

On Israel-Palestine, Biden Is Not Just Another Version of Obama

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

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Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



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A veteran Israeli official explains how the next administration will differ from its predecessors and why immediate consultations between Biden and Netanyahu's teams are crucial.

Many in Israel are expressing concern that the administration of President-elect Joe Biden will be a repeat of the Obama administration. But Biden is not Barack Obama and 2021 is not 2009.

Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris are traditional Democrats, with a fundamental commitment to Israel whose roots are in part emotional in nature (in contrast to Obama). The top members of Biden's team are for the most part level-headed and experienced. Contacts with them in recent months leave the impression that their approach to the challenges in the Middle East—which will not be at the top of their agenda in any event—is realistic. They seem to be a far cry from the irrational hopes for the Arab Spring of the Obama era, from dividing the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or from seeing political Islam as an antidote to extremist Islam.

These are people who have learned the lessons of the past decade and are alert to changes in the strategic environment. They are prepared to advance security cooperation with Israel and its Arab partners, but it can be assumed that they will also be critical of human rights abuses by Arab regimes that are important to Israel (Egypt and Saudi Arabia). Turkey, a growing regional headache, is also unlikely to get much satisfaction from them (in part due to Biden's sympathy for the Kurds).

This partial picture, which is full of shades of gray, holds potential for friction on issues that are critical to Israel. Biden seeks to [return to the original terms of the international nuclear agreement \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/iran-s-president-calls-on-biden-to-return-to-nuclear-deal-1.9297353\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/iran-s-president-calls-on-biden-to-return-to-nuclear-deal-1.9297353) with Iran and then to negotiate improvements to the problematic provisions of the original pact, notably including its “sunset” provisions (that is,

the relatively brief periods of restrictions on Iran) and perhaps also Tehran's conduct in the region. Biden's people claim that the non-nuclear sanctions (relating for example to missiles, human-rights violations, and support for terrorism) will remain in place, and that it will be possible to add sanctions in the context of a U.S.-European united front, to which Biden, unlike Trump, attaches major importance.

This approach will pose a challenge to Israeli-American dialogue. If it fails and Iran continually whittles away at the nuclear agreement's provisions and shortens the breakout time that it has to develop military nuclear capabilities, what will the United States do to stop the Iranians? What would be considered a good agreement, which rectifies the defects of its predecessor? And what are the prospects for achieving it with less stringent sanctions? It appears that when it comes to these questions, the United States and Israel would have differing views.

The Biden administration is not expected to give the Israeli-Palestinian issue the priority that Obama accorded it. Biden's aides have no illusions when it comes to the chances for a breakthrough in negotiations on the issue at the present, and they do not intend to launch a peace plan of their own.

At least at the initial stage, they would prefer to focus on preserving a window of opportunity for a future two-state arrangement. That would include taking Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank off the table, opposing West Bank settlement expansion, and shelving the Trump plan for Middle East peace. Even without a diplomatic initiative, the potential for friction is clearly there.

The Biden administration will undoubtedly encourage the trend toward **normalization between Israel and Arab countries** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-sudan-agree-on-steps-toward-normalization-announcement-expected-friday-1.9257650>), although it is not clear the extent to which it will invest efforts in promoting it. The administration would be expected to examine the possibility of involving such a process in developing options in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, including having Israel pay with concessions to the Palestinians for expanded normalization.

As someone who has participated in such contacts in the past, I cannot overstate the importance of consultations with the Biden administration before it takes office. The Israeli government would do well to overcome its internal disputes. It needs to decide what is important to it regarding the core issues (what it will agree to and not only what it opposes) and immediately undertake quiet discussions with the administration. As the Talmud says, he who prepares before Shabbat, eats on Shabbat.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Res.), is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine International Fellow and a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute. This article was originally published on the Haaretz website (<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-on-israel-palestine-biden-is-not-just-another-version-of-obama-1.9299747>). ❖

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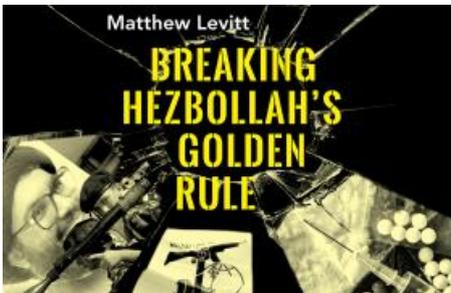
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