

The time-tested US-Israel alliance is under stress. Biden-Harris wary of new Netanyahu govt

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December 20, 2022



Benjamin Netanyahu waves as he addresses his supporters at his party headquarters during Israel's general election in Jerusalem on 2 November 2022 | Credit: Ammar Awad, Reuters

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In the history of Israel's foreign relations, its alliance with the United States is special and the most important one. In the diplomatic world, their relationship stands out as extraordinary due to comprehensive strategic partnership, intelligence and security cooperation, free trade economic engagement and socio-cultural ties. There isn't another alliance like theirs in the world. The growing success of religious and nationalist parties in Israel can impact its cherished alliance with the US.

Israeli domestic politics has been taking a turn to far-Right with more and more assertion of religious (ultra)nationalism – an agenda that challenges cultural-social pluralism and democratic ethos as well as the idea of peace with the Palestinians. People of Israel have been resilient in voting again and again, for five times in the national elections since 2019, in search of political stability. Their issues and aims are democratically dealt with thus far. Benjamin Netanyahu has got the mandate to form the government in the latest election held on 1 November. His party, *Likud*, has got 32 seats. But like all other elections, he banks upon coalition with the religious and far-Right parties. Some of these parties stand for gender segregation at the religious and publicly funded places, giving more power to the legislature with an override clause. It makes sure that the Supreme

Court may not have effective judicial review. And some parties suggest revision of the law of return (a law that grants right to the Jews anywhere in the world for Israeli citizenship) etc.

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The politics of Israel

Most of the liberal Americans have been supporters of Israel because it is the only country in West Asia that has an open society, free press and substantial democracy. Though they have a critical view of Israel's aggressive foreign policy with the Palestinians and expect Israel to show more commitment for the two-States solutions. The democratic party, which is in power right now, represents these notions for a long time and its leaders like Joe Biden and Kamala Harris who are apprehensive of the incoming government under Benjamin Netanyahu, which will have many ministers who don't shy away from attacking Israel's judiciary system, its autonomy that defends the rule of law as well as the open and plural society.

Netanyahu's coalition talks with ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties can secure 64 out of 120 seats of parliament and Netanyahu will have some ministers (such as Itamar Ben-Gvir or Bezalel Smotrich) in the cabinet who might not be able to travel to US or even share a podium with the US ambassador in Israel because of their views on gender, race and overt support for violence against the Arab Israelis and the Palestinians.

Boycotting a democratically elected leader of a foreign country isn't unusual in US political culture. But the fact that it can happen to Israeli elected leaders is a critical junction in Israel-US relations. Washington's pressure on Netanyahu was out in public last month when the US made it clear that Bezalel Smotrich shall not be the defence minister of Israel. Smotrich demanded to be given the defence portfolio, the second most important post after prime minister in Israel. As a result, he is being given treasury by Netanyahu who could not ignore the messaging from US.

As a democracy, Israel will get the kind of leadership that its people will vote for, and one must respect it if not appreciate. Case of Israeli electoral democracy is trickier and more complicated as the Centrist-Left-Liberal block is not far lesser in number compared with the Right-Extremist-Conservative one. These represent the two halves of Israeli society and that is why each election in the last four years has produced similar numbers for Left, Right and Center. The last government with Liberal-Left and Centrist coalition had 61 out of 120 seats.

However, the domestic divisions are now becoming grave because secular-liberal Israelis and religious-conservative Israelis are without a common minimum programme that can sustain democratic principles, rule of law and more importantly, the ethos of equality and

liberty for all Israelis and give enough political space to the orthodox people of Israel for their faith and practices. It is a complex, genuine debate that all Israelis wish to solve, democratically.

Israel has received strong and stable support from the US since 1967 and it hasn't really mattered if a democratic or republican president came to power in Washington. Israel-US ties are far deeper – it's cultural, social and part religious in addition to the two having common national interests and shared values. Samuel Lewis, one of the illustrious US ambassadors to Israel in late 1970s, said, "The relationship [with Israel] is deeper and wider than government to government, it is unique among all our relationships in the world. It is like a Catholic marriage of old: you can love each other, yell at each other, disagree with each other, even leave each other for a period of time, but you do not get a divorce".

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The US' solidarity for Israel

Beyond the narrow realist or Machiavellian perspective, there are some strong socio-cultural norms – values that hold the Israel-US relations. Evangelical Christians or Catholics believe that Jews' return to Jerusalem or ancient Israel is as it is told in the Bible. Harry Truman had 'a sense of appropriateness in the return of Jews to Palestine' and Lyndon Johnson was told by his grandfather to take care of Jews as they are people chosen by the god. According to George W Bush, Israel-US ties are 'grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, the ties of the soul'. Something very similar was said by Joe Biden. That for him, 'it started at my dinner table with my father, who you would refer to as a righteous Christian. ...My father's support for Israel... generated a feeling for Israel that began in my gut and went to my heart, and the older I got matured in my mind...my mother and my father often spoke about the special connection between the Jewish people and this land (of America)'. Donald Trump has been a more ardent supporter as he shifted the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in 2017, much against the international opinion. During his campaign for the second term, in 2020, he said he did that more for the American evangelical Christians rather than the American Jews (he thinks they don't care much about Jerusalem).

As of 2020, the US gave \$3.8 billion per annum in aid to Israel, as part of a long-term commitment made under the Obama administration. What is significant is that almost all this aid has been for military assistance, according to a report from BBC in 2021. Former US president Barack Obama signed an agreement, in 2016, for an overall package of \$38 billion in military aid over the decade 2017-2028. Israel is the only country in the world that gets military aid from the US and doesn't have to be accountable about how its spending. Obama wasn't a pro-Israel president. He was publicly critical of Israel's policy toward the Palestinians, and he didn't approve of aggressive and unilateral politics of

Benjamin Netanyahu. In the recently released autobiography, Netanyahu shares that he felt attacked by the Obama administration multiple times and blamed for the lack of peace in the Middle East. He felt, 'the prime minister of Israel was being treated as a minor thug in the neighbourhood'.

The support of the US is not unconditional, and Joe Biden is making it amply clear that his administration wishes elected Israeli leaders show enough commitment for democracy and peace. The complex interdependence that binds Israel to the US administration and people of America is playing a positive role here.

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