

# The first Bennett-Biden meeting: What's at stake

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## Introduction

**Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will travel to Washington DC today for his first official international trip since assuming office.** On Wednesday, he is due to meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, before meeting President Joe Biden on Thursday.

**The Biden-Bennett meeting will build on recent discussions between senior officials.** In June, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi flew to Washington to meet Austin, Sullivan, and US military officials; Foreign Minister Yair Lapid met with Blinken in Rome; Austin was in Israel to discuss regional issues with Defence Minister Benny Gantz; CIA Director William Burns spoke with Bennett and Mossad head David Barnea in Israel; and the incoming National Security Advisor Eyal Hulata met with Sullivan in Washington last week.

**Bennett's visit comes at a challenging time politically and strategically.** Heading a coalition government comprising many parties spanning left and right, Bennett has a razor-thin parliamentary majority, which is struggling to bring the COVID Delta variant under control. Israel's strategic position has been strengthened by the Abraham Accords, signed a year ago, which have led to a warming of relations with Bahrain, the UAE, and Morocco (Lapid recently visited Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Rabat). Yet the government is also facing a complex security situation: rockets have been fired by both Palestinian factions and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon; Iran has escalated its aggression on the high seas, most recently with a UAV attack on a vessel owned by an Israeli shipping magnate; the Gaza border is heating up, with violent demonstrations over the weekend and an Israeli soldier critically injured by Hamas fire; and Lebanon is facing a severe social and economic crisis, and is expecting an Iranian tanker purportedly carrying fuel but also potentially sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah. Biden too is under domestic pressure following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the speedy Taliban takeover of the country.

**The visit is testament to the enduring Israeli-American alliance as well intended to restore the relationship to what the sides see as a 'healthier' place.** Biden has historically been a strong supporter of the Jewish state. He famously boasts about having met all Prime Ministers since Golda Meir and in 2014, described support for a secure and democratic Israel as "meeting a moral obligation" and a "strategic necessity". The President has also rejected the policies of the progressive wing in the Democratic party who have called for conditioning US military aid to Israel. Yet Israel has increasingly become a wedge domestic issue, with Democrats angry at former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for what they saw as his disrespect towards former President Barack Obama, as well as his cosying up to former President Donald Trump. Despite Bennett's right-wing credentials, his government is consciously designing policy towards America in contrast to Netanyahu's sometimes partisan and confrontational approach (as demonstrated by his speech to a Republican controlled Congress in 2015 against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA] nuclear deal). Bennett comes to Washington looking to restore bipartisan support and hoping to keep policy disagreements private and 'between friends'.

**Beyond the expected warm welcome, the leaders will focus on crucial foreign policy issues.** White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the tête-a-tête would include "critical issues related to regional and global security, including Iran" and "efforts to advance peace, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians and the importance of working towards a more peaceful and secure future for the region". While Bennett will likely seek to place Iran front and centre, Biden will be at pains to raise the Palestinian issue and the need to keep open the window for a two-state solution.

## The JCPOA and Iranian regional policy

The two sides have already shared the intelligence picture about Iranian actions in both the nuclear and regional arenas, although it remains unclear the extent to which they share conclusions and an action plan.

**Despite the administration's preference, a return to the JCPOA – and certainly a 'longer and stronger deal' – seems increasingly unlikely.** Biden originally hoped to reach an agreement with the Islamic Republic to return to the nuclear deal in exchange for dropping sanctions, before subsequently negotiating a 'longer and stronger' agreement. Such a deal would potentially expand the 'sunset clauses', which provide legitimacy for Iran to become a nuclear threshold state once the agreement ends; restrict development and production of ballistic missiles; and roll back Iran's regional policy of using proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen to increase its influence. Yet nuclear negotiations in Vienna have stalled, and the election of a new, hard-line Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, raises questions regarding Tehran's interest in striking any deal. Iranian advanced enrichment and nuclear research progress has significantly reduced the time it would take to accumulate material for a single nuclear bomb, thus fundamentally changing the rules of the game established by the 2015 JCPOA. The administration hasn't given up. But Rob Malley, the special envoy to Iran, has said they are preparing a contingency plan for the possibility that a renewal of the JCPOA may ultimately not be a viable option.

**Bennett will present a new "holistic strategy" that relates to the array of Iranian threats without re-entering the JCPOA.** Bennett announced that Israel had recently finished a policy review towards Iran and planned to come to Washington "with an approach of a partnership that is aimed at countering Iran's regional activity and preventing it from breaking out to a nuclear weapon". Bennett has criticised Netanyahu's policy, charging in a stormy Knesset debate that "never has anyone talked so much and done so little" to curb Iran. Saying Israel was at a "critical point regarding Iran", Bennett remarked that he "will tell President Biden that it is time to stop the Iranians ... not to give them a lifeline in the form of re-entering into an expired nuclear deal. [The deal] is no longer relevant, even by the standards of those who once thought that it was".

**American support for Israel's regional policy against Iran will continue.** Israel's 'Campaign Between the Wars', which has entailed hundreds of sorties in Syria (and sometimes Iraq) to weaken Iranian entrenchment will face no opposition in Washington. Bennett will emphasise the serious threat Israel faces from Hezbollah and its [precision guided missile programme](#) and suggest that, under certain circumstances, Israel may be forced to act pre-emptively. He may also warn of a dangerous scenario in which Lebanon as a state collapses.

**The key question is the extent to which Biden will maintain a military option against Iran if diplomacy fails and support Israeli actions to curb Iranian nuclear ambitions.** Bennett will be eager to understand what the administration's Plan B is over Iran and how it practically plans to deter Iran from nuclear progress if negotiations collapse. They may discuss defining a red line or threshold for Iranian nuclear progress and options for if the Islamic Republic crosses it. In this context, the Israeli Prime Minister might request additional military hardware that could help ease a potential future military strike on Iranian nuclear sites (which in turn would act as an additional deterrence factor against Iran).

## The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

**A formal return to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over a final status deal is not a priority for either leader.** Bennett's coalition, an eclectic mix of advocates of West Bank annexation and advocates of withdrawal, is seeking to minimise the conflict rather than resolve it. The administration does not believe conditions are ripe for any significant progress – Biden remembers how Chairman Mahmoud Abbas did not respond to Obama during the last round of serious negotiations in 2014. But the US wants to keep the window for a two-state solution open and is interested in repairing relations with the Palestinian Authority after the breakdown during

the Trump years. In this context, the two leaders will find some agreement on certain steps and continue to disagree on others – although without public recriminations of the past.

**Biden and Bennett broadly agree on the need improve the situation on the ground in the West Bank.** In the lead-up to Bennett’s trip, the government approved 2,000 settlement homes as well as – in a nod to Washington – 1,000 homes for Palestinians in Area C and an additional 16,000 work permits for West Bank Palestinians. Biden may ask for additional gestures to improve the Palestinian economy such as facilitating the creation of industrial zones.

**Israeli settlements continue to be a point of contention.** While the Biden administration will not promote Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, it opposes Israeli settlement building, which the current government will inevitably advance (even if minimally). Biden understands Bennett’s political constraints and will refrain from turning the issue into a public spat as happened during the Obama-Netanyahu years (as Vice President, Biden was on an official trip to Israel when an announcement of housing construction in East Jerusalem was made). Biden will likely request Bennett restrain building approval and will publicly reiterate the US support for a two-state solution in which both Israelis and Palestinian can live in security and dignity.

**A more symbolic but highly sensitive issue is the American desire to re-open its Consulate in West Jerusalem,** which served Palestinian residents of the city before being closed following Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Yet the establishment of a consulate on sovereign Israeli territory for a foreign entity is politically controversial and particularly sensitive for Bennett and his shaky coalition. If Biden is insistent, one option might be to postpone the plans until the government has passed a budget in early November, after which Bennett will have greater political room to manoeuvre.

**Both sides see the importance of stabilising Gaza but know it’s easier said than done.** During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Biden gave Israel diplomatic cover while urging the Netanyahu government to bring the fighting to an end and allowing Egypt to take the lead in forging a ceasefire. Yet three months after the operation ended, the situation in Gaza remains unstable. Sporadic rocket fire and incendiary balloons have continued, which the government has responded to with pinpoint airstrikes. Hamas-initiated rioting along the border fence occurred over the weekend. Israel, Qatar and the UN last week did announce a “new mechanism” for Qatari humanitarian funds to reach the Strip. And Israel began allowing merchants and businessmen from Gaza through the Erez crossing. Israel is open to taking broad steps in the realm of electricity, water and gas to improve the humanitarian situation in the Strip, although this will be difficult to achieve without a return of the Israeli citizens and bodies of soldiers currently held by Hamas and willingness by the Palestinian Authority to be actively involved in the Strip. Biden’s team could raise ideas for stabilising Gaza, although there is little appetite in Washington to do the heavy lifting, and Biden will likely tell Bennett he supports steps that Israel and Egypt might make. Bennett is due to meet Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Cairo soon after his return.

## **The China issue**

**Chinese involvement in Israel remains a deep point of contention.** Fearing China could gain access to sophisticated Israeli technology, the US has consistently expressed strong opposition to Chinese involvement in critical Israeli infrastructure – most recently during the CIA Director’s trip to Israel. In the 2000s American pressure led to the cancellation of two major Israeli arms deals with China. Yet, economic cooperation with China remains important for Israel and in 2019 it allowed Huawei to enter the country’s solar power market. Most significantly, the Shanghai International Port Group company is due to begin operating the new Bay Port platform in Haifa from September, having won a 25 year contract (it’s worth noting that four American companies refused to apply for the tender) leading Pentagon officials to warn that the US Sixth Fleet may cease docking in the port. Biden will reiterate the seriousness in which the US views this issue, but – as with other disagreements – the sides will seek to resolve them privately.

## Conclusion

The intense staff work in the lead up to the summit is testament to the wish of both sides to strengthen the relationship and suggests the meeting itself will be considered a diplomatic success. Biden may enjoy short-term attention diverted from Afghanistan, while Bennett will benefit from having the red carpet rolled out for him, especially to an Israeli domestic audience used to seeing Netanyahu meet with world leaders.

Important policy gaps will continue over dealing with Iran although the two countries will likely cooperate on covert actions against the Islamic Republic to slow down its march towards the bomb if negotiations fail.

A larger question hovering over the summit – and which may not be directly discussed – is the longer-term position of the US within the Middle East as it seeks to pivot to Asia. The US maintains small numbers of troops in Syria and Iraq, and many of its regional allies fear Afghanistan is a prelude to further withdrawals, which they worry would not only fuel instability but allow Iran into the vacuum to continue its malign regional activities.

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