

# Israel-US Relations: Nothing Lasts Forever

Eldad Shavit and Chuck Freilich\_ | No. 1699 | March 23, 2023

**In a telephone conversation on March 19, 2023, President Biden relayed his concern to Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding events on the Palestinian front and Israel's judicial overhaul. The conversation follows a series of developments in the United States that should lead the Israeli government to realize that its actions and rhetoric could lead to a deterioration in bilateral relations. Even if Israel has the right to protect what it considers vital to its national security, the importance of the United States to Israel's national security requires that Jerusalem prioritize relations with Washington, and especially preservation of good relations between the leaders of both countries. The administration will likely not hesitate to respond with criticism if it believes that Israel is acting in violation of fundamental US values and shared interests. The US response could range from public condemnation to a practical erosion of the political, economic, and security support that the United States provides Israel.**

After a disconnect of around two months, US President Joe Biden placed a call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. According to the White House's [statement on the conversation](#), the President addressed the two main issues that are now of concern to the administration:

The Palestinian arena: Similar to previous announcements, President Biden reiterated his demand that Israel and the Palestinian Authority work together to increase security cooperation and avoid any steps that could undermine the prospects of a future two-state solution. The President welcomed the meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh between senior political and military figures from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, and the United States, which was designed, from the administration's perspective, to reduce tensions between the sides. The President's comments join many

statements from senior US officials in the past few months reflecting the administration's growing concern over developments on the Palestinian front and the potential for deterioration on the ground. A situation such as this would obligate the administration to invest diplomatic resources at a time when it believes its attention should be focused elsewhere – particularly the competition with China and the war in Ukraine. The administration is exerting intense pressure on Israel and the Palestinians, based on concern that the upcoming period, including the month of Ramadan, could lead to a conflagration. Therefore, as was made clear in the statement issued at the end of the Sharm meeting, it is demanding that both sides take concrete measures to avert this.

The judicial legislation: President Biden stated that “democratic values have always been, and must remain, a hallmark of the U.S.-Israel relationship...and that fundamental changes should be pursued with the broadest possible base of popular support.” The President offered his support for ongoing efforts to find a compromise, based on the core principles of democratic societies that allow fundamental changes to be made only with the broadest possible basis of public support. This is the most significant comment yet from the President on the issue, reflecting genuine concern that the legislative measures pursued by the Israeli government could damage the very values that have always been the principal basis of relations between the United States and Israel. As a rule, US presidents have refrained from interfering in Israel's domestic affairs. Therefore, President Biden's decision to bring the issue up in a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu testifies to the unusual depth of concern among the top echelon of the US leadership regarding the ramifications of the legislation.

The President's conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu leaves little doubt that despite the solid foundation on which Israel-US relations are built and President Biden's profound friendship and support for Israel, the administration is no longer concealing its displeasure and concern over the processes spearheaded by the government. One clear indication of this is that the President continues to withhold an invitation to the Prime Minister

to the White House, which was also evident in their recent conversation. A second indication was a special meeting at the State Department with Israel's ambassador to Washington, who was called in for a public dressing down.

A number of additional worrying developments on the US front indicate that there is genuine concern that the solid foundation at the base of the relations between the two countries, and what has allowed them to safeguard that friendship even in times of disagreement, is being undermined:

- A [new Gallup poll](#) found that for the first time, more of the respondents who identify as supporters of the Democratic Party (49 percent) identify with the Palestinians than with Israel. The findings indicate an increase of 11 percent in support for the Palestinians over last year alone. The increase in support for the Palestinians is also evident among voters who define themselves as independents, even though most of them still express support for Israel. On the other hand, there is no change in the high level of support for Israel among Republican voters. Taking all the data in consideration, Israel is still ahead – but the gap is closing. These figures lend support to previous surveys, which showed a trend that has become more pronounced in recent years – even if most Democrats still view Israel in a generally positive light – that support is being eroded and, more significantly, there is a growing distance between Israel and younger supporters of the Democratic Party. Most American Jewish voters support the Democratic Party, mainly the liberal if not the progressive wing.
- Democratic Senator Chris Murphy, the highly influential chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, who is known for his pro-Israel views, came out strongly in an interview against Israeli policy and said that the Biden administration should intensify pressure on the Israeli government: “Whether it’s conditionality of aid to Israel,

whether it's conditionality of visits to the United States, we've got to send a message that this assault on the two-state solution in particular, is very bad for the U.S.-Israel relationship in the long run." Murphy also assailed the government's proposed changes to the judicial system and said that they are "fraying the bonds that have connected Israelis together." Anti-Israeli trends have been evident before, mainly among lawmakers from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which often challenges the Democratic establishment from the left. Recently, however, it seems that there has been an increase in support among even centrist Democratic politicians for the idea of conditioning US military aid to Israel on the Palestinian issue.

Most of the evidence suggests that even if the administration is at pains to emphasize its support for Israel and its commitment to Israel's security, the tension between the two countries has already had an impact on that relationship. In the immediate term, the Palestinian issue is the primary threat. Israeli measures, which violate commitments given at the recent meetings in Amman and Sharm el-Sheikh, additional unilateral measures, and the legislation passed this week that repealed the law on the disengagement from northern Samaria (which itself was the result of assurances that were made to the US), could significantly aggravate US displeasure. The administration's intimations, that a legislative overhaul of the Israeli judicial system, in the absence of a broad consensus, could change Israel's character as the only democracy in the Middle East and thereby undermine its role as an American asset and strategic partner, must be taken seriously.

Israel's national security has long been based, inter alia, on its special relations with the United States. The understanding in Washington that the two countries share values of freedom, democracy, and civil rights has contributed to this, and even when there have been differences of opinion, the two countries understood each other and respected each other's interests. US administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, have always taken practical steps to safeguard the "security and welfare" of

Israel, sometimes in the face of domestic criticism. Support for Israel from within the US political establishment was based on the recognition that the American people are very supportive of these relations and the obligation to safeguard the security of the Jewish state.

The Israeli government must take into account that the American belief (within the administration and in Congress) that “the shared values” have been damaged and that Israel is acting against the immediate interests of the United States, could erode the intimacy of the bilateral relations. This is particularly true at this sensitive time, when the security challenges – led by Iran, which resolutely continues to advance its nuclear program – call for tighter coordination between the two countries. The Iranian issue was mentioned only in passing in the statement issued by the White House about the Biden-Netanyahu phone call.

Even if Israel has to protect what it considers as significant to its national security, it must, during the upcoming period, prioritize and attach utmost importance to its relations with the United States – especially its ability to maintain good relations between the two leaders. It appears that the administration will not hesitate to express objections and criticism if it believes that Israel is acting in contravention of shared fundamental values and common interests – and especially if it reneges on its promises on the Palestinian front. The US response could range from public condemnation to the practical erosion of the political, economic, and security support that the United States gives Israel. Israeli conduct and the nature of the bilateral relations will have important, long-term ramifications, given the demographic, economic, and social processes underway in the United States. Even if some of them have nothing to do directly with Israel, they could contribute to the erosion of the long-term US commitment to Israel. Ignoring these warnings could be disastrous for Israeli interests, since sooner or later, they will impinge on the special relations between the two countries.

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