

POLITICS

Joe and Bibi talked, but what does it all mean? Biden and Israel, the scorecard.

BY RON KAMPEAS FEBRUARY 22, 2021



President Joe Biden, speaking from the White House at a virtual event hosted by the Munich Security Conference, said the U.S. and its allies must address Iran's destabilizing influence, Feb. 19, 2021. (Anna Moneymaker-Pool/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Four weeks into his presidency, Joe Biden spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the “scandal” over the new U.S. leader’s failure to pick up the phone came to a quick and cheerful close.

The end of the “will he call?” controversy on Wednesday was evident in Netanyahu’s grin in the photo his office sent to the media to announce the phone call, which lasted an hour.

But the scrutiny of the Biden-Israel relationship is just beginning. How the two sides summarized the call was evidence of where they stand on critical issues, including Iran and the peace process.

Netanyahu's summary spoke of peace in broad strokes. Biden mentioned the Palestinians, while Netanyahu did not.

Netanyahu celebrated his long personal friendship with Biden. The president spoke of his longstanding friendship with Israel.

Netanyahu said they chatted for an hour. Biden's team did not list a time.

Netanyahu attached a photograph to his statement. Biden did not.

More subtly, the readouts, and a series of statements by top Biden officials, depict a tentativeness on all sides: Netanyahu seems eager to show that he is at ease with a Democratic president after being one of Donald Trump's most eager boosters for four years. Biden seems intent on differentiating himself on Middle East policy not only from Trump but from his predecessor, Barack Obama, who Biden served as vice president.

Notable, too, are the differences in tone, with Biden officials showing a greater willingness to adopt the language that pleases Netanyahu and the center-right pro-Israel community in the United States, including robust rejections of the boycott Israel movement.

There is agreement on advancing the normalization agreements that Trump brokered between Israel and four Sunni Arab states, the so-called Abraham Accords. There are sharp differences, however, over whether and how the U.S. should rejoin the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that Netanyahu detested and Trump left in 2018.

Israeli-Palestinian peace: Not now — who knows when?

Biden has plenty on his plate, his defenders say, but even once he gets it clean, reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace talks is not likely to be a priority.

His team emphatically embraces the two-state outcome, whereas Trump and his Middle East team equivocated on whether their endgame included Palestinian statehood.

But the likelihood of a Washington-led push for Israeli-Palestinian talks is remote. Biden has stacked his team with Obama alumni, and privately they say they were burned by the two failed peace pushes made by the former president, in 2009-10 and 2013-14, and aren't eager to play with fire again.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a deputy secretary of state and a deputy national security adviser under Obama, said the initiative this time around has to come from the parties rather than Washington.

“We need to engage on that. But in the first instance, the parties in question need to engage on that,” Blinken said Feb. 8 on CNN, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “Look, the hard truth is we are a long way I think from seeing peace break out and seeing a final resolution of the problems between Israel and the Palestinians and the creation of a Palestinian state.”

That won't stop Biden from reestablishing relations with the Palestinians mostly severed by the Trump administration, although there are logistical challenges.

Biden wants to reopen the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington, D.C., as well as discrete office for Palestinian interests in Jerusalem. He also wants to restore U.S. assistance to the Palestinians through nongovernmental groups in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and through the Palestinian relief arm of the United Nations, UNRWA. Trump shut down all those areas of U.S.-Palestinian interaction.

Except when it comes to UNRWA, Biden faces obstacles.

A recent law forbids the PLO office from reopening unless the Palestinian Authority drops its criminal complaints against Israelis in the International Criminal Court. Reopening a dedicated consulate to the Palestinians in Jerusalem may face opposition from the Israeli government. And in order to deliver assistance to the Palestinians, Biden must work around U.S. statutes that ban assistance to the P.A. as long as it compensates the families of Palestinians who killed Israelis or Americans — what Israelis call “pay for slay.”

The Abraham Accords: Yes please, but pass the carrots

The Biden administration has embraced the pact, but has frozen some of the incentives Trump proffered to the Sunni Arab states, including the sale of stealth combat jets to the United Arab Emirates.

Warnings that such freezes would undercut the accords have not borne out: The UAE last week named its ambassador to Israel.

The tone: Words matter

During the Obama years, Netanyahu and his backers in the United States wanted not only to *see* robust assistance to Israel — which came, unstintingly, in generous defense packages — but to *hear* robust defenses of Israel.

Those at times were hard to come by. In 2011, for example, the then-ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, vetoed a resolution that would have condemned Israel's settlement policies, but also spoke at length about why the United States opposes Israel's settlement policy. Israel welcomed the veto, but felt her remarks undid the goodwill.

Biden's tone is notably different. Unlike Trump, his team will comment on Israel's settlement moves, and it restored the Obama-era practice of calling on Israel and the Palestinians to “refrain from taking unilateral steps.”

But there's a Biden-era twist to the boilerplate.

Biden officials routinely warn against “annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolitions” on Israel's part, and “incitement to violence, and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism” on the Palestinian side. Obama officials did not include such specifics when warning against unilateral moves.

Specifying “pay for slay” is a particular nod to the Israelis and how galling they find the practice.

Similarly, Obama administration diplomats made clear in private with other countries that it was opposed to Israel boycotts, but less so in public. Biden appears set to make his opposition to the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment movement public in a big way, at least according to his nominee for U.N. ambassador.

“The actions and the approach that BDS has taken toward Israel is unacceptable,” Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in her Senate confirmation hearing. “It verges on anti-Semitism and it is important that they not be allowed to have a voice at the United Nations.”

Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights: Definitely, maybe

Trump recognized Israel’s claim to Jerusalem as its capital and its claim to sovereignty in the Golan Heights. The peace plan released a year ago by Trump’s aide and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, recognized Israel’s claim to parts of the West Bank.

Biden is walking some of it back — but not all the way. He’s warning Israel not to unilaterally change the status of the West Bank, but on other issues his team is treading lightly.

Trump moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem; asked on CNN if he regards Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Blinken replied, “I do, yes. And more importantly, we do.” That distinguishes Biden from other candidates in the Democratic primaries who depicted the embassy move more as a *fait accompli* than something to be embraced.

Blinken equivocated slightly when asked the same question about Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

“Look, leaving aside the legalities of that question, as a practical matter, the Golan is very important to Israel’s security,” Blinken said. “As long as Assad is in power in Syria, as long as Iran is present in Syria, militia groups backed by Iran, the Assad regime itself – all of these pose a significant security threat to Israel, and as a practical matter, the control of the Golan in that situation I think remains of real importance to Israel’s security.”

“Legal questions are something else. And over time, if the situation were to change in Syria, that’s something we’d look at. But we are nowhere near at that.”

A number of right-wing eyebrows were raised by Blinken questioning the legality of Israel’s claim, but the bottom line is that Israel’s control of the strategic plateau was not an issue for now. Another notable element of Blinken’s reply: the hint that Israel’s security concerns would be a priority in considering Syria policy. That was not explicit with Trump or Obama.

Iran deal: Heading back, with a heads up

On Thursday, Blinken met with his counterparts from Britain, France and Germany. They issued a joint statement calling for talks with Iran to order to return to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Netanyahu, who opposed the deal, immediately voiced concern.

“Israel believes that going back to the old agreement will pave Iran’s path to a nuclear arsenal,” he said. “Israel is in close contact with the United States on this matter.”

The second sentence may have been the more significant and explained why there otherwise were no fireworks: Netanyahu and Biden had discussed Iran in their Wednesday call, and Biden likely gave him a heads up.

Those advance warnings were missing during the two years leading up to the 2015 deal, greatly exacerbating the Obama-Netanyahu tensions. Biden officials say they will keep Israel informed.

Unlike Obama, Biden also seems ready to tie a nuclear deal to other issues: The new president wants to reenter the ’15 pact because he sees it as the best means to keep Iran from going nuclear, but Biden also

wants to simultaneously roll back Iran's missile program and decelerate its regional adventurism, which includes sponsoring terror groups and proxies throughout the Middle East.

"We must address Iran's destabilizing activities across the Middle East," Biden said Friday in an address to the Munich Security Conference. "We will work with our European and other partners as we proceed."

International forums: The room where it happens

Thomas-Greenfield is promising a robust pro-Israel defense as ambassador to the United Nations.

"I look forward to standing with Israel, standing against the unfair targeting of Israel, the relentless resolutions that are proposed against Israel unfairly," she said in her Senate testimony.

Biden scored pro-Israel points early for swiftly rejecting an International Criminal Court decision to move ahead with prosecutions of Israelis.

"We have serious concerns about the ICC's attempts to exercise its jurisdiction over Israeli personnel," the State Department said in a statement.

But hawks are wary of the administration's emphasis on reengaging with the international community, especially its intention to rejoin the U.N. Human Rights Council, which Trump quit in part because of its anti-Israel bias. Biden officials are citing the Obama-era rationale for being inside the room: It's easier to roll back some of the bias, and the forum also is useful for holding bad actors accountable.

"The best way to improve the Council, so it can achieve its potential, is through robust and principled U.S. leadership," Blinken said on Twitter.

