

Change in the Middle East?

New Israeli government controls the agenda

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The media focus on the Summit meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin has to a certain extent crowded out news about the new government in Israel, headed by hardline nationalist Naftali Bennett. In those media outlets that are actually discussing the change there is an odd sort of perception that Israel’s new government will have to adjust to the new regime in Washington. That would imply that the Israelis will have to mitigate some of their more outrageous behavior to accommodate themselves to Biden’s intention to take actions that will be disapproved of in Jerusalem, to include a possible rapprochement with Iran over its nuclear program and a White House reengagement with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015.

The *New York Times* has [an interesting article](#) written by its Washington bureau diplomatic correspondent Michael Crowley with contributions from its new correspondent in Jerusalem Patrick Kingsley. The article is entitled “Shift in Israel Provides Biden a Chance for Better Ties” with a sub-heading that reads “The departure of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister is a relief for Democrats, but Iran and the Palestinians could test Mr. Biden’s relations with a fragile new Israeli government.”

The article argues that the fact that Biden did not call Netanyahu for three months after his own inauguration but called Bennett within three hours is significant. In the phone call Bennett reportedly blamed Netanyahu for “poisoning” the relationship with the United States, which should surprise no one as that was one of the issues hammered at repeatedly by Bennett during his own electoral campaign.

But one has to look beyond that and ask where is the evidence that Netanyahu’s admittedly acidic personality and arrogance led to any retribution by the White House, either under Barack Obama, Donald Trump or Joe Biden? It was generally reported and probably quite correct that Obama deeply disliked Netanyahu, even once being [caught on an open mike](#) speaking to French President Nicolas Sarkozy and regretting the fact that he had to interact with the petulant Israeli Prime Minister every week. Yet Obama then turned around and did something that no American President had ever done, arranging to give the Israeli’s a guaranteed \$38 billion in military assistance over the course of ten years. The money was not conditional on Israeli behavior, did not reflect actual US interests, and was then

sweetened by another half billion per year to support the Jewish state's Iron Dome air defense system.

In 2015 the Obama Administration did indeed enter into the JCPOA, a multilateral agreement to monitor and limit Iran's existing nuclear program, a move that was strongly opposed by Israel, but the only time the White House actually demonstrated any annoyance with Israel was when it abstained on a United Nations vote critical of the Jewish state's settlements shortly before Obama left office. And it should be observed that Obama was duly punished by Israel for his bad attitude, with Netanyahu showing up at a joint session of Congress to denounce the impending Iran pact in March 2015. Bibi received twenty-nine standing ovations from a completely brainwashed gathering of the "peoples' representatives."

And then there is Donald Trump, who was probably the most pro-Israeli president in US history. Trump promoted Israeli interests repeatedly, moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing the annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights, de facto approving eventual incorporation of the Palestinian West Bank into Israel, and assassinating a senior Iranian general while also turning a blind eye to illegal settlement expansion and bombing attacks on both Syria and Lebanon. The US also repeatedly used its United Nations veto to prevent any criticism of Israel and its policies. Trump's Ambassador to Israel David Friedman was notorious for his pander to Israeli interests, approving harsh measures against Palestinians and war crimes directed against its neighbors, so much so that he was perceived as a spokesman-apologist for Israel rather than the US.

Not much "poison" in the relationship as reflected by facts on the ground, is there? The money kept flowing, the political support hardly wavered, and the United States government at all levels could hardly stop gushing about how the Jewish state was a "democracy" and a "close ally," both of which assertions were and are not true.

So now we come to Biden and talk about a reset. *The Times* oddly concedes that "The change in government in Israel will hardly wipe away deep differences with the Biden administration: The right-wing Mr. Bennett is ideologically closer to Mr. Netanyahu than to Mr. Biden. And it did not make the longstanding issues in the Middle East any less intractable. But the early interactions suggest a shift in tone and an opportunity, analysts said, to establish a less contentious relationship, with potential implications for dealing with Iran, the Palestinians and the wider region."

Excuse me, but Bennett ran on a very hard line. He opposes any nuclear agreement with Iran and will not permit anything like a Palestinian state. He has been in office only a short time and has already approved airstrikes against targets in Syria and Gaza as well as [a march](#) by thousands of settlers through Palestinian East Jerusalem calling for "Death to Arabs." A change in tone might be welcome, but as the United States already supinely agrees to support everything claimed by Israel, what will it mean on the ground? Nothing. And the "contentious relationship" is likewise hard to find. The thunder heard along the Potomac several weeks ago consisted of Congress and the White House's synchronized chanting of "Israel has a right to defend itself!" And then there is the Iranian nuclear deal, which seems to be slipping away as Secretary of State Tony Blinken seemingly adds "conditions" to US reentry. So what are, in reality, the deep differences between Jerusalem and Washington that will be more manageable with "better tone?"

The *Times* argues perhaps more credibly that the damage has been done re the Israeli

government relationship with the Democratic Party itself. It says “Mr. Biden has long considered Mr. Netanyahu a friend, [albeit one with whom he often disagrees](#). But many administration officials and Congressional Democrats viscerally disdain the ousted Israeli leader, whom they came to see as a corrosive force and a *de facto* political ally of Republicans, including former President Donald J. Trump.”

Excuse me yet again, but such thinking is pie in the sky. To be sure a handful of Democratic Party progressives have come down hard on Israel’s recent slaughter of Gazans, but those who have any real power in the party have not voiced a single criticism of the war crimes committed. Biden might have been able to intervene to shorten the conflict, but he did nothing in reality to put pressure on Israel. His view of the Palestine problem is to give them a state though he is inevitably fuzzy on the details and will put no pressure on the Israelis to take any peace initiatives. In short, he and the Israelis will likely work behind the scenes to reduce the tension so there is no more mass killing and therefore no more negative media. If they are successful, that will make the Palestinians go away.

Joe Biden has called himself a “Zionist” and is proud of it and his first move after Israel was through killing Arabs was to send them \$735 million on top of what they already receive from the US taxpayer. And, most important to him is all those Jewish donors whose hands are clutching their checkbooks while their hearts are in Israel, contributing something like two-thirds of all the money going to the Democratic Party. They are led by Hollywood producer Israeli-American Haim Saban who has said unambiguously that he is a “one issue guy and that issue is Israel.” In a sense, Washington is also run by a duopoly that has “one issue” in foreign policy and that issue is also Israel.

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