



# Jerusalem & Washington DC

## How will the US-Israel relationship play out in this pandemic year?

**WHETHER US** President Donald Trump or Joe Biden takes the oath of office as president in January 2021, the US-Israel relationship will likely be different from what anyone could have imagined before the coronavirus pandemic struck the world. That special relationship could be upended in the wake of COVID-19 and the choices any administration will be forced to make given the financial constraints of an unprecedented amount of American debt and the possibility of a prolonged and deep recession.

To maintain the relationship on sound footing will require innovative thinking while convincing skeptical Americans of the importance of remaining engaged in the Middle East when the American public, Congress, and the whoever is president may choose the path of least resistance by turning inward, withdrawing money from the region when it will be most needed to maintain long-term American security interests. The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, whose *raison d'être* is strengthening the US-Israel relationship, has its work cut out for it.

As evidence of American apathy to foreign affairs, even the strafing of American warships near the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian attack vessels coming within 10 yards of the American warships didn't register a blip on the American media until Trump threatened to retaliate, and even then, the story quickly disappeared. Previously that would have been front-page news. Would the next president want to do the heavy lift of convincing Congress and the American people that it is in our interest to remain a force for good in world's affairs, while Americans are economically struggling? That will use up a lot of political capital.

Israeli military intelligence analysts and strategic thinkers must contemplate all the possibilities of how the special relationship could change, stressed as a consequence of America's decisions to repair its economy, especially in light of what a changing of the guard in the White House could mean.

The strains of the US-Israeli relationship will likely be greater no matter who wins in November, but with a Biden presidency, the chal-



KOBIGIDEON / GPO

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomes US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on a six-hour visit to Israel on May 13

lenge could be magnified. A *Foreign Policy* headline read, "Biden Likely to Embrace Some of Sanders's Foreign Policy Ideas, Especially After the Pandemic." Biden foreign policy experts were "opening a debate on conditioning aid to Israel (and) pushing for cuts in defense spending," the report said.

On one hand, Biden has repeatedly gone to AIPAC gatherings and stridently claimed his fidelity to the US-Israel relationship. But even if he has not changed, his party certainly has. A Democratic Party platform would likely condemn Israel's annexation of the Golan and any future unilateral Israeli annexations in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), condemn the withdrawal of US financial support for the United Nations Works and Relief Agency and the Palestinian Authority that was done to avoid US tax dollars being used to incentive terrorists and support their families, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) that was the centerpiece of the Obama-Biden administration's foreign policy legacy, and Trump's moving the US embassy to Jerusalem.

According to JNS editor Jonathan Tobin, "The current American government doesn't think that it is entitled to dictate policy to the Israelis.... This unwillingness to give orders to the Jewish state really shocks critics of Is-

rael.... These critics had sought to 'save Israel from itself' since the policies adopted by its democratically elected government were not in accord with their own vision of how to achieve peace."

As vice president, Biden was part of an administration that passed UNSC Resolution 2334 undermining Resolution 242, which had assured Israel for over 50 years that it would not be forced to return to the indefensible borders of the 1949 Armistice agreement. It also dramatically increased the chances of successful prosecution of Israel at the International Criminal Court.

According to Bryant Harris, writing in *AI-Monitor*, Biden's foreign policy team will likely include his longtime associates Jake Sullivan and Tony Blinken, who were an integral part of negotiating and creating the Iran nuclear deal, the greatest stress to the US-Israel relationship in generations. The former vice president himself has said he would reenter the nuclear deal if he is elected, although under what terms is to be determined.

But the greatest impact on the relationship that could come from either a Trump or Biden presidency is on the financial side. Israel receives \$3.1 billion of US foreign aid as part of the 10-year memorandum of understanding signed between Obama and Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu that may be reevaluated if the US economy heads south. Israel is the US's largest receipt of foreign aid, all of it military.

One thing Israel has going in its favor is that the majority of that aid is congressionally mandated to be spent in America and the case can be made that decreasing that largess would weaken US military contractors and thereby weaken the American economy.

Israeli security is also dependent on the financial stability of its neighbors, and America's influence on them is in large part due to foreign aid. If US aid to Jordan and Egypt, the second and third largest recipients of aid after Israel in the Middle East at \$1.7b. and \$1.2b. dollars is reduced or ended as a consequence of this pandemic, Israeli and American security may suffer.

You can bet that Israel will be lobbying Congress in favor of continuing aid to its neighbors. Unlike Israel which is respected and considered valuable for American national security among the current administration and routinely is favored by a bipartisan majority in Congress as the only reliable ally in the region, authoritarian third world countries that have human rights problems may not receive much sympathy from Congress or the American people. Americans who are in dire financial straits will be in no mood to understand that if those nations fall to Salafist elements, American interests would be profoundly undermined.

Before the coronavirus, America already had one foot out the door of the Middle East. Congress and the next resident of the White House will hear a rising chorus of Americans who will demand the return of American servicemen from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, demanding those financial resources be used at home, not supporting misguided adventures in the quicksand of the Middle East. When the crisis subsides, parts of the Middle East that were already economic basket cases will almost certainly be in worse shape.

If America retreats from the Middle East, Israel will be asked by either a Biden or Trump administration to provide even more intelligence as a decreasing American footprint will reduce American human intelligence (HUMINT) resources. There is only so much American drones can do in gathering intelligence. As an analogy to understand the irreplaceable importance of human intelligence, think of when Israel left Gaza in 2005. Its loss of HUMINT left Israel blind to many new threats, from tunnels to the balloon intifada. Now think of where Israel is today with an embedded security pres-



JOSHUA ROBERTS/REUTERS

US President Donald Trump participates in a Fox News Channel virtual town hall on May 3

ence in Judea and Samaria, allowing Israel to thwart most terrorist threats before they can even get started. If America withdraws, it may lose much of its HUMINT in places like Iraq, with the native assets that had risked their lives to gain intelligence for the US less willing to do so, when the US would seem to be abandoning them.

If Biden is elected president, his choices for cabinet positions, especially secretary of state and UN ambassador, are almost certain to be less supportive of Israel than current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or former US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley. *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman, a favorite of critics of Israel, has even recommended social justice Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez be the next American ambassador at the UN!

Can you imagine the damage to the US-Israel relationship if AOC or another like-minded progressive is placed in a position of influence in the Biden administration? Even if Joe wanted Rep. Steny Hoyer, a staunch friend of Israel, he may be forced to acquiesce to the anti-Israel Left of his party and choose someone who would be more comfortable in a Sanders administration. Time will tell, but it will be a litmus test of who holds the most influence in the administration, old school Biden "AIPACers" or the progressive "J Streeters." Democrats and never-Trumpers like Bret Stephens have said that in reality Trump has weakened support of Israel, even in comparison to Obama, who was criticized for his even-handed approach to the conflict. In December 2018 Stephens said, "During the eight years of the Obama presidency, I thought US policy toward Israel – the hectoring, the incompetent diplomatic interventions, the moral equivocations, the Iran deal, the backstabbing at the UN – couldn't get worse. As with so much else, Donald Trump



KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks during a debate held in CNN's Washington studios on March 15

succeeds in making his predecessors look good."

Pro-Israel American Jews will overwhelmingly vote for Obama's vice president, but they also must open their eyes to the negative possibilities of what his administration could do to hurt the relationship between the Jewish State and America. Unfortunately, the majority of American Jews consider Israel a low priority, valuing pocketbook and social issues that will only increase in a post COVID-19 world.

Bottom line: Israel was already planning for a smaller American footprint in the region, but now must consider the real possibility of less financial help than had been promised before the coronavirus pandemic. Fortunately for American security interests, Israel has never been stronger militarily. The real question is, how will either administration respond to Iranian ballistic missile progress, its march to nuclear weapons capabilities, its threats to US servicemen and Navy, and its growing control of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The coming clash over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iran nuclear deal is inevitable in a Biden administration.

The US-Israel relationship will survive, but for it to thrive over the next four or eight years, it will need some new messaging to explain its importance to a skeptical American people who will be traumatized after this pandemic. Add to that the drumbeat from the progressive world that Israel is not a liberal democracy anymore, not deserving of that special relationship. Challenging times ahead no matter who sits in the Oval Office in 2021. ■

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