



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Israel Between Two Presidents

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As President-elect Joe Biden starts to form his administration, Israel has to prepare itself for both the transition period leading up to the transfer of power on January 20, 2021 and the four subsequent years.

One of the realities to which Israel will have to adjust during a Biden administration is that Barack Obama will probably play a role, officially or otherwise, as an advisor on national security or political affairs. This means Israel needs to start having conversations with members of the emerging Biden administration rather than move forward, in the waning days of Trump's term in office, to achieve goals that the Biden administration will not accept.

It has been suggested that Israel should exploit the remaining months of the Trump presidency to extend sovereignty over parts of the West Bank. Doing so would echo the approach of Barack Obama, who, during his own transition out of the Oval Office in December 2016, supported the thoroughly anti-Israel UN Security Council Resolution 2334, spurning President-elect Trump's request that he not do so.

Applying Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank over the next two months without coordination with the incoming Biden administration might so greatly disturb that administration that pressure could be brought to bear to declare all Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank illegitimate. Implementation of sovereignty could even result in the imposition of US sanctions on Israel (in relation to settlement, sovereignty, or both), a move that would be heartily endorsed by members of Congress of the likes of Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Senator Bernie Sanders.

Israel must absorb the fact that the Democratic Party of today is not the same party it was eight years ago. It has become extremist in some ways, a process that intensified sharply in response to Trump's entry into the White House and accelerated throughout his four-year term in response to his policies, both domestic and foreign. Pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel positions have multiplied and increased their grip on Democratic constituencies. Voices are already being heard suggesting the reopening of Palestine Liberation Organization offices in Washington and moving US embassy activities back to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem.

But the most complicated problem with applying sovereignty right now concerns the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, and also (implicitly) Saudi Arabia. These countries will view an Israeli implementation of sovereignty without prior coordination with them as evidence of Israeli fraud, because the excuse to normalize relations with Jerusalem was Israel's agreement to indefinitely postpone the application of sovereignty in the West Bank. If Israel responds to Trump's loss by immediately withdrawing from its commitment not to enforce sovereignty, Jerusalem's new friends will feel it has deceived them. That feeling will surely work against Israeli interests.

During the interim period before Biden takes office, Israel must contact the leaders of the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt with a view to establishing a joint bloc to appear together before the new administration. That bloc would present a united front on these issues: that the US not bow before Iran regarding the nuclear file, not lift sanctions on Iran, and not allow Tehran to interfere in the affairs of other countries. This coalition may or may not eventually give Israel tacit approval to apply sovereignty to parts of the West Bank, but Jerusalem should not proceed with any such plan without prior coordination with these countries. Indeed, coordination with Israel's new friends in the Arab and Muslim world is more important than coordination with the incoming Biden administration, vital though that is.

Over the next two months, Israel can encourage the search for a solution to the problem of what became of the Palestinian Authority after Hamas tore it into pieces 13 years ago—before the Palestinian Authority, during the Obama administration's eight years in power, descended into a failed and corrupt terrorist state based entirely on hatred of Israel.

Jerusalem should endorse a plan for Palestinian Emirates in which seven separate and independent emirates are built in the West Bank cities of Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Ramallah, Jericho, and Arab Hebron. Once the Palestinian Emirates are established, Israel will be able to apply sovereignty to rural areas. Biden, Harris, and Obama will not be able to revive the

sclerotic and self-defeating Palestinian Authority, and the coalition countries won't shed many tears over its end.

By approaching the Biden administration as a united front, Israel and its five friends in the Arab world will all be in a greatly enhanced position. As Aesop put it in the sixth century BC, united we stand; divided we fall.

Their alliance can be useful not only on the Iranian issue, but on another key issue as well: the waters of the Nile. Tensions have arisen between Egypt and Ethiopia over a dam Ethiopia built on the river that threatens to cut water flow to Egypt to dangerous levels.

If this alliance is based on the Middle East stage as an active group, other Arab and Islamic nations will probably join it. Countries that could be interested are Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Kuwait, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger. As the alliance grows, its political weight is likely to increase in the eyes of the Biden administration, and all the member states will be beneficiaries—both from their internal cooperation and from their ability to present a unified bloc to the American administration.

Is this utopia? Absolutely not. A year ago we wouldn't have even dreamt of normalization with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan. And if Trump departs office on January 20 following a collapse of the Iranian regime, it will be a diamond in the crown of the Trump legacy.

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