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Israel Must Prepare for a Biden Presidency

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As the only contender remaining in the primary race, former Vice President Joe Biden is the presumed Democratic nominee for United States president in 2020. Biden will likely seek to maintain his centrist voter base while also recruiting supporters from the younger, activist wing of the Democratic Party by making concessions in domestic policy rather than foreign policy. Biden is a longstanding supporter of Israel, but should he emerge victorious in November there might be tension with the government of Israel on two key issues: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iran nuclear threat. The government of Israel would do well to reach out as soon as possible to Biden and his advisers in order to open a channel for discreet policy discussion that could serve as a basis for trust and mutual respect between the two leaders and their teams. At the same time, if it hopes to reestablish sweeping bipartisan support for US-Israel relations in Washington, Israel must take great care to avoid steps likely to be construed in Washington as partisan during an election season when political polarization is already heightened. These steps could minimize the degree to which foreseeable points of contention are disruptive to the broader US-Israel relationship should Biden assume the Oval Office.

Former Vice President Joe Biden secured his position as the presumed Democratic Party nominee for President after his last remaining rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders, bowed out of the race on April 8, 2020 and then endorsed him. It is now important to consider how Biden's policy platform may evolve in advance of general elections and the potential implications for Israeli national interests if he is elected.

The coronavirus crisis will alter both the subject matter and mechanics of the upcoming presidential election campaign. In terms of content, Biden will make his critique of the Trump administration's response to the pandemic central to his campaign, along with his plans to help the nation recover from the health and economic crises. In addition, the logistics of running for office "virtually" in the era of social distancing will place Biden at a distinct disadvantage because he lacks Trump's massive online presence and ability to use the White House as a backdrop to make news.

Leading Democrats are calling for party unity as they head into election season. The goal of maximizing his electoral reach will require Biden to strike a difficult balance between appealing to his base and swing voters in key states as a moderate while also engaging with the demands of the younger, and more activist wing of the Democratic Party. Biden's initial step to address this issue was to formulate joint task forces, consisting of both Biden and Sanders policy advisors, in order to reach compromise positions on domestic issues like healthcare, the economy, and education, while maintaining his own longstanding centrist foreign policy. The logic behind this is twofold. First, given the important role that domestic policy has played in the Democratic primaries, these appear to be significant concessions that warrant endorsements from more progressive candidates and their supporters. Second, in practice, because major domestic policy initiatives that require federal funding are dependent on Congressional approval (which appears unlikely in the current polarized climate in Washington) rather than White House executive orders, they do not infringe on the key domain of the president's prerogative that is foreign policy.

In terms of foreign policy, it remains unclear how Biden's "restorationist" approach might be implemented if he wins the November 2020 election. However, his campaign has [outlined](#) some guiding principles: returning to international agreements, reinvigorating longstanding alliances, lightening the US military footprint in the Middle East, and prioritizing the promotion and defense of democracy. From the Israeli perspective, Biden's policies with the greatest potential to affect national security are those relating to Israel directly, particularly in reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iran, particularly in reference to the Iran nuclear issue.

Throughout his long career in elected office, Biden has expressed strong fondness and appreciation for Israel in both moral and strategic terms. He has characterized himself as a [Zionist](#) and described other Democratic candidates' positions of [leveraging, conditioning](#), or diverting the annual \$3.8 billion US foreign assistance package to Israel as a "[gigantic mistake](#)." That said, in 2014, Biden acknowledged his divergence from Prime Minister Netanyahu on issues of substance when he said, "[Bibi I don't agree with a damn thing you say but I love you](#)." Despite a friendship that dates to the 1980s, the personal relationship between Biden and Netanyahu may be [less sanguine today](#) than it was six years ago, among other reasons because Netanyahu's March 2015 speech to Congress in opposition to the Iran nuclear deal was seen by the [White House as a flagrant act of disrespect](#).

Significant policy differences on the Palestinian issue between a Biden administration and Israel's [recently announced national unity](#) government will likely persist. The [former Vice President stated in August 2019](#) that, "we have to put pressure constantly on the Israelis to move to a two-state solution." Yet the coalition agreement between Likud and Blue and White, which is the foundation for the new Israeli government, permits Netanyahu to raise

the issue of annexing or extending Israeli law to sections of the West Bank as of July 1, 2020. Because such steps are viewed by Washington's foreign policy establishment as disrupting or even preventing progress toward a two-state solution, any unilateral annexation initiatives in the West Bank by Israel under the auspices of Trump's "deal of the century" (before or during Biden's tenure) would aggravate tensions with a future Biden administration. Other steps taken by the Trump administration favoring Israel in the Palestinian arena, including recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital and transfer of the US embassy there, are expected to be modified though not fully reversed by a Biden administration. A [Biden campaign spokesman implied](#) that a future administration would seek to return to the longstanding formula of an Israeli capital in West Jerusalem and a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem when he explained that, "Vice President Biden would not move the American embassy back to Tel Aviv...But he would re-open our consulate in East Jerusalem to engage the Palestinians."

Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, [Biden stated](#), "If Iran moves back into compliance with its nuclear obligations, I would re-enter the JCPOA as a starting point to work alongside our allies in Europe and other world powers to extend the deal's nuclear constraints." Israel will likely disapprove of this approach, in part because the structure of the agreement does not allow the White House to simply roll the clock back and return to the conditions of 2017 prior to Trump's withdrawal. Key restrictions on Iran begin to expire in 2021 and continue to do so through 2030, and [some of Iran's nuclear research and development activities](#) undertaken in violation of the agreement are not reversible. The domestic political context would also make it difficult for any Israeli Prime Minister to accept Biden's approach, following Netanyahu's repeated and public warnings that the deal will result in "[Iran with a nuclear arsenal in a very short time](#)" and his encouraging Trump to withdraw from the agreement. In any event, given that Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA exposed the frailty of executive orders, it is difficult to envision how Biden would not only return to the agreement but could credibly extend it beyond 2030 without approval as a treaty from the US Senate – such approval does not appear forthcoming in light of the current partisan and polarized environment in Washington.

In the broader strategic perspective, global dynamics have undoubtedly changed since President Obama left office in January 2017, and simply enacting policies to reverse steps taken by the Trump administration could prove ineffective or even self-defeating. US allies and partners are more aware than ever that developing long term dependence on Washington, which requires a level of consistency and continuity between presidential tenures that has been lacking, could compromise their national interests. Paradoxically, if Biden were to assume office and immediately roll out executive orders to restore US global leadership by reversing Trump's positions, it would serve to underline the extreme policy fluctuations that have defined recent US presidential transitions.

To ensure the continuity of strong US-Israel relations regardless of the outcome of the US presidential elections in November 2020, Israel must prepare for the possibility of a Biden presidency. As soon as it can do so, Israel should make a concerted effort to establish a channel to the presumed Democratic nominee and his advisors in order to discuss policy issues discreetly and seek to build trust. For example, the channel could be used to discuss the prospect of a parallel US-Israel agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue, including red lines and coordination of the responsibilities, in order to allay some of Jerusalem's concerns regarding a possible US return to the JCPOA under Biden. At the same time, in order to promote the restoration of [broad bipartisan US support for Israel](#), Israel must take great care to avoid steps likely to be construed as partisan in Washington during an election season when political polarization is heightened. Careful outreach could prove critical to ensuring that the relationship is not soured or disrupted when policy differences arise – as they inevitably do in all bilateral relations.