

**The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) issues a policy brief in light of the deepening crisis in relations between the United States and Israel**

**INSS researchers: “Israel’s strategic importance to the United States is relevant only as long as the shared values are safeguarded. At this time, the special relations are in danger, especially given the widening gaps on the perception of democracy, Israeli policy on the Palestinian issue, and the growing alienation between the American Jewish community and the State of Israel.”**

## **Background**

Disagreements between the United States and Israel have deepened. It appears that even after the meeting at the White House between President Biden and President Herzog, and the telephone conversation between the US President and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on July 17, the US administration has not softened the messages regarding its profound concern over the policies of the current Israeli government regarding both the judicial overhaul and the Palestinian issue. Even now, despite a promise that Biden and Netanyahu would meet in the United States in the coming months, it seems that the very occurrence of the meeting, and certainly its outcomes, will be influenced by developments in Israel.

After his discussions with the Israeli leaders, President Biden found it important to emphasize, in an op-ed written by *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman, his respect for the ongoing protests in Israel, as they demonstrate the “vibrancy of Israel’s democracy,” which is at the heart of US-Israel relations. At the same time, he said, “Finding consensus on controversial areas of policy means taking the time you need. For significant changes, that’s essential.” He added, “So my recommendation to Israeli leaders is not to rush. I believe the best outcome is to continue to seek the broadest possible consensus here.”

In a previous media interview, President Biden stated that the current Israeli government is “one of the most extreme,” and that some of the ministers in the coalition are “part of the problem,” especially when it comes to the Palestinian issue. In his phone call with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the US President reiterated his call to Israel and the Palestinians to take measures to keep the two-state solution alive and safeguard security stability on the ground.

## Significance

- **Without shared values, Israel and the US have no common interests and no special relations.** The United States is a global superpower that acts solely in its own best interests. Israel's importance to the United States lies in two main areas: technology and security power. But Israel's importance in these areas will stay relevant only as long as Israel remains committed to the shared values that define the special relations. If Israel changes and distances itself from the democratic values of the US, then strengthening Israel in those two areas could counter American interests. Presumably the United States can engage in extensive ties with countries with which it has nothing in common in terms of human rights, democracy, liberalism, and a capitalist economy. But that is only true when those countries have resources or assets that are vital to US national security or the US economy. Israel does not possess any rare natural resources, its geographic location is not of critical importance to the United States, it is not part of a defense alliance, and even Israel's human and technological capital, no matter how important it may be, is not exclusive to Israel.
- **For the first time in the history of relations between the two countries, the United States is concerned that Israel will no longer be a democracy.** Tension in the special relations between Jerusalem and Washington is not new, but casting doubt on such a fundamental anchor of that relationship is an unprecedented development.
- **The special relations with the United States spell the difference between Israel being a regional power and Israel being a small country with limited capabilities.** Israel could survive with a lower level of American support and would continue to exist, but a change of this sort would have an acute impact on Israel's security, its economic welfare, and the quality of life it provides its citizens. We are not close to the point where the United States would withdraw its support for Israel, but the ongoing and long-term trend is extremely negative. This is not just connected to Israeli policy, but also to the changing face of American society and politics.
- **The Biden administration strongly opposes the judicial overhaul and Israeli policy in the West Bank.** These positions from Washington are not new, but they differ in their harsh tone and how they are relayed. The administration is doing everything it can to stress how much it objects both to the government's behavior on the judicial overhaul and its policies in the West Bank, which it believes endanger the two-state solution.

- **The United States is frustrated by Israel's position on China and its policies with regard to the Russia-Ukraine war.** The tensions with Israel divert the administration's attention from foreign policy issues that are far higher on its list of priorities – primarily China and the war in Ukraine. In the Chinese context, there is increasing frustration among administration officials over Israel's policies and the fact that as far as Washington can see, Israel does not share US concerns over the issue.
- **On the US domestic political front, Democratic voters support Palestinians more and Israel less.** A recently published opinion poll indicates that most people who identify as Democratic voters support the Palestinians. This mirrors comments from some senior members of the Democratic Party during the 2020 presidential election campaign, who called for the administration to link military aid to Israel with its policies in the West Bank. This view commands increasing attention, even if it is not the prevailing position in the Democratic Party.
- **Significant demographic changes are distancing the United States from Israel even more.** The United States is becoming less religious, while Israel is becoming more so. In the United States, there is an ongoing trend of more people defining themselves as atheists. In Israel, the opposite is true.
- **American Jewry is drifting away from Israel.** This in part is due to Israel's policy of driving non-Orthodox streams of Judaism out of the "tent." Israel's refusal to recognize the Reform and Conservative Movements, with which most American Jews affiliate, aggravates the sense of alienation they feel from Israel. These are liberal streams of Judaism that espouse the same basic worldview as the US administration, as well as its concerns over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Policy Recommendations

- **The Israeli government must halt the unilateral legislation and proceed based on broad national agreement.** This will have a direct impact on whether Israel's relations with the United States deteriorate or improve. The administration will refrain from becoming actively involved in the judicial overhaul, as long as changes reflect agreement between the various camps. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) reiterates its position that such an agreement must reflect positions on both sides of the divide, and that Israel cannot allow a situation where any one side is quelled. Instead, the sides must work together to reduce tensions.
- **Refrain from unilateral steps that alter the status quo on the ground, coupled with a proactive initiative by Israel on the Palestinian front.** The continuation of Israel's current policies will eventually lead the United States to recognize the one-state solution, even if not in the next few years. It is far from certain that a future in which Israel becomes "the state of all its citizens" coincides with the national aspirations of most Israelis, who identify as Zionists.
- **Reverse the trend and embrace, rather than alienate, the various streams of Judaism.** The continuation of the current trend causes serious damage by aggravating the split in the Jewish people and making American Jewry's young leadership increasingly apathetic toward Israel. Members of the millennial generation, who were born into mixed Jewish-non-Jewish families and raised as belonging to the Jewish people, will stop seeing themselves as committed to Zionism and to their Jewish roots. This could mean that Israel would lose the next elite in the United States.
- **Recognize the limits of force.** When significant military power is used, it must be done in close coordination with the United States. This recommendation is especially important given the two main threats to the security of Israel: the Iranian threat and the Palestinian threat. In both cases, not only will military power alone not solve the problem, but it also stands to complicate it. Similarly, in both cases, a lack of coordination with the United States could have dire consequences, both in terms of military accomplishments and the stability of the outcome once the campaign is over.