

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 102 (June 2021)

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The historic end of Netanyahu's 12-year reign changed little in Israel-US security and diplomatic cooperation. As the US foreign policy establishment acquaints itself with the new Israeli regime, it remains resolved to balance loyalty to traditional pro-Israel postures and healing the scathed relationship with the Palestinians. Despite decreased US military presence in the Middle East in efforts to project JCPOA seriousness, continued attacks by Iranian-militias convinced Biden to order airstrikes.

A. Israel-US Relations

Biden welcomes the Bennet-Lapid government. As prospects of regime change in Israel congealed early in the month, Secretary Blinken [reassured](#) that the Biden administration will eagerly work with whomever will serve as the Israeli Prime Minister. President Biden [called](#) to congratulate Prime Minister Bennet on assuming the prime ministry. Vice President Harris [tweeted](#) a congratulatory message to Bennett and Lapid as well. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) Israeli-Palestinian relations, Iran and normalization efforts with Foreign Minister Lapid, the first meeting between the two since the government was enshrined. Later in the month, Secretary Blinken [met](#) with Lapid again in Rome, and the two reaffirmed their commitment to the ironclad US-Israel partnership and pursuit of normalization with other Arab countries. In their later meeting, Lapid also [reaffirmed](#) Israeli opposition to the Iran nuclear deal. Prime Minister Naftali Bennet [met](#) Interim Ambassador to Israel Ratney in Jerusalem for the first time since assuming office.

Security cooperation with Israel continues uninterrupted. Defense Minister Gantz [discussed](#) peace efforts and US-Israel security cooperation with Secretary Blinken in the White House. Blinken also stressed US commitment to Israel's security and reconstruction in Gaza. At the time Chief of Staff Cohavi [visited](#) Washington to discuss "common security challenges", CENTCOM [increased](#) military coordination with Israel as the indirect talks with Iran continue. Speaking in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Blinken [asserted](#) that Biden's proposed budget will sufficiently fund US commitment to Israel. Four Democratic and Republican Senators [introduced](#) a bill to establish a center for artificial

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intelligence cooperation between Israel and the US. Despite uninterrupted security cooperation, changing public opinion regarding US role in Israeli military offensives presents an ominous threat to US-Israel relations; A report [released](#) this month reveals that the majority of the American public supports conditioning military aid to Israel on improvement in human rights record.

B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

Biden balances support for Israel and efforts to restore trust with the Palestinians.

As it became clear that Bennet would become Prime Minister, Blinken [affirmed](#) that regardless of the Israeli position, the US is determined to pursue the two state solution. As Naftali Bennet aims to entwine retrieval of dead soldiers from the Gaza Strip with indirect negotiations with Hamas, the Biden Administration [refuses](#) to condition reconstruction aid to Gaza on the return of the bodies. Meanwhile, the Biden administration will [condition](#) UNRWA funding on substantial reform regarding anti-Israel and anti-Semitic materials, stated Secretary Blinken. The State Department issued a statement [commemorating](#) the death of Palestinian activist and PA-critic Nizar Barat, and called on the PA to conduct a “thorough and transparent” investigation of his death.

Congress is divided on Israel, and bipartisan support seems to weaken. Twenty-three Republican representatives [co-sponsored](#) a bill urging the government to divert funding for the reconstruction of Gaza to the Iron Dome. Likewise, 17 Republican Senators [implored](#) Biden to eschew from reopening either the Palestinian mission in Washington or the US-Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem. Sen. Rubio and Sen. Manchin introduced a bill [enabling](#) local authorities to divest from BDS-affiliated institutions, a revamped version of the 2019 Combating BDS Act. More than a hundred House Democrats [signed](#) on a letter calling on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to enable the passage of aid to the Gaza Strip. Later in the month, more than 70 Democratic Representatives [called](#) on Biden to recant Trump’s one-sided Israel-Palestine approach, withdraw the Trump peace plan and re-open the Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem.

C. The US and Israel’s relations with the Arab World

Bipartisan support for normalization with Arab countries. Fifty-six congress members from both sides of the aisle [introduced](#) a bill imploring the Biden administration to enhance normalization efforts between Israel and the Arab world, which [passed](#) later in the month in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The State Department [issued](#) a statement congratulating the opening of the Israeli Embassy in the UAE, and vowed to “work to create a more peaceful, secure, and prosperous future for all the peoples of the Middle East”.

The US hopes Sudan will expand relations with Israel. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) regional stability and commitment to the normalization with Israel with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

D. US Middle East policy

The US foreign policy apparatus is cautious about JCPOA restoration. At the conclusion of the sixth round of indirect talks with Iran, a senior State Department official [clarified](#) that an agreement has not yet been reached to restore the JCPOA, as rumors gained traction. The EU mediator [clarified](#) that although strides have been made, the deal is not yet within grasp. In a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing, Secretary Blinken [reassured](#) that in the case of JCPOA restoration the US will maintain myriad sanctions on Iran, unless the latter will change its aggressive posture in the region. The US [removed](#) sanctions against three individuals and two companies designated for their involvement in trading petrochemicals with Iran. National Security Advisor Sullivan [asserted](#) that fundamental disagreements still prevent the salvaging of the JCPOA, while stressing that the Iranian elections are largely immaterial to the negotiations.

Biden orders airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias, while efforts to decrease military presence continue. In retaliation for ongoing strikes against US troops, President Biden [ordered airstrikes](#) on June 27 in Syria and Iraq, targeting Iranian-backed militias for the second time since assuming the presidency. The Pentagon [asserted](#) that the US attacked three different "operational and weapons storage facilities", [two in Syria and one in Iraq](#). US Ambassador to the UN Thomas-Greenfield [clarified](#) that the strikes were aimed to deter attacks on American interests. Early in the month, General McKenzie [warned](#) that the US must develop better strategies to counter drone attacks by Iranian-backed militias on areas with American presence in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Biden administration is [reducing](#) military presence in the Middle East, withdrawing at least 8 patriot missile batteries from key positions, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and [hundreds of troops](#).

US pursues ceasefire in Yemen while targeting the Houthis. The State Department [issued](#) sanctions against individuals associated with an international network that provided millions of US dollars in assistance to the Houthis in cooperation with the IRGC. US Special Envoy Lenderking [returned](#) from a tour in Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, where he convened with officials "to discuss the humanitarian and economic crisis in Yemen and the urgent need for a comprehensive ceasefire". Later in the month, Lenderking [visited](#) the Middle East again to discuss the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement and the importance of Yemeni return to Aden with Saudi and Yemeni officials.

The US expands cooperation with Saudi Arabia to climate policy. Following a visit by Climate Change Envoy Kerry, the US and Saudi Arabia [issued](#) a statement about shared commitment to tackling climate change and affirmed resolve to work together on various projects, such as the Saudi Green Initiative. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) strategic cooperation and common interest in containing Iran with Saudi Foreign Minister bin Farhan.

The US and Turkey cooperate in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. A US delegation visited Ankara to [discuss](#) Turkish takeover of Kabul airport following Biden-ordered US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Reportedly, officials from both countries are close to an agreement.

D. Further Readings

1. Michael Eisenstadt, [Beyond Forever Wars and Great Power Competition](#), *Washington Institute*, June 1st
2. Elham Manea, [Absence of Violence or Sustainable Peace? Yemen's Pathway Forward](#), *Middle East Institute*, June 6th
3. Ali Vaez and Dina Esfandiary, [The Hard-Liners Won in Iran. That's Not All Bad News](#), *The New York Times*, June 22
4. Omar H. Rahman, [U.S. Support Is Keeping the Undemocratic Palestinian Authority Alive](#), *Foreign Policy*, July 2nd