

## Opinion – Biden and the Netanyahu Government: An Inevitable Clash?

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, JAN 17 2023

United States President Joe Biden and American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken congratulated Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu on the occasion of the formation of his new government. The general elections were held on 1 November 2022, where the incumbent coalition of Prime Minister Lapid saw an overwhelming defeat. Yet, it took Netanyahu almost two months to reach agreements with other parties, namely religious and center-right ones. The new government was only sworn in on 29 December 2022. Biden and Blinken promised to preserve the good relations between the United States and Israel, but they are very suspicious of the coalition that was established. They emphasized the need to maintain established common values and interests, and have already criticized moves that they see as harming American interests directly, as well as those seen as provocative in the Muslim world.

At the fore of this provocation is the new Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir. He is a member of a smaller coalition party – Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), without which Netanyahu couldn't have attained a majority in the Knesset. Hence, he possesses a disproportionate power in the Cabinet as a Minister relative to the number of Knesset seats his party holds, and the number of people who voted for them. He ascended to visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem that is home to the Al-Aqsa mosque a few days after taking office. He claimed to have done so as an exercise of Jewish rights, as he claims, but others might see it as a move to change the status quo of Muslim control on the Temple Mount, a move that could set the region on fire.

In the United States, Ben Gvir is seen as the ideological successor of Rabbi Meir Kahane and the Jewish Defense League he founded in the United States – classified as a terrorist organization by the FBI. The fact that only about two months ago he spoke at a memorial dedicated Kahane indicates his adherence to the racist ideology of the rabbi. He is not the only member of Netanyahu's coalition that has caught the attention of American top officials. Knesset members Orit Struck and Simcha Rothman of the Religious Zionism party (known as Tkuma, a far-right, ultra-nationalist, and religious Zionist coalition partner) have proposed a new controversial legislation. Its content looks similar to what the United States would expect from a violent racist organization such as the Ku Klux Klan, or the blacklistings and persecutory stances akin to those endorsed by infamous US Senator Joseph McCarthy. This would also widen the rift that has opened between the Jewry of the United States and the new government in Israel.

Blinken, and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, will arrive in Israel with the stated objective to confer on the new government's policies. Israeli media prefers to suggest that this will also include a joint stance on the Iran nuclear threat, its supply of deadly drones to Russia for use in the Ukraine and its regional involvement in Syria and Yemen through proxy terrorist groups. However, given the nature of Netanyahu's coalition partners the visit will also serve to warn Netanyahu against far-reaching changes in the Israeli democratic regime and in relations with the Palestinians.

American administrations examine regimes in the world according to democratic values and human rights records. Promoting and preserving democracy globally has always been one of the most important values in American foreign policy. Since its independence in 1948, Israel has also stressed that it strives to promote and adhere to values in the fields of democracy and human rights, and the country is often seen as the bastion of democracy in a region saturated with autocratic regimes.

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Another Israeli Cabinet Minister (from the Netanyahu's Likud Party), Minister of Justice Yariv Levin, has announced an overhaul of Israel's legal system. This is planned to neutralize any criticism of governmental appointments, policies and challenges to laws debated and passed. If he succeeds to implement the reform, the balance between the authorities of executive, legislative and judiciary powers will be destabilized. Additionally, Aryeh Deri, who covers both the Ministries of Health and the Interior, has past criminal convictions (including one less than 12 months ago), and the Supreme Court of 11 Judges is debating whether this should bar him from office. However, Netanyahu couldn't have attained a majority in the Knesset without his participation in the coalition, and if Levin succeeds in reforming the legal system, ongoing court cases against Bibi might be affected.

Although many American administrations have already tried to broker a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Biden cabinet may well assume that Netanyahu's coalition leaves no chance for negotiations at all with even the most moderate of Palestinian leaderships. Biden's government, like all American administrations since 1967, supports the two-state solution. However, the new Israel Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich (from the Religious Zionist Party) and Ben-Gvir have stated that that would lay the groundwork in Israel for annexation of many parts if not all of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria). This will start with the expansion of Jewish settlements there, whitewashing the illegality of any temporary outposts, and repealing the law of secession, that would harm the 1994 Oslo Accords together with the governance of the Palestinian Authority. All of these guarantee a head-on collision between Biden and Netanyahu.

The effects of such a collision will not be confined to Israel's domestic politics, but will also extend to foreign policy areas. For example, shortly after taking office on 29 December 2022 Netanyahu spoke on the phone with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eli Cohen from the Likud Party, also spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They agreed to reduce public references to the war in Ukraine and so criticism of Russia. Moreover, Israel has security interests in Syria and coordinates military moves with Russia. To American eyes, conversations with Putin or Lavrov are seen as legitimizing Russia's military ambitions, while Democrats and Republicans alike see Putin, Lavrov and the Russian government and military as war criminals. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, one of Israel's biggest supporters, harshly criticized Cohen by saying:

I hope Mr. Cohen understands that when he talks to (Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov), he is talking to a representative of a criminal regime that commits war crimes every day.

Netanyahu's new coalition, arguably the most right-wing in Israel's history, with many of its members who have been elected for the first time to the Knesset, may well see the need to show their supporters that they are fulfilling their electoral promises. At the same time, those in the coalition, who are extremists, tend to ignore Israel's dependence on the United States. It is fair to assume that, when negotiating the coalition, Netanyahu thought he could manage to curb extremism by pointing out that democratic values and the international community are more important than stirring up turmoil. Bibi gave an interview in English to American media and said that he will hold the helm of his government and they have nothing to worry about.

However, there are gaps between what Netanyahu said in English and what he said in Hebrew – and between what he can and cannot do. Ben Gvir's ascent to the Temple Mount may be a challenge for Netanyahu both domestically and internationally, leading to reduced credibility in him and in the Likud Party. The bottom line is, if the extremists take control of Netanyahu and not the other way around, then it will lead to clashes with Biden that could harm annual American aid to Israel, the supply of arms and the protection of Israel's positions in UN organizations such as the Security Council, the Human Rights Council and the International Courts in The Hague. Without such protection, which has been always consistent, Israel could become a pariah state in the international community, and potentially see the termination of the Abraham Accords. Netanyahu is the only one who can decide between isolation and a well sustained "special relationship".

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