

**The Changing of the Guard: Israel at the Outset of the Biden Era**

**Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Eldad Shavit**

**Former Vice President Joe Biden has been elected President of the United States. While millions of votes were still being counted, President Trump declared victory and stated that he would appeal to the Supreme Court to stop the counting process. From the outset, Biden will have to immediately devote himself to domestic issues, after four years in which racial tensions reached their worst point in decades and the spread of the coronavirus wreaked enormous damage on public health and the economy. Israel's analysis of the incoming administration's anticipated conduct should factor in Biden's choice of Senator Kamala Harris as vice president, internal tensions in the Democratic Party, and the Party's embrace of multilateralism. The end of Trump's tenure requires Israeli adjustments, such as strategic efforts to create bipartisanship over Israel-related issues; efforts to broaden lines of communication with Democratic figures and the American-Jewish community, and dialogue to coordinate expectations with the administration vis-à-vis US conduct on regional and international issues that affect Israel.**

Former Vice President Joe Biden won the US presidential election after a close and divisive race. The deep rift in American society is reflected in President Trump's undermining of US democracy by declaring victory despite many uncanceled votes in battleground states, his call to stop the voting process, and his stated intention to appeal to the Supreme Court because, in his words, this "is a fraud on the American public." On the other hand, the Biden-led Democratic Party failed to secure a sweeping "blue" victory.

Despite overall global uncertainty and the influence that shifting priorities may have on the Biden administration, from the outset attention and resources will presumably be dedicated to "healing the soul of America" – in accordance with the [Democratic Party platform](#). This objective seems paramount against the backdrop of four years in which racial tensions peaked, and the spread of coronavirus resulted in over 220,000 American deaths, as well as economic and public health crises.

These developments have also left their mark on the Jewish community in the United States, which has experienced increasing antisemitism. In this respect it is noteworthy that Biden asserted that a significant catalyst to his decision to run for president was Trump's

flaccid condemnation of the 2017 antisemitic march in Charlottesville, led by neo-Nazis. The Democratic platform mentions antisemitism twice, both times in the context of the struggle against other forms of hatred, including against Muslims.

Attempts to anticipate policies and conduct of the incoming Biden administration should factor in three points: Biden's choice of Senator Kamala Harris as vice president; internal tensions in the Democratic Party; and the Party's embrace of multilateralism and the use of diplomatic tools as a means of boosting US soft power in the international arena. In this latter context, [the Biden administration](#), in contrast to its predecessor, can be expected to step up global cooperation with US allies.

Beyond energizing potential voters through the precedent-setting appointment of a woman of color for the prestigious position, Biden's choice of Senator Kamala Harris signals a policy directive, given that Harris is deeply rooted in the party's moderate flank. Although vice presidents do not traditionally wield great clout, the Harris pick is significant for the Democratic Party's future policy line because Biden (nearing 78) will likely not continue to a second term – positioning Harris as the 2024 presidential candidate.

As for intra-party tensions: The President-elect will likely fill important positions with Obama administration veterans who represent party moderates, even as pressure from the progressive flank – on both domestic and foreign affairs – can be expected. Lessons about the intra-party dynamic can be drawn from reports on the drafting of the [Democratic Party platform](#), and the final published version. On matters connected to Israel, the platform attests to the power of the moderates: the word "occupation" has been omitted and there is unequivocal opposition to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) campaign that seeks to isolate Israel internationally. The intra-party negotiation left its mark, however, with the assertion not to violate the right to free expression – including the right to boycott. Another change to the party platform from 2016 is in the clear opposition to Israeli annexation of Palestinian territory, although this has wall-to-wall backing within the party and is not a result of internal negotiations. Nevertheless, the election results (particularly if the Democrats do not have a majority in the Senate) may force Biden to cooperate with moderate Republicans – against the will of the progressive Democratic wing – in order to promote legislative initiatives.

On issues regarding Israel, President-elect Biden ascribes strategic importance to bilateral relations with Israel and has already proven to be its great ally. Campaign pledges indicate that Biden will remain committed to preserve Israel's [qualitative military edge](#) (QME), will not [condition continued defense assistance on a change in Israeli policy](#), and will not move [the US Embassy from its Jerusalem site](#). It also appears that Biden will not hasten to offer his own proposal to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – at least with no change in

Palestinian leadership. Biden can be expected to maintain support for the process of normalization with Arab countries, even if less generous with American "payouts." As such, Biden's approach to Saudi Arabia – which is considered the most important actor for completing the process – is more critical than Trump's. On the other hand, Riyadh may have an interest in granting the new President the "gift" of normalization as a means to iron out tensions, following fierce criticism of Saudi actions by the Democrats.

In relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Biden administration can be expected to reaffirm principles of past Democratic administrations and reinstate the vision of two states for two peoples as the preferred resolution to the conflict; to reopen the PLO representative office in Washington; and to condemn unilateral Israeli measures, beside annexation initiatives, that have drawn no response from the Trump administration. These include settlement expansions and the demolition of Palestinian buildings, whether as an Israeli response to terrorism or to Palestinian construction in Area C. The administration can be expected to view this stance as contributing to the US ability to resume its role an acceptable mediator to the Palestinians, as well as to Israel.

The Iran issue will likely be the focus of the administration's Middle East policy. [In an opinion piece](#) published during the campaign, Biden outlined his commitment to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons and to return the United States to the JCPOA if Iran fulfills its obligations, as outlined in the agreement. All this, however, is a precursor to continued negotiations – together with European partners – to extend the limits stipulated in the deal, and address regional tensions in a revised agreement. Biden has been opaque on the Iranian demand, presented as a precondition for entering negotiations, that all sanctions are lifted and compensation is made for the consequences of the re-imposed US sanctions. In any scenario, whether negotiations are renewed or Iran takes further escalatory steps, Israel should anticipate gaps between its interests and those of the United States.

In the international arena, Biden can be expected to restore US partnership in the Paris Agreement on climate change and bolster alliances with traditional partners in the West in general, and in Western Europe in particular. In the UN, relatively swift action can be expected with regard to two agencies: a halt to the exit from the World Health Organization (WHO), and a return to the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) – similar to when President Barack Obama returned the United States to the Council after his predecessor, President George W. Bush, withdrew the United States from it. Both inside and outside the UN, the Biden administration will be swayed by the competition-cum-rivalry with China. On that count, there is no significant difference between the Democratic and Republican perceptions of the threat posed by China, and the Democratic Party platform includes an

assertion that under certain circumstances, "aggressive action" can be taken against Beijing.

Bottom line: The conclusion of Donald Trump's presidency and the election of Joe Biden necessitate adjustments by Israel. First, a communications strategy with the new administration must strive to restore Israel to a matter of bipartisan consensus in a riven United States. As such, Israel should broaden open communication lines with elected Democratic Party officials, as well as with the US Jewish community. Second, expectations must be coordinated and close work undertaken between Israeli and American teams on US regional policy in the Middle East – from the threat posed to Israel by Iran, to a continued normalization process, to challenges posed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Third, regarding US international re-engagement, questions pertaining to trade and cooperation between Israel and China should be fleshed out; similarly, US re-entry to UN bodies should ideally be coordinated such that where relevant, this is done gradually and key budgets are conditioned on functional reform and the repair of shortfalls that generate an automatic bias against Israel. Finally, should US policy not square with Israeli government policy, it is important that Israel's response uphold two guidelines. One, the bilateral relationship with the United States is an asset of utmost significance for Israel regionally and internationally. A Biden administration will view Israel as an important ally in the Middle East, and it is in Israel's interest to cultivate and bolster the connection even when there are disagreements. Two, any public rebuke of the Democratic administration by Israel will widen the existing rift with the US and with various parts of the Jewish community, which – beyond the ethical-historical ramification – constitutes an important facet of the connection between the countries.

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*INSS intern Joshua Kadish contributed to this article.*