Israel’s Place in Biden’s Agenda

A new old ritual seems to be taking shape in the new President Joe Biden's White House, beginning with Jen Psaki's failed briefings, the "what-if" war games, and discussions in the Oval Office about how to talk to a particular US ally or adversary. Many times since he took office, President Joe Biden has dialed one world leader or another after reinstating the old rule, which has been a longstanding White House standard canned by Donald Trump. The change in telephone diplomacy was about both style and substance, as Joe Biden sought to let foreign leaders — many embittered by Trump’s habit of berating his colleagues and mixing personal interests with US national security — know that he was determined to reset US relations with the world.

Yet for a full month after Joe Biden's inauguration, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had a warm relationship with former President Donald Trump and his administration, did not receive a call from the new president. In spite of this, however, the Israeli still kept up a good fight and told Channel 12 that he and the new president have had a "great friendship" for almost 40 years, ever since he represented Israel in Washington as deputy chief of mission. We agree on much, though there are some divisions on Iran and the Palestinians. He went on to say that he had a great relationship with the Democrats, despite the obvious friction that existed between him and former President Barack Obama, particularly on Iran.

Upon taking office in January, Joe Biden announced his intention to return to the Iran nuclear deal, which Trump
withdraw from in 2018, and reversed some of his predecessor's decisions on the Palestinians, such as renewing financial aid to the PA and reopening the PLO office in Washington.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki, responding to a reporter's question about some silence and pause in relations with Israel, denied that there was any change in the new president's policies. Regarding the delay of the call, Psaki pointed out that not only Netanyahu but many other leaders are still waiting for a call.

In 2001, George W. Bush called Ehud Barak seven days after his inauguration, even though he knew full well that Barak would be reelected in a few weeks and was predicted to lose. Nevertheless, the call was made. In 2009, Barack Obama called Ehud Olmert the day after his inauguration, which shows how important the Middle East is to his foreign policy agenda. In 2017, Donald Trump called Binyamin Netanyahu two days after his inauguration, a sign of how important the relationship with Israel is and will become for his administration.

And now it finally happens, the call takes place. All the Israeli newspapers published a photo of a happy Netanyahu with a telephone receiver in his hands, talking to US President Joe Biden. The entire leadership of Israel, and especially the Prime Minister himself, breathed a sigh of relief. So why didn't the American president make the call for an entire month, even though by all accounts Israel is still the most important ally in the Middle East? Most likely, it was meant to achieve three particular goals. First, after four years during which Trump seemed to give Netanyahu everything he wanted, Joe Biden and his aides wanted the Israeli politician back in his place. The administration wants to show that the Israelis are no longer in control of Washington. The second goal was to show that the US-Israeli relationship does not depend on one man, such as Netanyahu. Israel is approaching an election in 33 days, and regardless of who wins, the White House has basically stated that they will learn to work with a new Israeli prime minister as well, if that happens. Making Netanyahu, who himself took the time to congratulate Joe Biden after the November elections, wait and worry, was apparently another reason. Finally, the administration did not want to give Netanyahu a pre-election present in the form of a quick phone call, which would have been immediately exploited by him for his own personal purposes in the upcoming elections.

In this situation, we must not forget Netanyahu's notorious role in bringing Israel to this low point. Although he would argue that his fight with Obama and against the 2015 Iran deal was vital, he actually failed. The Iran deal still passed through Congress despite Netanyahu's controversial speech, but it caused a kind of wound in Israel's relations with the Democratic Party that has yet to heal six years later. It should be recalled that Joe Biden was vice president, and many of the advisers now surrounding the new president were the same advisers who surrounded B. Obama and worked on the Iran deal known as the JCPOA. At the time, Netanyahu was repeatedly warned that this would happen, and that his chances of stopping the deal with his speech, no matter how passionate and lively, were virtually non-existent.

A look at where Iran is today — with its increased stockpiles of uranium and centrifuges — raises questions about whether Donald Trump's speech or coercion to withdraw from the JCPOA was worth it. Netanyahu was also warned in 2017, when Trump took office, that there would be a price to pay for his friendliness. When Netanyahu commented that Trump was Israel's "greatest friend" in the White House, he was warned that this was a mistake and would insult the previous 12 people who had sat in the Oval Office for 72 years of Israel's existence. By saying what he said, Netanyahu effectively slighted Truman, Reagan, Clinton, Bush and Obama. Netanyahu not only hinted, but simply said in plain language that none of them were as good for Israel as Trump.

Netanyahu was warned that his flattery would come back to hurt him. That the pendulum would eventually swing back and that a Democratic president would re-enter the White House and might even win a majority in the Senate and House of Representatives. But the Israelis ignored these warnings and made no secret of his passionate desire to re-elect exactly Trump, whom he helped as the Israeli prime minister.

In the past few years, there has been a constant disconnect, the Jerusalem Post wrote bitterly, between the state of Israel and Jewish movements in the United States, where the biennial conference of the Union of Reform Judaism no longer attracts even high-ranking members of the government. Netanyahu knows this well, and he is well aware that American Jews, who voted overwhelmingly for Democrats, do not approve of his alliance with Trump, and that they are against his policies in Israel itself.

Another Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, believes that Israelis must make sure that they do not pay such a price so that the current prime minister — assuming he stays in office after the upcoming elections — will not enter into a fight with Joe Biden the way he fought with Obama. He has to keep smiling while talking to the president. Although Joe Biden mentioned the Palestinians in his phone call, no one now expects any breakthroughs from the long-standing stalemate over the Middle East crisis. Instead, relationships between Jerusalem and Washington will inherit the new
president's intentions in his policy toward Iran. As we know, the Joe Biden administration is seeking to return to the nuclear deal that former US President Donald Trump left in 2018, although that won't happen until Tehran returns to full compliance with its restrictions. Israel opposes the deal in general, which, according to the Israelis, will eventually allow Iran to enrich uranium to a high level and then begin producing nuclear weapons. In recent weeks, Iran has begun enriching uranium to 20% (well beyond the limits of the 2015 deal) and developing uranium metal.

It is likely that Israel will adopt a different strategy than the tough stance it took almost a decade ago during the initial negotiations on the nuclear deal. In 2013, the Obama administration, supported by the UK, China, Germany, Russia, and France, began negotiations with Iran to limit its nuclear program. Israel vociferously opposed the process, preferring the undiplomatic route to ending the program, and was out of the negotiating room with no say when the 2015 deal was formalized. In November 2020, Israeli media reported that Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said during a private security meeting that "we don't want to be on the outside this time."

President Joe Biden has charted a new course for the United States in the Middle East, in general, and with Israel in particular, reformulating the American alliance system in the region and setting clear directions for American diplomacy. He can simply achieve greater consistency and a clearer connection between means and ends in order to carry out his plans. In general, all contacts with Tel Aviv will be frozen until the Israeli elections, and then they will be adjusted according to the US president’s plan; whether Israel and its American lobby will agree to such an arrangement remains to be seen.

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