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The United States and Israel: Insights following Operation Guardian of the Walls

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President Joe Biden's friendship with Israel and his administration's commitment to Israel's security needs were manifested clearly during Operation Guardian of the Walls. So too was the United States' central role in managing crises that involve Israel. In contrast, the Congress assumed the role of the "bad cop." The pressure exerted on the administration to harden its policy toward Israel, mainly (but not only) on the part of the progressive wing within the Democratic Party, was significant. In order to minimize the possibility of surprises in the future and prevent gaps between the positions of the two countries, Israel should conduct an ongoing and discreet strategic dialogue with the US administration, enabling both a better understanding of American interests and Israel's potential influence capability. Given that overall the administration's requests are in line with Israeli interests, Jerusalem would do well to adopt an approach that as much as possible reflects willingness to align with the administration, and certainly not to confront it in public. As such, Israel will be able to help the administration deal with growing anti-Israel sentiments in the American public, which may impact on the positions of legislators and possibly the administration itself, and which Israel is hard-pressed to address directly.

Operation Guardian of the Walls surprised the US administration. The appointment of an ambassador to Israel and Consul General in Jerusalem (traditionally entrusted with maintaining ties with the Palestinian Authority) was delayed after President Biden entered the White House. The new administration did not signal that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be a priority, although it sought to restore relations with the Palestinians and leave room for the possibility of advancing a two-state solution in the future. The violent confrontation that developed between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 forced the administration to formulate policy quickly and invest considerable time to achieve calm. In this context, during and immediately after the operation:

- a. President Biden backed Israel and its right to defend itself, and avoided public criticism of its moves as much as possible. At the same time, he conducted a vigorous diplomatic effort with Israel and Arab countries, with an emphasis on Egypt, to promote a framework for a ceasefire. The pressure on Israel seems to have

- increased only when it was clear to the administration that the military campaign had realized its potential.
- b. In contrast to similar incidents in the past, Congress adopted the role of the “bad cop,” and the pressure on the administration to toughen its policy toward Israel, mainly (but not only) on the part of the progressive wings of the Democratic Party, was significant.
 - c. US Secretary of State Tony Blinken arrived in the region to work to establish calm and apparently advance efforts for reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the administration and President Biden reiterated that while there is no change in the commitment to Israel's security, a two-state solution is the only way to end the conflict, and that "Palestinians and Israelis alike deserve equal measures of freedom, security, opportunity, and dignity."

In the wake of Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel must consider the following issues:

- a. Contrary to some previous estimates, it is clear that the White House currently houses a true friend of Israel. The President's approach is based on years of political experience and a deep recognition of the United States' need to ensure Israel's basic interests regarding its security needs. However, this understanding does not mean that the President and the administration will automatically agree to any move by the Israeli government. As in previous governments, steps taken by Israel will be examined in Washington through the prism of American interests and the interpretation given to Israeli interests. In this context, when making decisions, Israel must also weigh in advance the expected approach on the part of the US administration.
- b. Even if the administration maintains its planned priorities, recent events have proved that the Middle East drags one in, even if one would wish otherwise. It seems that at least in the near future, the administration will be involved in attempts to stabilize the situation in the Gaza Strip in order to prevent the resumption of violence as much as possible. Even before his visit to the region, [Secretary Blinken emphasized](#) that the goal now is "to start building back in concrete ways and offering some genuine hope, prospects, opportunity in the lives of people." He said that in the first stage, it would be necessary to deal with the severe humanitarian situation in Gaza by persuading countries to support the area's reconstruction and development. At the same time, the administration will continue the ongoing dialogue with Israel and renew its ties with the Palestinians, including by reopening the US consulate in Jerusalem. However, the administration is also expected to face difficulties, due to legislation that limits its ability to assist the Palestinians.
- c. It is too early to determine whether the confrontation between Israel and Hamas will indeed lead the administration to deepen its involvement in the Palestinian

issue, contrary to its initial intention. At this point the administration emphasizes that it is still too early to address policy initiatives to resolve the conflict. However, President Biden and senior administration spokesmen have repeatedly stated that only a two-state solution has a chance of succeeding in easing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At the same time, after years of focusing on relations with the Republican Party – during President Trump's tenure, and even earlier, during President Obama's tenure – Israel must invest major efforts to regain its former position at the bipartisan consensus center in the United States. At the very least, the conduct of Democratic lawmakers requires this. Most Democratic lawmakers in Congress still adhere to their pro-Israel policy, but the critical stance toward Israel in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has begun to seep into mainstream legislators. For example, the rare criticism voiced by Democratic Senator Bob Menendez, one of Israel's most prominent supporters, is most noticeable. Following the destruction of the al-Jalaa building in Gaza, which housed al-Jazeera and the US news agency AP, he noted, "I am deeply troubled by reports of Israeli military actions that resulted in the death of innocent civilians in Gaza as well as Israeli targeting of buildings housing international media outlets." Additionally, a group of 28 Democratic senators called on President Biden to bring calm to the fighting between Israel and Hamas. Moreover, there are Democratic lawmakers, led by Jewish Senator Bernie Sanders, who urge the President – against the President's staunch opposition – to condition military aid to Israel on advancing a solution to the conflict. Moreover, during the operation, Democratic lawmakers led an unsuccessful attempt to halt an arms deal that the administration sought to advance with Israel. The fact that currently Israel does not have a full-time ambassador in Washington may make it difficult to provide an effective response to developments.

President Biden's conduct during the operation proved that he was able to withstand the onslaught. However, neither the President nor his administration can ignore growing trends within the party and among its supporters across the United States. A [Gallup](#) poll conducted in February 2021 shows that support for the Palestinians has increased, even though most of the American public has a positive attitude toward Israel. Furthermore, a majority of Democrats are interested in seeing more significant pressure from the United States on Israel. A study conducted at the [University of Maryland and published in the *Washington Post*](#) showed that among Democratic voters, a majority call for punitive measures against Israel regarding the settlements. According to the study, more Americans are now willing to give up on a two-state solution and prefer a democratic rather than a Jewish Israel, over a Jewish state that does not grant civil rights to the Palestinians. Beyond that, more and more Democratic lawmakers are internalizing the growing discourse among the

Democratic electorate that links the struggle for human rights in the United States to the Palestinian struggle to exercise their rights.

Although immediately after Operation Guardian of the Walls President Biden averred that the Democratic Party continues to support Israel, he was forced to expend substantive efforts vis-à-vis his party. The tension between the President's basic approach of support for Israel and an alleged contradiction with the importance he and his administration attach to human rights obliged him to maneuver carefully with his opponents in the global arena during the days of the operation. This was especially true vis-à-vis China, when the Chinese foreign minister accused him of hypocrisy over the US criticism of China's policy toward Muslims in Xinjiang. Biden, given his friendship and deep commitment to Israel, is expected to continue to fend off extraordinary demands from his party members, but the fact that he needs them in order to advance the administration's agenda may present him with complex challenges.

The administration's conduct during Operation Guardian of the Walls highlighted President Biden's positive attitude toward Israel, and as in the past, illustrated the United States' central role in managing crises that affect Israel's security interests. Against this background and as a direct lesson, the Israeli government must understand and consider the interests of the United States and the needs of the administration. In order to minimize surprises and avoid gaps between the positions of the two countries, Israel would do well to conduct an ongoing, discreet strategic dialogue, which will enable both a better understanding of American interests and Israel's potential influence capability. In this context, and on the assumption that US requests are in line with Israeli interests, it is recommended that Israel adopt an approach that reflects willingness to align with the US administration as much as possible, and certainly not to confront it in public. As such, Israel will be able to help the administration deal with the anti-Israel sentiments in the American public, which Israel is hard-pressed to address directly.