

# Bennett Meets Biden: Resetting the Tone and Discussing Differences

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Aug 25, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/bynyt-yltqy-baydn-tghyyr-allhjt-wmnaqsht-alkhlafat\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

**The two leaders have been looking forward to an upbeat summit, but the test will be if they can establish trust and work through their differences on thorny regional issues.**

**F**or Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett and his fragile, wide-ranging hybrid government, this week's White House meeting with President Biden is a rite of passage. Over the past twelve years, Binyamin Netanyahu has dominated Israeli politics and defined the country's policies in the minds of many Americans, so Bennett is already seeking to stand out from that legacy. The visit's timing is also significant for Biden, whose administration is still navigating the turmoil in Afghanistan. Given these factors and the lingering uncertainty about next steps on the Iranian and Palestinian portfolios, the two leaders need to continue resetting the tone of the relationship—and embrace the more difficult task of quietly resolving their policy differences.

## A Constructive Tone in the Shadow of Afghanistan

**B**efore departing for Washington, Bennett told reporters that he seeks a “new spirit of cooperation” with the United States, alluding to the rocky times that Netanyahu experienced with the previous Democratic administration. Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid have committed to projecting this constructive tone and avoiding the public clashes of the Netanyahu years; they have also emphasized the importance of restoring the bipartisan tenor of U.S.-Israeli relations.

Likewise, the Biden administration has maintained its Bennett honeymoon phase. President Biden does not want to see Netanyahu return to power, so he will do what he can to boost Bennett's fragile new government via strong U.S. encouragement. In addition, personal chemistry with other leaders is a staple of Biden's foreign policy approach. When officials trust that Washington will not publicize their differences in a harmful manner, bilateral ties tend to

become more intimate and candid. This behind-the-scenes focus characterized Biden's personal intercession in the **May Gaza crisis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-are-more-divided-ever>)**, helping to curb the fighting fairly quickly. Hence, regardless of any disagreements that emerge behind closed doors, the two governments can be expected to avoid or greatly temper public criticisms and emphasize convergence instead, at least in the summit's aftermath. This has been the Biden administration's corrective to the Obama administration's habit of publicly accentuating its differences with Netanyahu.

The shadow of the chaotic Afghan withdrawal will inevitably influence the summit as well, perhaps spurring Bennett to issue a public reminder that the United States has been a steadfast ally of Israel for decades. Coming from the leader of a country deeply identified with the fight against terrorism, such a statement could win Bennett special gratitude at a time when Biden is being rocked by criticism over his decision. It could also be a precursor to future discussions about whether more U.S. retrenchment in the Middle East is coming—and whether this presages a wider regional role for Israel. In a *New York Times* interview timed to coincide with his arrival in Washington, Bennett declared, "Israel is here. We are the precise anchor of stability, of willingness to do the job to keep this area safer."

## Time for Plan B on Iran?

**B**efore leaving Israel, Bennett made clear that the Iran nuclear issue would be his top priority during the White House meeting. Americans and Israelis alike are increasingly dubious that a breakthrough will occur in the long-running Vienna talks, particularly given the ascension of Ebrahim Raisi's new hardline government in Iran.

The purpose of Vienna was to synchronize the lifting of economic sanctions with Iranian steps toward resuming compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but the process has stalled and **even moved backwards (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-its-not-tactic-khameneis-waning-faith-jcpoa>)** in recent months. Far from scaling its activities back down to within the JCPOA's restrictions, Iran has **greatly increased (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-nuclear-watchdog-report-suggests-impact-suspected-israeli-sabotage>)** its uranium enrichment efforts, leading many to question what the United States will do if the new Raisi government moves toward a **nuclear breakout (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-nuclear-breakout-what-it-and-how-calculate-it>)**. Last month, Biden publicly reiterated that Iran will not get a nuclear bomb "on my watch," but how does an expedited Iranian nuclear timetable affect U.S. planning in practical terms?

Even if the Vienna process is somehow restored, Israeli leaders doubt its utility without guarantees of follow-on talks that enhance and lengthen the JCPOA's restrictions on Iran's nuclear program. Accordingly, Israeli officials have said that Bennett will urge Biden to consider a Plan B. (Notably, though, some senior members of Israel's national security establishment favor a flawed JCPOA, if only to buy time for their country to upgrade its offensive capabilities.) Bennett will seek a better understanding of U.S. planning before pursuing intensified bilateral consultations on the issue.

In the meantime, he told the *New York Times* that Israel would consider involvement in a "coalition of reasonable Arab countries" seeking to curb Iran. Israeli officials have affirmed this notion in private, mentioning enhanced cyber, intelligence, and missile defense cooperation with Arab governments under the U.S. rubric. Bennett also made clear to the *Times* that Israel will continue its longstanding shadow war with Iran, which he called "gray area stuff."

Yet the United States has yet to bury Vienna, so it may not be ready to commit to a Plan B. As one U.S. official noted, "We are pessimistic, but we do not see Vienna as off the table yet." This fact, combined with the lack of certainty about Iran's intentions for the talks, could spur Biden and Bennett to focus on scenarios rather than decisions—a discussion that could be continued in separate meetings between their top aides. The two leaders will also

presumably discuss Iran's [problematic regional role \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-irans-deadly-tanker-attack-linked-nuclear-deal\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-irans-deadly-tanker-attack-linked-nuclear-deal).

## Operationalizing Gradualism on the Palestinian Issue

The Biden administration does not seek to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at this time—the gaps between the parties on core issues are too wide, and there are too many other priorities competing for presidential attention. Yet the United States and Israel both believe in the need for gradual progress.

Bennett knows that Democrats view such progress as the embodiment of restoring bilateral bipartisanship. Yet he, too, is preoccupied with other urgent priorities, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Israeli officials with knowledge of Bennett's thinking have expressed concern that Netanyahu could use any outreach to the Palestinians as ammunition for bringing down the fragile coalition government. For example, one potential diplomatic move could be reopening the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem, which long served as Washington's separate diplomatic mission to the Palestinians—a symbolically important distinction that was erased in 2019 when Palestinian affairs were folded into the relocated Tel Aviv embassy. Some U.S. officials believed that the consulate issue would be resolved after Bennett's new government passes its first budget later this year, but senior Israeli officials now say he wants to avoid the issue altogether.

Another key question is the Palestinian economy. Prior to becoming prime minister, Bennett talked about making major economic enhancements in West Bank cities and their environs, referring to his proposals as “autonomy on steroids.” Yet he has been rather silent on this issue since taking office, focusing on Gaza instead. In addition to responding to periodic rocket and incendiary balloon attacks along that frontier during his tenure, Bennett struck a deal with the UN and Qatar last weekend to provide vouchers to 100,000 impoverished Gazans, sidestepping the need to send cash to Hamas. In retaliation, the terrorist group has organized demonstrations at the Gaza fence in an apparent attempt to undo the voucher deal and mar Bennett's visit to Washington.

Meanwhile, some Israeli moves in the West Bank have seemingly mystified the Biden administration—particularly the decision a few weeks ago to advance plans for building hundreds of new housing units outside the security barrier, in “non-bloc” areas (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/settlements-and-solutions-it-too-late-two-states>) that have typically been regarded as [likely parts \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-state-solution-unworkable\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-state-solution-unworkable) of a future Palestinian state. Will Biden and Bennett's teams resolve this potential friction point by reaching quiet understandings on future settlement activity?

As for Israeli-Palestinian relations, Bennett has avoided being too closely identified with this portfolio, so he may ask Defense Minister Benny Gantz to be the de facto point person with Palestinian officials. Traditionally, Palestinians have come to view Israeli defense ministers as key interlocutors due to the relationship's heavy security dimension and the fact that Palestinian civilian issues often come under the purview of the Israel Defense Forces. Moreover, Gantz seems eager to carve out a role as a leading policy figure at a time when Bennett and Lapid have been the axis of the new government.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Biden and Bennett will emphasize the need to reset the tone of the relationship in a constructive manner. The question is whether this effort will translate into a trusting personal relationship that enables their senior advisors to quietly work through bilateral differences on key regional issues. If the two allies are unable to counsel each other on Iran, Palestinian gradualism, and other matters, then their differences may soon spill out into the open and end the current honeymoon. Alternatively, if the broader forces shaping American retrenchment in the Middle East make Israel even more important to Washington's regional calculus, this strategic imperative could

overshadow any bilateral policy differences going forward.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow in The Washington Institute's Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations, creator of the podcast [Decision Points \(https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/\)](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/), and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its).* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response](#)

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)

◆  
Ido Levy,  
Craig Whiteside

(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022



Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)

## TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)