**Does Israeli factor still dominate Biden’s Mideast policy?**

[Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/syed-qamar-afzal-rizvi/)

February 4, 2021

Certainly, narratives are used by the states to create an environment in which foreign policy takes place. This is what true about the US foreign policy. Generally believed, be it the Republican Government or the Democratic Government in Washington, the Israeli factor richly dominates the US foreign policy contours. The world already knows that under the Trump era, the core of US foreign policy was tilted towards the Israeli consideration in one way or another. Though US decades’ old foreign policy legacy (with no surprise), holds that Israel has been the linchpin of America’s Middle East strategy during both the Cold and the post-Cold War era, President Joe Biden, despite a pro-Israeli tilt , adopts a cautious approach in his Mideast policy.

Actually, the US wasn’t always so close to Israel. For instance, when Israel (along with France and Britain) invaded Egypt in 1956, the United States sided against Israel, pushing the invaders to leave. The US-Israel relationship grew “by leaps and bounds” after 1967, according to Michael Barnett, George Washington University political scientist, owing largely to “a changing US containment and strategic posture.” American presidents and strategists envisaged Israel as a useful tool for containing Soviet influence in the Middle East, which was significant among Arab states, and used diplomatic and military support to weave Israel firmly into the anti-Soviet bloc.US support for Israel isn’t just about strategic calculation and foreign policy interests, or at least not anymore. For a long time, at the very least since the 1980s, it’s also been about domestic politics and the way American politicians read American voters. Congressional votes on issues relating to Israel are famously lopsided.

In the decades since, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute has continually flared into conflict, including multistate wars, armed uprisings (intifadas), and the growing role of the non-state actors. A major turning point was the 1967 Six-Day War, which culminated in Israel’s occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. In its aftermath, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242, which called for Israel to withdraw from occupied lands to secure and recognize borders in exchange for peace. And subsequently, it was the Oslo Peace Accord in 1993-5 — a milestone, becoming the basis for future diplomacy to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. But unfortunately, both the Oslo Accord and the Quartet peace diplomacy could not achieve their respective objectives.

It appears that the growing opportunism of Russia in the Middle East and the penetrating geopolitical clout of China coincide with American reticence, upending the structure of world power politics in Israel’s vicinity

Under the Trump administration, the past four years have radically changed the political landscape for Israelis and Palestinians. While the US has always been a huge backer of Israel – peddling the two-state solution line over the years, even as Israel continued to expropriate Palestinian land and build more settlements – Trump took this policy to new heights. He cut off US aid to the Palestinian Authority in the occupied West Bank, formally recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and moved the US embassy there from Tel Aviv. Trump refused to condemn settlement building and expansion as illegal – in defiance of international law. He also withdrew funding to the UN refugee agency,

President Joe Biden spent thirty-four years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, beginning in 1975. When he was brought on to be Barack Obama’s vice president, it was his nominal status as a national security eminence grise that reportedly attracted political neophyte Obama. Secretary of State Tony Blinken insisted in his nomination hearing that this would be a new era: “We’ll engage the world not as it was, but as it is.” But that’s a problem for Biden, whose national security credibility, such as it is, appears more attuned to a world that was. Biden appears to be moderate in his pro-Israeli thinking. It was he who supported the Obama administration stand on the Israeli settlements.

As for the US Vice President Kamal Harris, this process can be measured in her relationship with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Not long after her election as California senator, but well before her presidential bid, Harris was the star performer at the powerful pro-Israel lobby’s 2017 Policy Conference, in a much-quoted appearance: “Having grown up in the Bay Area, I fondly remember those Jewish National Fund boxes that we would use to collect donations to plant trees for Israel,” she said at that conference, followed by a rapturous travelogue of a recent tour of Israel and the West Bank, which she visited with her Jewish husband, Doug Emhoff, whom she married in an interfaith ceremony in 2014.

Harris highlighted the co-sponsorship in a 2017 speech at AIPAC’s policy conference, saying it would help “combat anti-Israel bias at the United Nations and reaffirm that the United States seeks a just, secure and sustainable two-state solution.” But while a new administration under Biden will not reverse some key steps adopted by its predecessor, including the decision to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it will surely abandon the Trump peace plan. In that way, it will deny Israel the green light it had to disregard international law and prevent the establishment of a viable Palestinian state, with its capital in East Jerusalem. In its desire to reconstitute the JCPOA, some argue that the Biden administration might be tabling a pragmatic bargain, at least temporarily: Washington could refrain from pressuring Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians, in return for a freeze on the annexation front, and Israel’s cooperation for pragmatic tolerance regarding an updated agreement with Iran.

It appears that the growing opportunism of Russia in the Middle East and the penetrating geopolitical clout of China coincide with American reticence– to engage in the region–upending the structure of world power politics in Israel’s vicinity. The Barack Obama administration had already sought to reduce Washington’s commitments in the region, and this rested on deep and probably lasting trends in American public opinion. As many Americans continue to argue their country’s interests in Middle Eastern affairs are declining, the U.S.-Israeli ties seem to mark some new changes, with a growing gap between Republican and Democratic support for the Israeli-American relationship, manifested by generational ideological shifts. Skepticism of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians is rising on the American political left and even among younger Americans on the right. Biden’s move– to review the Iranian nuclear while halting the Arms and F-35s sale to KSA and the UAE– is reflective of a Democratic President’s cautious approach in the region.

*The writer is an independent ‘IR’ researcher and international law analyst based in Pakistan*