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## **Israel Must Talk to Biden**

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**Following the recent elections in the United States, President-elect Joe Biden declared the incoming administration's intention to return to the nuclear deal and lift the sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration if Tehran returns to full compliance with its commitments as part of the agreement. However, senior administration officials appear willing to discuss the matter in consultation with US allies in the Middle East, and in particular with Israel. In the dialogue that is expected to take place with the administration, Israel must formulate realistic and professional working assumptions, present constructive positions on the basis of these assumptions, and maintain discretion as well as honest and transparent conduct. Israel's course of action will likely help determine the consideration it receives from the administration, its impact on policy, and the nature of relations between the two governments over time.**

In advance of Joe Biden's inauguration, the question of the future of US policy on Iran has gained prominence in the public and political discourse in Washington, the international community, and the regional arena. The incoming administration has likely not yet fully formulated its strategy on Iran, but a number of statements suggest the cornerstones of its expected policy, including its approach to the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), from which the United States withdrew during President Trump's tenure.

Following the November 2020 election, [President-elect Biden](#), [Secretary of State-designate Tony Blinken](#), and [National Security Adviser-designate Jake Sullivan](#) have reiterated that the new administration intends to return to the nuclear deal and lift the sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration on the condition Iran returns to full compliance with the agreement. They promised that negotiations would then open for a follow-on agreement, which would extend the term of the restrictions imposed on Iran. In a recent interview, Biden stressed the importance of uranium enrichment restrictions, but averred that Iran's missile program and subversive activity in the Middle East should be addressed as well. The measures to persuade Iran to return to the negotiating table after returning to the JCPOA have not been disclosed, but it has been emphasized that if Iran refuses to do so, it will once again find itself under the proven pressure of US sanctions. Even before the election, Sullivan promoted the establishment of a separate

negotiating track for actors in the Middle East to focus on regional issues, Iran's missile program and involvement in terror.

The administration relies on messages coming from Tehran that Iran would agree to return to comply with the dictates of the nuclear deal in exchange for the complete lifting of sanctions. For its part, there is no need to renegotiate anything but technicalities at most, primarily the synchronization of a reciprocal timetable for the removal of sanctions by the United States and the reversal of Iran's violations of the nuclear deal over the past year. The decision by the Iranian parliament, taken in response to the assassination of the leading nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, to adopt a law that will oblige the government to expand the nuclear program if sanctions are not lifted in about two months (including 20 percent enrichment and reducing cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] inspectors) has already given Iran leverage to pressure the Biden administration to hurry up and return to the nuclear deal.

Israel's starting assumption for formulating policy ahead of Biden's entry into the White House should be that even if the administration is still debating how to advance dialogue on the Iranian nuclear issue, it is already clear that it is interested in reviving and expanding the agreement. Experts at US research institutes close to the Democratic Party are aware of the administration's need for an initial orientation period, but worry about results of Iran's presidential election, scheduled for June 2021, and urge the new administration to reach agreements with Iran quickly to de-escalate tensions between the two countries.

Although senior members of the new administration present well-formulated opinions, they seem willing to discuss and consult on Iran and the nuclear issue with US allies in the Middle East, with an emphasis on Israel. Most likely, they will implement policies that will take into account concerns and interests presented to them. This is an administration with a different worldview from that of the Trump administration, and Israel, as well as the Gulf states, must internalize this and formulate policies accordingly. In this context, [the Saudi Foreign Minister's statement](#) that the nuclear agreement is insufficient and does not provide a solution regarding missiles and terror is noteworthy, as it included a constructive tone emphasizing that the United States is expected to consult with the Gulf states as part of the return to the deal.

Accordingly, the dialogue that Israel is expected to have with the United States on Iran should be based on the following principles:

- a. *Constructive positions*: The firm public position presented by the Israeli government that the nuclear agreement should not be revived and the "maximum pressure" policy on Iran should be continued is known to the new administration.

- However, presenting it in this way publicly and prematurely highlights the gaps between Israel and the incoming administration, and creates tension before the president-elect has even been inaugurated. It seems that the administration, which has not yet formulated an overall policy, is open to ideas, certainly those that will be phrased constructively, rather than negatively or destructively. In order to wield influence, Israel must formulate a uniform message on all political and professional levels that is focused on positive courses of action, such as conditional return to the agreement based on Iranian compliance with its dictates. At the same time, it must maintain the leverage of sanctions in order to reach an improved agreement that includes the extension of the terms of the agreement (on supervision, research and development, and enrichment), and restrictions on the missile project and support for terror. On the other hand, an Israeli denial that this is a new administration with a different policy from that of the outgoing administration, i.e., "fixation" on previous positions, may undermine Israel's ability to influence the administration and even spark a confrontation between Jerusalem and Washington from the outset.
- b. *Focused discourse*: The president-elect reiterates that the United States will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. In his view, the nuclear deal serves this purpose and therefore the United States must return to it as soon as possible. Beyond that, the new administration appears to be debating how to include the issue of Iran's missile arsenal and its regional activities in future agreements. Therefore, it is important that Israel formulate its concerns quickly, while taking into account that according to the new administration the return to the agreement is separate from demands of Iran regarding its missile program and regional activity. Thus, discourse on renewal of the agreement must be leveraged in order to discuss a new agreement that will also include additional requirements beyond the nuclear. These new items should be coordinated and presented with the Gulf states (for whom Iranian missile activity and regional subversion are the main and immediate threats). At the same time, Saudi Arabia may well be regarded negatively by the Biden administration and Congress, and therefore Israel will find it difficult to rely on it in attempting to influence the administration's position.
- c. *Discretion*: Messages should be conveyed directly to the US leadership, "through the usual channels," and certainly not through leaks or statements to the media. [Blinken recently emphasized](#) this in the Israeli context, noting that the administration is aware that there are different interests, but "Biden believes that disagreements between friends should be left behind closed doors. You do not want to put your friends and partners in a corner; you do not have to wash the dirty laundry outside." In the background of his statement is a memory of Israel's record vis-à-vis the Obama administration, when it conveyed messages in the

- media that embarrassed the administration and showcased the disputes between Washington and Jerusalem. Moreover, Israel expects reciprocal transparency with the US government and the avoidance of instances similar to the secret negotiations with Iran that were hidden from it in 2012.
- d. *"Clean hands"*: Immediately after the assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh, many in the United States saw the move as an expression of an Israeli intention to torpedo the new administration's return to the nuclear deal. Designated senior administration officials have refrained from criticizing the assassination, but President-elect [Biden said in an interview with CNN](#) that it is "difficult to know" how much the assassination will affect negotiations with Iran. The new administration's assessment that Israel is "in cahoots" with the Trump administration or is acting behind its back in an attempt to influence its decisions will make it very difficult for Israel to create the intimate dialogue necessary to influence decision making. Moreover, Biden's personal memories of Israeli conduct, including the [announcement](#) during his March 2010 visit to Israel regarding construction plans in East Jerusalem, which angered him and the US administration generally, will also come up.
  - e. *Working with Congress and the public*: The strategic relations between the United States and Israel are based on relations between the peoples, not only between the leaders, and accordingly Israel must exercise "soft power" vis-à-vis the American public and its elected representatives. To this end, in coordination with the administration and as a complementary step toward dialogue (and not a substitute for it), an orderly effort must be made through public diplomacy to mobilize support (public and parliamentary) for Israel's core positions.

Despite the imperative for the new US administration to focus on internal issues in the first months of its tenure, it is likely that the Iranian issue will also command urgency and occupy a central place on the agenda. Israel's conduct and initiatives will likely shape the attention it receives from the administration and its potential ability to impact on US strategy. Israel must present its reservations about US policies when they exist, but also act in coordination with the administration to promote policies that will serve the interests of both countries.

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