



Domestic Politics = International Politics: The US-Israel Relationship

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The long delay preceding Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's invitation to the White House reflects significant issues concerning Israel's security and international position. President Joe Biden does not hide his distaste for the structure of the current Israeli government, even as Israel faces rising security tensions on all fronts. The potentially historic breakthrough of a peace agreement between the Jewish state and Saudi Arabia, largely motivated by Biden's electoral considerations, has been delayed by Netanyahu's domestic problems. The rule that internal and external politics are not to be linked has apparently been breached by the world power that carries the international system on its shoulders. Moreover, the crisis is between two allied nations that are considered liberal democracies. What are the implications of this linkage between domestic and international politics?

One of the main disputes in international relations theory concerns the linkage between international and domestic politics. The school of structural realism holds that international politics is an autonomous discipline. In an anarchic world, it is only the distribution of power and the need for survival that dictate the behavior of states and prescribe their relations. Other schools of thought list examples of cases where domestic politics had a decisive impact on the interstate arena, suggesting that internal politics are in fact an integral part of international relations.

This debate is also heard in the Israeli political arena. The argument on the right is that at the end of the day, Israel is America's most stable ally in the Middle East, and therefore American strategic interests will determine its involvement during a regional crisis. The opposing camp expands the US-Israel relationship to the realm of the political values of both countries. Hence the argument from the center left, as well as some right-wing moderates, that non-consensual regime change is not only an affront to the values of Israel's founders but also to the values of Israel's Western allies, and thus affects their attitude toward the Jewish State.

While illustrations of domestic-international interaction can be found in many arenas of world politics, this linkage has moved to the fore in the Middle East in recent years. Starting in 2011, a number of Arab countries in the Middle East underwent a series of regime crises in what came to be known as the "Arab Spring." While the process did not ultimately lead to fundamental changes in the character of the regimes of countries such as Syria and Egypt, it certainly had a positive effect on the balance of power and threats to Israel. While the Syrian civil war was going on, the distribution of power improved in Israel's favor. Israel's internal stability during this period yielded economic and security gains that led to the political breakthrough of the Abraham Accords. Correspondingly, the tension in the Gulf has to do with a religious schism between two streams of Islam that caused animosity between Tehran and Riyadh. That tension ultimately activated a détente between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Israel has caught up with its neighbors in terms of internal convulsion. Five elections in a three-year period, and the internal crisis that erupted after the establishment of the current government in Israel, attest to a deep socio-political divide within the Jewish state. This split is not confined to the domestic arena, and it radiates weakness to Israel's friends and adversaries alike. The image of an Israel torn from within encourages Hezbollah on the Lebanese border and Hamas in the West Bank to challenge the status quo. While Israel has been preoccupied with domestic instability, Iran has accelerated its progress toward becoming a nuclear threshold state.

The domestic politics issue becomes more multifaceted when the interaction ceases to be confined to interstate relations. A new dimension is added when it penetrates the sociopolitical realm. Political agendas cross national borders and hence are conducted between domestic institutions such as political parties or camps in what is called transnational relations.

The political crisis that has been going on for several years in the Israeli domestic arena is paralleled by a similar crisis in the US. The mutual abomination between conservatives and liberals within American society has expanded in recent decades to an unprecedented degree, a trend that is reflected in Israeli right-left loathing. Political relations do not, therefore, end at state borders but rather cross into the political arenas of both countries. While the progressive wing of the American Democratic Party has long been critical of the Jewish state, the concurrence between the Israeli right and the Republican Party further distances Israel from centrist Democrats. Such a turn undermines the principle that Israeli governments once devotedly upheld: bipartisan support for the special bond between the US and the Jewish state.

A case in point of transnational collaboration and cross-border infiltration can be found in the American media. In an essay in *The New York Times* on July 12, liberal columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that a “reassessment” of US-Israel relations by the Biden administration is inevitable. He claims that in view of the regime turnover by Benjamin Netanyahu's government, which contradicts US values, the White House is determined to save Israel before it goes off the rails. In a response two days later, conservative newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* attacked the Biden administration, claiming that its recent statements against Israel and Netanyahu are harsher than those it directs toward Iran. “That’s not how you treat a democratic ally,” the article contended defiantly.

Another contour of transaction between the two polities occurs at the intercommunal level. The composition of the current Israeli government distances the Jewish State from a customary ally on the internal US scene whose importance should not be underestimated: liberal American Jewry. For the most part, US Jewry belongs to the Conservative and Reform streams of Judaism, two denominations rejected by Orthodox Jewry. With Orthodox parties accounting for about half the members of the current coalition, American Jews fear legislation that would disqualify their children as Jews and distance them from the State of Israel. The support of American Jewish organizations for the protests against Israeli judicial reform has not gone unnoticed by the power centers of both Republicans and Democrats, and the delay in Netanyahu’s invitation to the White House is undoubtedly related to the discomfort American Jewry feels toward his government. During the previous administration, Donald Trump expressed disappointment with the lack of Jewish support for him despite his unprecedented

actions on Israel's behalf during his term, and his opinion is unlikely to have changed. It can be assumed that this will affect the Jewish lobby in Washington, which is a central tool of Israeli influence in Congress.

Turning to the US internal arena, Israel's security and regional status are affected by domestic attitudes about American involvement in global issues and especially its role as the leading power in the Middle East. The failure of the US to turn Iraq into a democracy, followed by the shameful withdrawal from Afghanistan after suffering heavy casualties and astronomical expenses, led to internal opposition to continued American involvement in small wars around the world in general and in the Middle East in particular. As in the Vietnam War, the American defeat in Afghanistan was not on the military level. The withdrawal reflected American public opposition to the heavy price of military involvement in a distant arena that did not appear to endanger the existence of the US. Accordingly, President Obama's doctrine of transferring leadership of military activity to local allies was adopted by his successors. Two successive administrations, one Republican (Trump) and the other Democratic (Biden), implemented this doctrine. The American surrender of Kabul in August 2021 was very similar to the withdrawal from Saigon in 1973. Significantly, the American public largely opposed military involvement henceforward, even though the US military is an army of volunteers.

The aversion of the American public to active military involvement in the Middle East does not augur well for Israel's main concern: Iran's progress toward becoming a nuclear threshold state. While President Herzog was warmly welcomed at the White House and by Congress, Washington is going to be very cautious about direct military involvements in the future because of domestic opposition. Nor is this a partisan concern. A Trump victory in 2024 is unlikely to prompt American military engagements in Middle Eastern wars.

How about a unilateral Israeli military option? American backing is critical. Despite the military cooperation between the two defense establishments, there can be no Israeli preemptive strike without the political support of the US. Recent cracks in the anti-Iranian front of the Gulf states and the acceptance of the Syrian regime by the Arab League undermine the deterrence and strategic environment that had emerged in the previous era. Apparently, this is related to the erosion of US standing in the Middle East. Although we can see some new thinking in Washington in its dialogues with Saudi Arabia, it is doubtful whether Congress would support the administration in offering the latter a solid defense treaty.

In light of all this, domestic politics have become a national security challenge for Netanyahu's sixth government. This challenge is salient in a new arena: US-Israel relations. Without diminishing the importance of the military arena, where cooperation between the US Armed Forces and the IDF continues unabated, the Israeli government must grasp that strengthening the axis between domestic Israeli and American politics is now its main strategic task. Breaking away from the quagmire of legal reform, restraining the onslaught of settlement in the West Bank, and curbing the ultra-Orthodox agenda that cuts off American Jewry from the Jewish state are prices the government's Likud partners will have to pay to improve Israel's security situation. A shift away from the agenda of regime reform and a proper engagement in the security sphere will restore Israel's special relationship with the US and hence its national security as well.

Benjamin Netanyahu likes to compare himself to David Ben-Gurion. He must remember that when Israel's first prime minister decided on a Western orientation, he distanced Marxist parties from his first governments and built coalitions in the political center. He chose the US over the Soviet Union because he comprehended that in Washington, unlike in Moscow, Israel can sway US foreign policy via the domestic system. Israel-US relations have always been and still are based not only on common interests but also on common values. This decision paid off handsomely for both countries, and it should not be thrown away lightly.

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