



Biden and Netanyahu can carefully nourish U.S.-Israeli ties

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Even the closest of bilateral relationships have their ups and downs, and that's surely true of the vibrant ties that the United States has maintained with Israel since the latter was established more than 70 years ago.

As President-elect Biden prepares to assume office, however, he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be wise to recognize the challenges that each faces, focus on the goals that their governments share, and avoid steps that could complicate their burgeoning relationship.

For both, the political landscape is fraught with challenges, but it also provides opportunities for progress.

That Biden has signaled he does not plan to focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace at the outset is welcome news. He faces far more pressing global challenges, and he probably recognizes that the same obstacles to peace that bedeviled his predecessors remain. They include a Palestinian side that largely rejects the reality of Israel, and an Israeli side that feels burned by Palestinian leaders who have rejected numerous offers of statehood and, at those moments, opted for more violence.

Perhaps, too, Biden recognizes what recent events have confirmed: Israeli-Palestinian peace never was the key to broader Arab-Israeli peace. To its chilly peace deals with Egypt and Jordan, Israel now has warmer and potentially broader deals with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. These Arab nations are driven by the economic and military benefits of engaging with Israel, and by the fears they share with it over a threatening Iran.

For his part, Biden says that he sees Iran with clear eyes. But events of recent days nevertheless offer a timely reminder of why a return to Obama-style engagement with the radical regime may prove so fruitless.

The incoming president wants to rejoin the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, which President Trump left in 2018, but he then wants to craft a broader agreement to restrict Iran's missile program and rein in its other threatening activities. Yet while Tehran says it would rejoin the 2015 agreement, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has asserted that the regime won't negotiate over its ballistic missile program. Over the weekend, meanwhile, Tehran executed a prominent dissident journalist it seized last year in Paris, and then defended its actions and summoned French and German diplomats for a formal demarche after their governments criticized the execution — making clear that the regime remains a global outlaw.

Biden and Netanyahu, who dismisses the original nuclear agreement as too weak to block Iran's path to nuclear weaponry, may never agree on that and some other issues, but they would be wise to recognize the political pressures that each faces.

Though Netanyahu heads a shaky right-wing coalition and governs a deeply divided country, he also presides over an Israeli population that was unusually united on one issue: favoring Trump over Biden last month.

That's because — among other initiatives that delighted Netanyahu — Trump moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem; recognized the Golan Heights as part of Israel; designated the global boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS) movement against Israel as anti-Semitic; and proposed an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that gave Israel what it sought while leaving the other side seething.

It's also because Israelis fear a return to the Obama administration's style of pressuring Israeli leaders to make sizeable concessions in order to spur Israel-Palestinian peace, and of lecturing them about how best to protect their nation. That approach led to a marked downturn in the "special relationship" between Jerusalem and Washington during Obama's time in office.

To help avoid a return to the frosty U.S.-Israeli ties of the Obama era, strengthen bipartisan support for Israel in Washington, and reduce Israeli fears about what's to come, Biden would be wise to treat America's closest regional ally with respect in public and air his concerns with it in private.

At the same time, Netanyahu must recognize the pressures that Biden faces.

While Biden is a longstanding Israel backer, he presides over a party that has moved markedly leftward on foreign affairs — and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rank-and-file Democrats increasingly tilt toward the Palestinian side. Netanyahu would be wise to avoid strident moves, such as major expansions of Jewish settlements in contested areas, that would prompt Democratic lawmakers to pressure Biden to respond.

The Israeli leader also would be wise not to challenge Biden stridently over the nuclear agreement. Netanyahu's speech to Congress of early 2015, in which he blasted the agreement that Obama was spearheading, left more than a few Democrats deeply offended. That he accepted an invitation from Republican leaders to speak and bypassed the White House in the process made matters worse.

For decades, America's close military, diplomatic, economic, and other ties with Israel have generated vast benefits for both sides. At a time of such hopeful change but also serious challenge across the Middle East, it's a relationship that each should nourish carefully, avoiding the unnecessary missteps that can cause significant damage.

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