

Behind the Visits by US Officials to Israel: Signs of Cooperation or Confrontation?

Eldad Shavit | No. 1682 | January 18, 2023

The visit to Israel by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and the expected visit of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken are intended for coordination of policy with Israel on a range of issues, above all Iran. In addition, they aim to clarify concerns over the possibility that moves by the Israeli government will breach the status quo on the Palestinian issue. While Biden and his administration, friendly toward Israel, are not seeking confrontation, steps that conflict with US interests and values could lead in this direction. The value of Israel for the United States has for many years derived from its position as the only democracy in the Middle East. Moves that are interpreted as undermining this image, compounded by the growing criticism of Israel already sounded among Democratic legislators and many US Jews, could over time change the situation. Therefore, the Israeli government, which needs American support as it tackles the many security and political challenges before it, must consider the mood and interests of the United States.

United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan is now in Israel, and apparently his visit will be followed by a visit of Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Since the Knesset elections, and even more so since the swearing in of the new Israeli government, senior US administration officials have made frequent statements in public, in which the common thread includes the following principles:

The US administration supports the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and steps that drive the parties further from this objective are dangerous to Israel's long-term security and its Jewish identity. According to Secretary of State Blinken, the administration is aware that at present the chances of advancing a political solution are slim, but they

intend to maintain the option in the future. Therefore, the administration will oppose moves that increase the tensions and weaken the prospects for a political solution. Blinken stressed explicitly that the administration will object to an expansion of settlements in the West Bank and to annexation moves. Tom Nides, US Ambassador in Israel, added that the administration's central mission is "to keep the two-state solution alive." The United States expects Israel to maintain the status quo on the Temple Mount and at the holy sites. Secretary of State Blinken stressed that it is important for all sides to show restraint and avoid provocations on the Temple Mount and at the other holy sites, both in rhetoric and in action. The United States will "hold [the government of Israel] to the mutual standards we have established in our relationship over the past seven decades." The US will continue to support democratic values, including LGBT rights and equal justice for all citizens of Israel. Administration officials have so far avoided referring in public to the Israeli government's proposed judicial reform, but a State Department spokesman was quoted stressing that the shared democratic principles were at the heart of the relationship between the two countries, and Israel's independent institutions were critical for maintaining the country's thriving democracy.

The visit by senior US officials to Israel, and the possible visit by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington, are an opportunity for both sides to present their policy, in an effort to draft a joint work plan. The administration is apparently concerned about moves outlined in the coalition agreements, particularly in the context of the Palestinian issue, as well as the Israeli domestic arena. The impression is that even while administration stresses that it knows and relies on the judgment of Prime Minister Netanyahu, the visits are intended to underscore to the Israeli leadership the seriousness of US expectations that the new government will take US interests and wishes into account, as expressed in a series of comments on relevant matters since the Knesset elections. It is likely that the American visitors intend to focus, inter alia, on coordinating policy over the Iranian issue.

In [an article](#) published in *Yisrael Hayom* (January 11), Meir Ben Shabbat, former National Security Advisor and currently a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), estimated that the White House has adjusted its expectations to the composition of the new government, the coalition's positions on the Palestinian issue, and the domestic situation in Israel. Moreover, "Netanyahu must stress that Israel is a young and vigorous democracy that uses democratic tools to discuss issues at the focus of severe internal disagreements. There is no reason for intervention or foreign influence from any party whatsoever." However, it is doubtful if the administration will endorse Ben Shabbat's approach. President Biden's administration has indeed from the start shown great commitment to Israel's security and welfare, and it seems that he is in no hurry to weather a confrontation with it. However, immunity does not last forever, above all regarding developments in the Palestinian arena. Any significant deviation by Israel from the status quo in general, and particularly the promotion of unilateral moves, will affect the administration's actions. The US reaction could range from public condemnation to real erosion in the backing that Israel receives in international institutions, including the Security Council, which will likely address the subject.

Moreover, it is important for Israel not to ignore the US message regarding the need to "preserve shared values" as the basis for the special relationship between the countries. Some claim that the US demands are vague and are no more than rhetoric from an administration that itself has contacts with countries that are far from champions of democratic principles. Even so, contacts between the administration and these countries are dwarfed by the depth of its relations with democratic countries. Therefore, here too it is highly likely that the emerging reality will disprove the claims of those who downplay the possible risk of the new government's policy on relations with the United States.

The US administration sees the promotion of a liberal agenda and strengthened democracy as its central objective, and in its opinion, Israel must preserve these principles, particularly with respect to possible

damage to human rights and an independent judicial system. Israel's value for the United States derives first and foremost from the administration's ability to present it as the only democracy in the Middle East. This is especially true at a time when US criticism of Israel's conduct, particularly that of its democratically elected legislators, is growing stronger. At the same time, there is shrinking motivation and ability to support Israel on the part of American Jews, whose leaders criticize the Israeli government with increasing frequency.

The Sullivan and Blinken visits will be an opportunity for Prime Minister Netanyahu to present his objectives to the administration, and particularly to relay his ideas about Israel's needs and the preferred nature of cooperation between the countries. However, the assumption that irrespective of its actions, Israel will continue to be an asset for the United States in terms of security, economy, and technology, and that the administration will therefore close its eyes and continue to grant all its requests, is incorrect. Moreover, this mistaken assumption could damage Israel's ability to establish the strategic dialogue with the administration that is so essential in view of the challenges it faces. The concrete focus of the agenda for Israel is the Iranian issue. Even if the administration believes that diplomacy is the preferred way of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, Iran's significant progress in uranium enrichment capabilities forces the US to prepare an alternative plan to reinforce its deterrence – a process requiring a “noise-free” environment. A unilateral change of policy by Israel on the Palestinian issue, and the administration's need to deal with a situation that it perceives as problematic, will make it very hard to focus its attention on coordination over the Iranian issue.

Moreover, Prime Minister Netanyahu has defined the expansion of the Abraham Accords in general, and the promotion of relations with Saudi Arabia in particular, as a strategic objective for his government. It seems likely that during the visit of the US officials, Netanyahu will ask them to work with these countries to secure a rapid implementation of this objective. It is even possible that Netanyahu will ask the administration to support Israel against the politically hostile moves of the Palestinian

Authority in the international arena, especially in view of the UN Assembly's recent request to the International Court of Justice in The Hague for an opinion on the legality of the occupation. The administration sees eye to eye with Israel on the importance of these objectives, but will it be able to promote them in a situation where Israel acts contrary to its statements regarding the Palestinians? This is highly unlikely.

For Israel, relations with the United States are a top priority, but this means taking American interests into consideration. The Israeli leadership must of course defend what it considers important for Israel's national security, even at the price of conflict with the US administration. However, it is vital to understand that Washington – the administration as well as Congress – expects Israel to respect American interests. Israel cannot expect the administration to respond to its needs in a situation where its policies significantly contradict US interests and values.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen