

INSS Insight No. 1444, March 3, 2021

Transatlantic Cooperation and the Implications for Israel

Shimon Stein and Oded Eran

The leaders of the major members of the European Union could sigh with relief upon hearing President Biden's first statements on foreign policy. His remarks indicate that the United States is resuming its central role in the international arena, with a renewed emphasis on diplomacy, multilateralism, universal human rights, and the rule of law. Cooperation between the United States and the European Union, which waned during Trump's term in office – thereby eroding their ability to deal with shared challenges – is now expected to play a significant role as the West confronts leading international challenges. Among them are matters of importance to Israel: the Iranian nuclear program and Iran's activities in the Middle East, the geopolitical situation in the region, and the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Given this renewed transatlantic cooperation, disagreements are likely to arise between Israel on the one hand, and the US administration and European Union on the other.

In two recent speeches, on February 4, 2021 at the State Department and on February 19, 2021 at the Munich Security Conference, President Biden presented the main themes of his foreign policy doctrine. His remarks indicate a profound change from the policy of former President Trump. Biden intends to resume work with international frameworks, for example, by returning the United States to the Paris Agreement on climate, the World Health Organization, and the Human Rights Council. He also intends to promote universal rights and freedoms, and to strengthen cooperation with traditional United States partners in handling shared challenges. In addition, in his speech at the Munich Security Council President Biden declared that his administration was seeking Europe's cooperation in coping with the strategic challenge posed by China and Russia. For their part, the European Union leaders will consider the possibility of expanding cooperation with the Biden administration in other problematic areas of importance to the EU, including in the Middle East, above all on the question of Iran, especially the Iranian nuclear program; Turkish activity in the region, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel obviously has a direct interest in many of the issues that the transatlantic dialogue is likely to address, and in the ability of the US and the EU to reach coordinated positions on these issues.

Should Israel be alarmed at what appears to be the restoration of the transatlantic partnership? An examination of three issues – Iran and its nuclear program, the closer relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries in the region, and the political process between Israel and the Palestinians – gives an indication of the new situation in which Israel is liable to find itself.

Iran: The Biden administration has made its intention clear of returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, reversing the Trump administration's 2018 decision to withdraw from the agreement. The three European partners in the agreement have been urged to create the conditions for a meeting that both Iran and the United States will attend. This policy goal is unquestionably difficult for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept, as he has argued consistently and vehemently that the JCPOA is a bad agreement and a threat to Israel's security. Evidence of the Israeli government's strong opposition to a return to the nuclear agreement in its current form appears in the remarks by IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi on January 26, 2021 at the annual international conference of the Institute for National Security Studies, where he also called for continuation of the maximum pressure on Iran imposed by former President Trump.

The United States' renewed emphasis on diplomacy, and the willingness to return to the nuclear agreement with Iran, has put both Israel and certain Gulf states in a position of weakness vis-à-vis the US-European similar approach on this issue. It is doubtful whether the telephone conversation between President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu on February 17, and the conversation between the US and Israeli National Security Advisors on January 23, did much to assuage the concerns in Israel. In this state of affairs, Israel must choose between a return to a head-on confrontation with the US administration, with consequences likely to be more severe than those that resulted from the disagreement between the Netanyahu government and the Obama administration, and an attempt to include as many as possible number of Israeli demands in the negotiations to be conducted with Iran.

The geopolitical situation in the Middle East: The Biden administration began its term in the midst of events and processes that are changing the political configuration in the region. After the decade of upheaval that began with the so-called Arab Spring and a year of a pandemic that has aggravated socioeconomic problems, countries in the region are clearly experiencing difficulty (that emerged even earlier) in coping with Iran, Turkey, and Russia, which act aggressively to advance their strategic interests. Presidents Obama and Trump sowed much uncertainty among leaders in the region about the continuation of the US political, economic, and military presence there. This perception led a number of Arab/Muslim countries to recognize Israel and normalize their relations with it.

Both the European Union and President Biden, before and after his inauguration, welcomed the Abraham Accords – normalization of relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain – and the agreements that Israel signed with Morocco, Sudan, and Kosovo, all under the auspices of President Trump. Those countries, the EU, and the current US administration, however, do not share the prevalent sense among the Israeli public and leadership that these agreements constitute clear abandonment of the Palestinian issue, and that the forging of relations with Israel before the conflict is solved has obviated the need to reach a solution, or at least take steps toward it. The willingness of the Biden administration and the European Union to help advance the normalization between Israel and its neighbors will be of great importance for the consolidation of the normalization process. In the absence of supporting measures, however, which include promoting an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, the agreements will remain partial and limited. A slowing of the normalization process is already evident as a result of disappointment among the participating Arab countries that did not receive the quid pro quo promised them by the Trump administration. Furthermore, Arab governments that chose normalization with Israel are concerned by Israeli government decisions on further construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem after the agreements were signed.

The Israeli-Palestinian political process: The Biden administration's decision to abandon the "deal of the century" formulated by the Trump administration for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, replace it with renewed support for a two-state solution to the conflict (while maintaining US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the relocation of the US embassy), and renew relations with the Palestinian Authority and the United Nation Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), was welcomed by the EU members.

The European Union's firm support for a two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 borders with changes acceptable to both sides is not far from the traditional view of all US administrations before Trump's tenure. President Biden's desire to resume multilateral diplomacy makes US-European coordination on core issues of the conflict and ways of advancing a solution more likely. Even before the concrete position of the United States in this context is clarified, the EU expressed support for renewed activity by the Middle East Quartet and the Munich format, comprising Germany, France, Jordan, and Egypt. These countries are taking steps to resurrect the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

While other, more weighty issues than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict clearly take precedence on the current US and European agenda, any Israeli government that interprets this as an opportunity to expand the Jewish settlements in the West Bank or the Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem will be making a mistake. The relevant international community in the matter, especially the United States and the European Union, as well as the countries with which Israel recently signed normalization agreements, can be expected

to keep a close watch on Israeli measures in Jerusalem and the West Bank because of their wish to maintain the viability of a two-state solution. One possibility is that the European Union and the United States will co-sponsor a Security Council resolution anchoring the promotion of this solution in agreed stages, barring unilateral measures, and delineating a specific timetable.

If the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) overcomes the internal Palestinian obstacles to elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and presidency, the PA itself, Israel, and the international community will have to face the dilemma created by the participation of Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the participation of Hamas in the election. The combination of an insistence on realization of political rights, shared by the US administration and the European Union, and the wish to preserve the Oslo Accords (under which Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have already participated in elections for the PA institutions), requires prior consideration by Israel of the possible consequences of a decision to place obstacles in the way of the Palestinian political groups trying to conduct elections or to prevent such elections.

It is even more critical for Israel to prepare a response to the possible formation of a transatlantic axis contending that even if a comprehensive overall settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along the lines of a two-state solution is unachievable under current conditions, measures having a negative impact on realizing such a solution should be avoided. Furthermore, an Israel initiative to invigorate the Palestinian economy, including in Area C; relax the closure on the Gaza Strip; begin a partial and contingent release of Palestinian prisoners; and promote large-scale regional cooperation with the United States, the European Union, Egypt, and Jordan (while demanding a halt in the Palestinian anti-Israel campaign) is likely to be welcomed by the US administration and the European Union, thereby avoiding disagreements. Such initiatives will also further normalization with Arab countries, and possibly with Muslim countries outside the region.

In conclusion, Israel, which regards itself as part of the Western world, should seemingly be encouraged by the changes in US policy, toward strengthening the transatlantic coalition in the global struggle against autocratic rivals such as China and Russia. In practice, however, the emerging effort to enhance the liberal order, based on international law and human rights – two priorities that were not relevant for the Trump administration – is liable to become a significant bone of contention between Israel and the United States, between Israel and the European Union, and especially between Israel and a united US-European front. At the same time, from the global perspective, Israel should have an interest in lowering the tension between the United States on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, as increased tension impacts negatively on Israel's room for maneuver on some

regional issues as well as on economic issues, and poses difficult dilemmas for the Israeli government.