; strict per-account redaction unless opt-in.

C. Independent snapshotting & escrow.

- **What:** Hourly public snapshots of trending panels, top hashtags, and top linked domains, stored by a neutral custodian (library/university consortium).
- **Why:** Preserves evidence for audits, FOI-style requests, and post-mortems.

D. Warrant canaries for policy scope.

- **What:** Quarterly statements on whether government takedown/visibility requests targeted foreign-policy topics; include counts by legal basis and country.
- **Why:** Signals pressure without revealing case specifics.

E. Researcher sandbox.

- **What:** A fenced environment with *synthetic* traffic and seeded content to benchmark algorithmic changes against known truths.
- **Why:** Lets the platform demonstrate intended effects (e.g., spam suppression) without exposing live systems.

10.3 Election-adjacent safeguards for foreign-policy topics

Foreign-policy narratives routinely bleed into primaries and generals. Add narrow, time-boxed guardrails keyed to election calendars.

A. Pre-election distribution moratoriums (targeted).

- **What:** In the **14 days** before an election in a given jurisdiction, freeze **owner-directed** changes to ranking, link friction, or reply order **unless** triggered by documented safety incidents.
- **Process:** If a change is unavoidable, file an immediate Bulletin entry and a post-election after-action note.

B. Parity rules for candidate/ballot-relevant foreign-policy content.

- **What:** If a foreign-policy topic (e.g., Israel aid vote) is election-salient, ensure:
    1. **Symmetric eligibility** (ads and organic) for legally qualified candidates,
    2. **Equal reply access bands** (no asymmetric reply gating by cohort),
    3. **Equal label mechanics** (same down-rank factors for comparable claims).
- **Why:** Prevents covert tilt while preserving enforcement.

C. Fast-track correction and prominence for verified errors.

- **What:** During election windows, if a post about a foreign-policy/election intersection receives a validated correction (e.g., Community Note with cross-ideology threshold or newsroom correction), temporarily **boost the corrected version** and **link back** from the original.
- **Metric:** Publish a 24-hour **correction carry-through** rate (see §8.1).

D. Synthetic-media provenance.

- **What:** Require C2PA (or equivalent) provenance labels for AI-generated images/audio/video in election-salient foreign-policy contexts; down-rank unlabeled synthetic media during election windows.
- **Why:** Attacks often pair geopolitics with fabricated media.

E. State-actor signaling.

- **What:** Prominent, standardized labels for known state media and state-linked outlets; pair with a neutral explainer and link-out to methodology.
- **Why:** Informs users without suppressing speech.

F. Appeals clock & ombuds.

- **What:** Election-window appeals resolved within **24–48 hours** by a dedicated ombuds team; publish anonymized case metrics post-election.

G. Cross-platform crisis protocol.

- **What:** Voluntary pact among major platforms to share indicators of coordinated manipulation related to foreign-policy topics in election periods (TTPs, not user data).
- **Why:** Coordinated campaigns hop platforms; defenses should, too.

Bottom line.
We don't need to choose between secrecy and source-code dumps. A practical combo—*signed change logs, minimal but meaningful telemetry, neutral archives, a public-interest API, and narrowly scoped election-adjacent rules*—would let outsiders detect real gatekeeping, distinguish safety from tilt, and keep platforms nimble when harm is at stake.

11. Research Agenda and Open Questions

This agenda prioritizes **measurable**, **replicable** work. The aim is to move beyond anecdotes toward instruments that any newsroom, lab, or regulator can re-run.

11.1 What data we need next

- **Signed distribution changelogs.** Minimal fields from §10.1 (effective time, affected surfaces/objects, expected direction). Even coarse ranges make event studies tractable.

- **Cohort-level exposure shares.** Monthly reach/CTR/retention broken out by account class (paid-verified, org-verified, unverified), post type (link/text/video), and language/region.
- **Domain friction telemetry.** Hourly medians for click latency and interstitial rates for top domains (released with delay and k-anonymization).
- **Label & Notes ledgers.** Post-level timestamps for labels and Community Notes (created, eligible, visible), with outcome hooks (down-rank applied, restored).
- **Probe whitelisting.** A public-interest API tier allowing standardized "reader" and "reply" probes (rate-limited), so multiple teams can measure rank/latency without scraping.
- **Advertiser adjacency maps.** Aggregated rules describing brand-safety blocks (by topic/domain class) to separate revenue protection from viewpoint bias.
- **Cross-platform IDs.** Opt-in author keys enabling the same post set to be audited across platforms without doxxing.

Open question: What is the **minimum viable telemetry** that constrains silent switches while not enabling adversarial gaming?

11.2 Multi-platform comparisons

- **Common probe kit.** Release a reference suite (scripts + content templates) that posts synchronized A/B material to X, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Bluesky, and Threads; log feed rank, reply position, link latency, and time-to-correction.
- **Topologies of virality.** Compare cascade shapes (depth, breadth, half-life) by modality (text vs video) and by presence/absence of external links.
- **Correction economics.** Measure "correction carry-through" and "note activation half-life" across platforms; identify policies that reliably flip the sign (corrections seen *more* than originals).
- **Eligibility and pay-to-reach.** Quantify how verification/subscription tiers alter baseline exposure on each platform; test whether paywalls correlate with reply insulation.
- **Safety vs. tilt fingerprints.** Use placebo topics (sports, entertainment) to learn each platform's neutral physics, then test foreign-policy windows for deviations.

Open question: Can we construct a **synthetic control** from lower-stakes platforms (e.g., Bluesky/Mastodon) that reliably estimates what X's distribution *would* have been absent a switch?

11.3 International spillovers

- **Jurisdictional toggles.** Audit whether rank/label effects differ across regions with distinct laws (EU DSA, India IT Rules, Israeli emergency orders). Are "global" changes actually geo-scoped?
- **Language asymmetries.** Track Community Notes coverage, label latency, and link friction for Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, Turkish, and Spanish content discussing Israel/Gaza versus English coverage.
- **State and para-state media routing.** Measure exposure of state-linked outlets and diaspora amplifiers during cross-border crises; identify when labels inform vs. suppress.
- **Conflict spillover into elections.** In countries with upcoming votes, test election-window safeguards (§10.3): are foreign-policy narratives receiving parity treatment across candidates?
- **Transnational coordination.** Map identical assets (videos, talking points) hopping between platforms and regions; quantify time lags and amplification differentials.

Open questions:

- What **early-warning indicators** (e.g., sudden domain-specific latency spikes across regions) predict coordinated manipulation?
- How do **energy/compute alliances** (e.g., Gulf buildouts) reshape information flows and moderation incentives outside the U.S.?

Deliverable mindset. For each item above, pre-register outcomes, publish code and probe IDs, and target **portable metrics** (rank shifts, latency deltas, reach residuals). The field advances when others can **reproduce your numbers**—not just your conclusions.

12. Conclusion: Distinguishing Debate from Design

The U.S. conversation about Israel is not born on platforms; it arrives with decades of statutory aid, a domestically anchored defense economy, organized religious and strategic constituencies, and professional narrative suppliers. Platforms—especially when privately owned—do not create that current, but they can narrow or widen the channel. The practical task is to tell when we are watching **debate** (organic preference, news salience, verification lag) and when we are watching **design** (owner-set rules that steer distribution).

A workable test emerges from this paper:

1. **Anchor to time.** Tie observed reach changes to dated policy or product switches, not vibes.
2. **Measure effects, not intentions.** Use rank position, link latency, and reach deltas with matched controls; report confidence, not anecdotes.
3. **Falsify alternatives.** Check whether size controls, cross-platform mirrors, or modality/verification costs explain the asymmetry.
4. **Look for convergence.** Declare "gatekeeping" only when multiple indicators move in the same direction around the same switch.
5. **Demand minimum transparency.** Signed change logs, cohort-level exposure tables, and domain-friction telemetry make silent switches visible without forcing source-code disclosure.
6. **Preserve a public record.** Independent snapshots, public-interest APIs, and escrowed trend feeds keep evidence available for post-mortems and election windows.

For Musk and X, the record shows pro-Israel signaling paired with narrow humanitarian connectivity via Starlink, and a conspicuous absence from Israel-based AI infrastructure programs—choices consistent with a strategy of building compute power elsewhere while retaining platform latitude at home. Whether that latitude becomes **policy power over speech** is an empirical question, not a presumption. The methods here make it answerable.

The normative horizon is modest but important: platforms should disclose enough to let outsiders detect distributional changes; researchers should publish kits others can rerun; journalists should separate structural baselines from platform physics; regulators should reserve heavy tools for election-adjacent periods and repeat offenders. If we can keep those commitments, we can argue politics on the merits—and see clearly when the argument was quietly redesigned.

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Note: Items 1–4 and 14–15 establish the structural funding baseline; 5–6 cover election spending contexts; 7–8 document distribution/product changes on X; 9–12 cover Musk’s statements, visit, and Starlink carve-outs; 13 and 16 contextualize Israel-based AI infrastructure (NVIDIA Israel-1; Google/AWS Project Nimbus).