



## Policy Prospects of the Biden Administration towards Israel and Palestine

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While the Biden administration will backtrack on some of the Trump administration's decisions, it will maintain the traditional stance in U.S. policy towards Israel and Palestine. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. will be committed to improving the situation of the Palestinians, but probably will not submit its own peace plan, preferring ad hoc diplomatic actions.

**Trump's Legacy.** The administration of President Donald Trump pursued the most pro-Israel policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as bilateral and regional relations, than any previous U.S. government. It resulted in a change in the longstanding American position on the [status of the West Bank](#) (including rejection of the illegality of [Jewish settlements](#)), [Jerusalem](#), and [the Golan Heights](#), as well as decisions targeting [Palestinian institutions](#) or international bodies intervening in the conflict (e.g., sanctions on the [International Criminal Court](#), or ICC; withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council). The process culminated in the announcement of the ["Trump peace plan" in January 2020](#), which clearly favoured Israel and intended to allow the annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Ultimately, the annexation was not implemented and the political alternative for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government became the [normalisation of relations with Arab states](#) supported by American diplomacy under the Abraham Accords. So far, the process includes Israel establishing full relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Integral to these agreements were incentives made by the U.S., which included removing Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, recognising Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, and armaments contracts with the UAE. Trump's decisions on foreign policy are currently under review by the new administration and may result in their revision (e.g., the U.S. already [returned to the Human Rights Council](#) and an F-35 delivery to the UAE was halted).

**Biden's Approach.** Joe Biden's campaign declarations and actions since taking office indicate that the new

administration—unlike its predecessors—will not give political priority to actions involving Israel and Palestine. Biden disagrees with the [progressive wing of his Democratic Party](#), which calls for a revision of military aid to Israel. He also declared that the U.S. embassy will remain in Jerusalem, which was also confirmed by the new Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Biden's cabinet also supports the normalisation process between Israel and Arab states, with Blinken stressing that it cannot replace the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At the same time, the new administration has limited confidence in Netanyahu because of his support for the Republicans and the strained relationship with the previous Democratic administration of Barack Obama.

The dynamics of U.S.-Israel relations will be most influenced by disputes in two areas. The first is the expected correction of the U.S. position on the settlements in the West Bank, to revert Trump's move. Most probably the U.S. will again declare the settlements illegal under international law and enhance the criticism of settlers' actions, especially in the context of subsequent Israeli decisions on the expansion of settlements in January. The second area is the Biden administration's strategy towards Iran. Netanyahu was one of the staunchest critics of the JCPOA and actively supported Trump's "maximum pressure" policy. Israel is now pushing for the sanctions on Iran to be upheld and linking their lifting to a halt in that country's ballistic missile programme and military operations in the region, again threatening that there could be a direct strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

# PISM BULLETIN

The Biden administration declares that its goal is to improve relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA), which will result in reversing some of Trump's decisions. The U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem is very likely to be reopened. However, the restoration of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) office in Washington remains hampered by laws in force targeting the PLO's activities. At the same time, the new administration is critical of the PA leadership, stressing the need to change its system of stipends for Palestinian prisoners in Israel convicted of terrorism and their families. Restoration of suspended financial aid to the PA may be contingent on reforms in this area. The U.S. also sides with Israel in the context of the ICC's decision on the possibility of an investigation by the court's prosecutor into Israeli activities in the Palestinian territories (the U.S. indicates that the court does not have jurisdiction in this area).

**Biden and the Peace Process.** The U.S. president will not be proactive in resuming Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Currently, the level of faith in the Israelis and Palestinians and in the chances of peace and the prospect of reaching a compromise is very low. It is accompanied by a lack of political motivation among the ruling elites of both sides to even negotiate, exacerbated by the ICC decision. Hence, the activities of the new U.S. administration will focus on rebuilding trust and de-escalating emerging problems (it has already called on the parties not to pursue unilateral actions and emphasised the legitimacy of the two-state solution). At the State Department level, no one has been appointed to focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Additionally, the Biden administration will be tracking the results of the parliamentary elections in Israel ([23 March](#)) and the PA (22 May). The right-wing coalition led by Netanyahu, which would include parties refusing concessions over settlements, talks with the PA, or any form of Palestinian statehood, has the best chance of forming a government in Israel. In the Palestinian case, it may be necessary for the U.S. to develop new policy, especially if Hamas wins the elections (it is recognised by the U.S., the EU, and Israel as a terrorist organisation) and there are [changes in PA leadership](#).

The main tool of the Biden administration to strengthen trust between the parties may be the normalisation process between Arab states and Israel, which is a current priority of its foreign policy and in which U.S. incentives were a key element. Hence, the U.S. may insist that this process does not perpetuate itself as a means of isolating the Palestinians. Increased U.S. support for normalisation may

be conditioned on the introduction of new mechanisms to promote joint Israeli-Palestinian initiatives. Another platform for cooperation may be offered by [regional energy projects](#). At a later stage of Biden's presidency it is possible to support the format proposed by the PA of a multilateral conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the participation of regional Arab states and members of the Middle East Quartet (along with the U.S., Russia, the UN, and the EU).

**Prospects.** The Biden administration will seek to restore the former sense of proportion in U.S. relations with Israel and Palestine. While the U.S. will continue to maintain a clearly pro-Israel stance, it will not be as uncompromising as it was during the Trump presidency. Some decisions targeting the Palestinians will be withdrawn, but due to the internal U.S. political situation the scope of changes will be limited. At the same time, a return to the U.S.-Israeli tensions that characterised the Obama administration is likely. Despite the fact that Netanyahu emphasised his many years of acquaintance with the new president, the Israeli PM may play out possible conflicts with the U.S. (on settlements or Iran) for internal political purposes, enlisting his support of the Republican Party and creating divisions among Democrats.

The main obstacle to reactivating the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will be the effects of Trump's decisions, which stiffened the positions of the parties and limited the existing political toolbox of U.S. diplomacy. The Biden administration is forced to operate under conditions of distrust in the peace process and strictly dependent on the post-election landscape in Israel and the PA. Without a change in the situation in the Palestinian territories and in the approach of the political leadership of both entities, the possible resumption of negotiations will remain only a diplomatic process without influence over the actual dynamics of the conflict.

For the European Union, Biden's presidency—less one-sided and supporting the normative order—means a greater convergence of positions on the situation in Israel and Palestine. This will allow for deepening cooperation, especially in the area of democratisation of Palestinian institutions, which would strengthen their position in relations with Israel. The EU can support the U.S. in putting diplomatic pressure on the Israeli government in the event of obstruction of the elections in East Jerusalem and on the PA authorities regarding transparency in the election process.