

US-Israeli relations after Biden's victory

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Despite the special relations existing between the United States and Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu congratulated Joe Biden and Kamala Harris relatively late (with a Tweet on 8 November), without specifying what he was congratulating them for. He had a telephone conversation with the president-elect only on 17 November, many days later than the leaders of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada. During the call, the two politicians agreed that they would meet soon.

Commentary

- The situation is in stark contrast to that of 2016, when Netanyahu spoke to president-elect Donald Trump the day after the election. Netanyahu's reserved behaviour is an effect of his close personal relationship with Trump and his fear of decisions which the outgoing president might make (or abstain from) in his final months in office, if he found Netanyahu to be disloyal.
- Trump has made many moves that did not match the canons of American politics, and these moves were favourable to Israel. These included: the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the recognition of the annexation of the Golan Heights, discontinuing the objection to the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, a significant weakening of the Palestinian Authority, withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), the policy of 'maximum pressure' on Tehran, and causing the normalisation of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan. As regards the selection of personnel, the members of the Trump administration in charge of relations with Israel are almost exclusively people of Jewish origin, among whom staunch supporters of the Israeli political right predominate. It seems likely that the cautious approach to the US election result is related to the fact that the Netanyahu government is currently lobbying for further groundbreaking decisions to be passed in Washington that will no longer be possible once the presidential administration changes.
- The achievements of the two US presidents preceding Biden are assessed extremely differently in Israel. Despite the adoption in 2016 of the largest-ever military aid package, worth 38 billion dollars, the presidency of Barack Obama has been negatively assessed because he had signed the JCPOA agreement with Iran and criticised the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In 2016, 63% of Israelis identified Obama as "the worst US president for Israel in the last three decades." On the other hand, Trump's presidency (whose achievements will be the touchstone for the Biden administration) is assessed – for the reasons presented above – with great enthusiasm by both the government and the public. In an October survey this year, over 60% of Israeli

respondents wished the incumbent president to be re-elected, while Biden was supported by less than 20% of respondents.

- The statements heard from Biden and his associates so far suggest that the American policy towards Israel will contain both elements of continuation (including upholding the decision on Jerusalem and support for the normalisation of relations with the Arab states) and attempts to resume Obama's strategy in aspects such as restricting Israel's fait accompli strategy in the West Bank and the rebuilding of contacts with the Palestinian Authority. Biden's announcement that he will return to talks with Tehran on the Iranian nuclear program has caused the greatest concern in Israel. However, at this stage it is very difficult to predict the extent to which the reinstatement of the JCPOA in some form is realistic. As regards the US regional policy, we should expect a continuation of the trend visible in the actions of the last two presidents – falling importance of the Middle East and a gradual reduction of US activity in the region (while maintaining privileged relations with selected countries, above all Israel).
- The Biden administration will be a more difficult partner for the Netanyahu government than the Trump one. First of all, Israel will probably be held accountable by the United States for its policy towards Palestine to a greater extent and prevented from taking actions that could ruin the chances for resolving the Palestinian conflict in a two-state format. Israel led by Netanyahu will also have relatively weaker instruments to put pressure on the new US administration. Unlike Trump, Biden is not dependent on his electorate or donors supporting the Israeli political right. Furthermore, he has received a strong political mandate from the Jewish diaspora in the United States (he garnered 70% of their votes). Additionally, the return of the Democrats to the White House will strengthen the left wing of the Democratic Party, which is critical of many aspects of Israel's conduct. This will also strengthen the Jewish organisations related to the Democratic Party, such as J Street, which are critical of Netanyahu's right-wing politics. However, Biden himself, at various stages of his career (as well as during a telephone conversation with Netanyahu on 17 November), has repeatedly declared his attachment to the issue of Israel's security and the privileged nature of US-Israeli relations, which guarantees that any potential 'tougher stance' will not exceed the limits set by mainstream US politics.
- The two administrations will undoubtedly be united by the high priority given to combating anti-Semitism. However, while the Trump cabinet focused on promoting a broader definition of anti-Semitism to include excessive/disproportionate criticism of the State of Israel or any movements to boycott it, Biden's presidency will most likely expose and condemn above all traditional anti-Semitism related to the activities of the far right (both in and outside the USA) and all forms of historical revisionism.