

The Biden Administration Faces Serious Domestic Challenges

Eldad Shavit and Rotem Oreg | No. 1545 | January 2, 2022

In the coming year, President Joe Biden and his administration will almost certainly continue to focus primarily on complex domestic issues. Although in any event the President has three more years left to his first term, his ability to fulfill his promises will have a dramatic impact on his presidency and the legacy he leaves. Inter alia, Biden and the Democrats are expected to face the possibility that in the November 2022 midterm elections the party will lose the slim majority it currently enjoys in both houses of Congress. Israel should invest serious thought regarding the political polarization and demographic and social changes in the United States, and the long-term implications of these trends for the commitment of future American presidents and legislators to its security. It is recommended that Israel respond to the changing priorities in the United States and work to expand its relations with Washington to include "day-to-day life": health, climate, economy, and technology, areas in which Israel has a relative advantage, in order to maximize its potential as an asset to the US administration.

2022 will mark a challenging year for the US administration. Although President Biden must confront many difficult foreign policy issues, some of them potentially explosive – such as Ukraine, Taiwan, and Iran – he and his administration, particularly in advance of the November 2022 midterm Congressional elections, will likely continue to focus most of their efforts on implementing their agenda on domestic issues. Over the past year, the administration has sought to advance its infrastructure and economic reconstruction program in the United States through a number of parallel efforts – while at the same time dealing with waves of COVID-19 and a "tired" public, which has difficulty cooperating and is divided about the steps required to address the pandemic.

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In a move supported by both parties, the \$1 trillion [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) was enacted to upgrade American infrastructure (transportation, communications, water, and electricity). In tandem, however, the administration faces difficulties due to opposition from Republicans and Senator Joe Manchin, one of the last conservatives in the Democratic Party, to pass its flagship legislation, the [Build Back Better Framework](#), which it describes as a once-in-a-generation plan. The legislation, at a cost of \$1.75 trillion, includes huge investments in the fields of economics, welfare, and climate. It is not yet clear whether the opposition will completely block the legislation or whether the administration will be able to maneuver and eventually present an adjusted framework. Either way, the process attests to the depth of the rift that exists within the Democratic Party between the moderates and the progressives, and especially to the President's difficulty in running and controlling his party.

These issues and rising inflation (6.8 percent in the past year, the highest rate since 1982) clearly do not contribute to the president's popularity with the American public. Republican opposition to his leadership is predictable, but his support among Democratic voters is also eroding. According to [a Gallup poll](#) from December, support for Biden was about 43 percent: with the exception of former President Trump, support rates for previous presidents a year after taking office were higher. It is likely that the frustration of the President and his staff is particularly heightened because of the difficulties in marketing their successes and the inability to rise in the polls, since in recent months the administration has managed to score quite a few achievements in advancing its promises – in particular: the improvement of employment indices, the Infrastructure Law, and other legislation that included the most extensive economic assistance program in the history of the United States, amounting to \$1.9 trillion, to deal with the crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Although President Biden has three more years left until the end of his first term, his ability to fulfill his promises in the coming year will have a dramatic impact on his presidency and the legacy he leaves. In the

meantime, Biden and the Democrats are expected to face the danger that in the November 2022 midterm elections (in which one-third of the Senate and all members of the House of Representatives are elected) the party will lose the slim majority it currently enjoys in both houses of Congress – making it nearly impossible for the administration to pass laws that are not in the national consensus. Recent polls suggest that the chances of a Republican majority in the Senate and House of Representatives are very high.

The President is no doubt distressed by the challenges in implementing his agenda, as mitigation of social tensions in the United States is the most important challenge facing him and his administration – these days a seemingly impossible task. In his [inaugural address](#), Biden stressed that much work needs to be done to heal the nation, and promised to fight "extremism" and "domestic terrorism"; he insisted that he would be the president of all US citizens – even those who did not vote for him. Biden, whose election campaign ran with the message that it was a "battle for the soul of America," promised during his speech to invest everything for the unification of the country.

Promises notwithstanding, it is highly doubtful whether the administration has succeeded in advancing this difficult and complex task in any way. Recent months have shown that party polarization remains dominant and almost insurmountable. After a very short period, following the change of administrations, Trump's momentum in the Republican Party has grown: the former president continues to control the party, albeit without an official leadership position, and is in the midst of a campaign to clear its ranks of any hint of personal criticism, opposition, or disloyalty. The central motif in Trump's speeches and public interviews is the rejection of the validity of the 2020 elections, thus reinforcing the polarization and distrust in United States institutions. Even if the deadly onslaught on Capitol Hill, two weeks before the Biden inauguration, caused a shock in the United States, no significant change was recorded in the conduct of the two parties. President Biden, formerly known as the one who bridged the gap between parties, has succeeded in passing the Infrastructure Act

but has encountered great difficulty advancing beyond that agenda – even if he meets the interests of Republicans, he still meets with their opposition.

Moreover, Biden himself reiterates that he is has engaged with “the most significant test of [US] democracy since the Civil War.” [In a speech \(July 2021\) at the Philadelphia Constitution Hall](#), Biden stressed, “I swore an oath to you, to God – to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution. And that’s an oath that forms a sacred trust to defend America against all threats both foreign and domestic.” These promises were made following changes in the election laws led by the Republican Party in 19 states across the United States, in which it has a majority in Congress, which they say is designed to protect the purity of the election. The Democrats, for their part, charge that the amendments are intended to make it difficult for minorities and low-income individuals, who tend to vote for the Democrats, to exercise their right to vote.

Political polarization has overshadowed other controversies in recent years, and the polls indicate that most of the public thinks that American democracy is under attack and that political violence is only likely to increase. The political controversies are indicative of a divided and conflicted nation characterized by growing social gaps (particularly between the cosmopolitan cities, which tend to vote for Democrats, and the rural, Republican space for the most part), as well as inter-ethnic tensions that often contribute to violence. Voting data from the election indicate that voting for one candidate or another does not merely reflect political divides, but reflect geographic, class, religious, ethnic, and ideological differences that jeopardize the state's ability to maintain a functioning political and social system.

In recent years, the growing preoccupation with existential problems has increasingly focused the American citizen on what is happening around him and the immediate threats to his personal neighborhood, and less on problems overseas. Accordingly, President Biden has understood that it is necessary to position himself as investing most of the resources at his

disposal to promote internal reconstruction before turning to address other issues in the global arena – much like his predecessors Trump and Obama, each in his own way. However, hopes that Biden's election and Trump's removal from the presidency will lead to a changing reality, and the expectation that the United States will gain inspiring leadership in the near future that succeeds in reversing the alarming trend are giving way to growing pessimism.

Even if the internal events in the United States have no direct impact on Israel, developments will have a direct impact on Israeli interests on several levels, indirectly and over time. The United States remains the most influential global power in the world, even as its priorities are changing, and this has a direct impact on the international actors, including in the Middle East. Therefore, Israel must invest deep thought in the long-term implications of political polarization and demographic and social changes in the United States. It must assess how these might impact on the commitment of future American presidents and legislators to its security – and even assume that what is underway in the American arena will erode the deep understanding that exists among the current leadership in the United States regarding Israeli national security needs.

Israel would do well to adapt to the changing priorities in the United States, and work to expand its relations with Washington to include "day-to-day life" issues: health, climate, economy, and technology. Israel has a relative advantage in these areas, which may be an asset for Washington. In this way, the ties between the countries will be maintained and strengthened. Israel must also diversify its support base and step up its efforts to connect with audiences that lack a significant historical affinity for Israel, and not rely heavily on the support of evangelicals and American Jews.

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