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The Strategic Implications of Joe Biden's Victory
INSS Conference Summary

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A panel discussion was held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) to assess the main implications of Joe Biden's victory for United States policy, with an emphasis on the Middle East, and to formulate insights on the steps Israel should take. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to internalize quickly that the reality has changed, and Israel must therefore adapt its policy to the evolving American policy, as well as to the style of the new President and administration. Much importance was attached by the conference participants to Israel helping (even during the transition period) shape the incoming administration's policy on Iran, which could become a major issue of dispute between the two countries. The dialogue with the new administration should be conducted discreetly, avoiding both criticism and public advice, and above all, provocative steps.

On November 24, 2020, a conference was held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) entitled: "A New Middle East? Israel and the Region in the Biden Era." The discussion focused on several issues: the impact of elections on United States priorities; expected changes in US foreign policy; the expected policy toward the Middle East; the regional response to the election results; and implications and recommendations for Israel.

The conference was moderated by Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun. Participants included Ambassador Dan Shapiro, Distinguished Visiting fellow at INSS and former US Ambassador to Israel; Dr. Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky, a research fellow at INSS; Dr. Eran Lerman, Vice President of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, formerly in senior positions in the National Security Council and the IDF and a lecturer at the Shalem Academic Center; Tal Schneider, *Globes* political correspondent and expert on the United States; Brig. Gen. (ret.) Assaf Orion, senior research fellow at INSS and former head of the Strategic Division in the IDF Planning Directorate; Sima Shine, senior research fellow and head of the Iran program at INSS, formerly head of research at the Mossad; Dr. Shira Efron, senior research fellow at INSS; Col. (res.) Eldad Shavit, senior research fellow at INSS and head of the program on the United States; and Maj. Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin, Executive Director of INSS.

The Domestic Arena and United States Priorities

Joe Biden will be inaugurated as President of the United States on January 20, 2021. President Trump and his administration, who have so far denied the election results, are slowly showing signs of internalizing and coming to terms with the outcome. It seems that most of the focus and resources, at least early in the new administration's term and possibly throughout 2021, will be invested in the effort to "heal America's soul." The administration will deal with the coronavirus pandemic, the economic situation, and social polarization. Special emphasis will be given to the United States' return to international climate agreements, after the Trump administration withdrew from them. Evidence of the importance that Biden attaches to this issue can be seen in his appointment of John Kerry, Secretary of State under President Obama, as a special envoy on climate issues. In his [first interview](#) following the election, Biden told NBC that in his first 100 days in the White House he will focus on repealing Trump's immigration policy and addressing the pandemic. Biden noted that he was considering appointing a Republican to the cabinet: "I will need their support." He said: "[This will not be] a third Obama term. We face a totally different world than we faced in the Obama-Biden administration. President Trump has changed the landscape. It's become America First. It's been America alone."

The administration's transition will take time, and for now the President-elect has [announced a series of appointments to posts focusing mainly on foreign affairs and national security issues](#). The Biden administration, perhaps unlike its predecessor, will adopt traditional patterns of action, and the policy it will formulate on various issues is expected to be based on orderly decision making processes. The impression is that the Biden appointees so far are professionals who are not pushing political agendas, and who have worked with the President-elect for many years. It is likely that in the future as well, they will make sure to work as a team. The new administration will be challenged by its ability to advance the legislative agenda in Congress. In the House of Representatives the Democratic majority has been reduced, and the Senate remains undecided, with two races in Georgia lying ahead. Biden is known to "know" how to work with Republicans, but it is likely that the bad blood between the two parties will be palpable. In addition, the President-elect and other senior government officials are expected to face ongoing pressure from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, on both domestic and foreign policy issues.

The Biden Administration's Expected Foreign Policy

The President-elect and his team have stressed that the new administration will chart a change of direction vis-à-vis the international community, by restoring the American role in the global arena and renewing multilateral cooperation. The administration has already begun a process with the purpose of restoring US relations with its traditional allies, especially in Europe. At the same time, the United States will return to international agreements from which the Trump administration withdrew and renew its cooperation with the international institutions that were neglected. The new administration is careful to emphasize that there are issues that can only be resolved by way of joint cooperation.

Beyond that, the new administration will also have to deal with superpower competition, and especially with the challenges posed by China and Russia to the United States. There is not much difference in the perception of this threat between Democrats and Republicans. However, the Biden administration is expected to adopt a less aggressive approach than that taken by the previous administration.

Middle East Policy

The Biden administration will likely continue the trend that began in the Obama era and continued in the Trump era, and thus reduced American involvement in the Middle East is expected to continue, though perhaps changed in terms of how US interests are managed. Regarding Israel, President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris attach strategic importance to this bilateral relationship and have, in practice, already proven in the past that they are great friends of Israel. Based on his statements during the election campaign, it can be understood that Biden will remain [committed to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge](#) (QME), will not hinge continued provision of security assistance on a change in Israeli policy, [and is not expected to move the United States Embassy from Jerusalem.](#)

However, gaps between the Biden administration and Israel may arise on a number of issues:

- a. *Iran* is expected to be the focus of the administration's policy in the Middle East. The administration will seek to find ways to rejuvenate the JCPOA, which the Trump administration exited in May 2018. [In an opinion piece](#) published on CNN during the campaign (September), Biden laid out his policy in this regard and pledged to act to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He also stated that if Iran returns to abide by the agreement, the United States will do the same, as a point of entry into negotiations intended (also according to the European partnership in the nuclear agreements) to extend the restrictions included in the renewed agreement and address Iran's surface-to-surface arsenal and regional tensions in the Middle East. Biden has given a vague response to the Iranian demand that is presented as a precondition for entering into negotiations – the removal of all sanctions and compensation for the consequences of US sanctions since they were re-imposed.
- b. *Settlement with the Palestinians*: Biden will not be in a hurry to make his own proposals, certainly as long as there is no change in Palestinian leadership. It is not clear to what extent the incoming administration will see a basis for renewing the political process of the "Deal of the Century" or its components, formulated during the Trump era. Biden will likely continue to support the process of promoting normalization between Israel and the Arab states, even if his administration may be less generous than the Trump administration in the American "payment" for establishing relations with Israel. Biden's approach to Saudi Arabia – which is considered the most important actor in furthering the trend – is more critical than that adopted by Trump.

- c. *Israel-China relations*: The principal tension between the United States and Israel relating to China concerns China's investments in Israeli infrastructure and technologies. Therefore, Israel must take a closer look at the red lines of Biden's advisers regarding investment and transfer of technology and knowledge, focusing on the leading technology areas in the US-China competition, in which Israel is expected to limit its cooperation with Beijing. Israel must also seize the opportunity inherent in the Democrats' premise of the right to leverage alliances, and position itself as a key partner of the United States in the broader context of US-China relations. To do so, it must demonstrate adherence to US concerns through increasing oversight of Chinese investments in certain areas.

Iran's Preparations for the Biden administration

Biden's election was accompanied by a sigh of relief in Tehran – more over Donald Trump's loss than Joe Biden's victory – despite the fact that it is not yet clear to the Iranian leadership how the new administration will approach Iran. In the Iranian political system, there is a heated debate around the question of returning to negotiations with the United States on the nuclear agreement: the main dilemma for Tehran is whether to take advantage of Biden's election and his interest in rebuilding the nuclear deal to improve Iran's situation, or to insist on changes and risk an impasse. In the meantime, the primary demands are: complete removal of sanctions as a condition for returning to abide by the agreement and compensation for the damages caused by the sanctions, as well as objection to renegotiation of the 2015 agreement, which Iran presents as a *fait accompli*. Meanwhile, the nuclear program is progressing, albeit not very quickly, and due to the short period of time between Biden's entry into the White House (January 2021) and the Iranian presidential elections (June 2021), it is highly doubtful whether agreements that will substantially change the current trend can be advanced.

Significance and Recommendations for Israel

After four years of the Trump administration, during which Israel had considerable influence over United States policy, Jerusalem will have to adjust to the new reality and formulate an updated strategy for its engagement with the team that will shape the foreign policy of the incoming administration. Although Biden is considered a friend of Israel, his government is expected to be suspicious of the Israeli government's intentions due to the tensions with the Obama administration at the end of its tenure and the intimacy between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Trump. Both sides need to learn to work together again, and it is likely that the new administration will be interested in getting off “on the right foot.” Therefore, it is very important that Israel too meet with the new administration with honesty and transparency. It is important to internalize quickly that the reality has changed, and that conduct must be adapted to the changing American policy and to how the incoming President and the new administration conduct themselves.

At least in the coming months, Israel would do well to maintain a dialogue with the new government discreetly, while avoiding both criticism and public advice, and especially

provocative steps. It should refrain from appearing to try to bypass the administration through Congress, especially if the Republican majority in the Senate is retained.

It is important that Israel prioritize the issues that will be raised for discussion. The focus should be on Iran, where disagreements are likely to arise. Israel must present measures that can be promoted, not just focus on rejecting ideas raised by the administration. Gaps are also expected to arise on the Palestinian issue. In this context, the Israeli strategy should focus on the effort to persuade the new administration to preserve the positive components of the "Deal of the Century," while ensuring that the administration does not reject the entire plan to dismantle Trump's legacy. Israel is advised to work to coordinate regional policy, especially in the context of the steps it is taking to curb Iranian expansion. On the other hand, disagreements with the government are not expected in the context of progress in the normalization process with countries in the region, although the government may to some extent object to issuing rewards due to the importance it attaches to the issue of human rights. Israel must also adjust its relationship with the United States to the competition between the superpowers and increase bilateral technological cooperation to the point of creating a technological alliance that will be at the forefront of the superpower competition.

In addition, it is important to invest immediately in a vigorous effort to restore relations with the Democratic Party, including establishing open lines of communication with the party's elected representatives, as well as with the Jewish community in the United States. The goal is to adjust what is perceived as Israel's identification with the Republican Party and correct the loss of bipartisan status.

In conclusion, the Biden administration is just beginning its preparations for taking office, and due to the centrality of challenging internal issues it will be some time before it turns to foreign affairs. Even in dealing with foreign affairs, the Middle East is unlikely to be at the top of its priorities, as it will have to focus primarily on restoring US relations with traditional allies, and conversely, with the challenge posed by China. As for the Middle East, Trump remains in office for the next several weeks and actions the outgoing president may take to establish his legacy (possibly in the Iranian arena or an attempt to encourage normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia) will affect the opening conditions under which the new administration launches its policy in the region. However, the roles already staffed by Biden are indicative of a careful approach that seeks dialogue. Biden himself and his associates reflect a bipartisan view of Israel, and Israel must leverage this to establish close relations with them. Israel's involvement in shaping the new administration's policy toward Iran is of paramount importance.