

# Israel is in trouble with the Democrats and it needs to move fast

The message is clear - Hamas and anti-Netanyahu protesters are happy Biden has won.



AMERICAN AND ISRAELI flags fly during a demonstration in support of Israel at the US Capitol in 2002. (photo credit: KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS)

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“It is easier to fight with someone you can present as your adversary.” That is what a senior member of Israel’s right-wing camp told me on Sunday following the announcement that then-Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden had won the presidential election.

Biden, he explained, might be a veteran friend of Israel. But, he added, the former vice president would be easier to portray as the opposite if needed. “Trump gave Israel so much that it was harder to battle him on something like the establishment of a Palestinian state,” he said. “With Biden, that will be easier.”

The conversation was telling. First, it showed what direction the post-election narrative is taking in some right-wing circles. Tzachi Hanegbi, a veteran Likud minister, made his own contribution Sunday night when he expressed grave concern over the impact Biden’s election would have on Iran, warning that it could lead to an Israeli-Iranian conflict.

And then there was a meme put out by Channel 20, a TV station joined at the hip with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In the graphic, a Hamas terrorist has his arm wrapped around the shoulder of a smiling protester against Netanyahu. Both men are waving Biden-Harris flags. The message is clear - Hamas and anti-Netanyahu protesters are happy Biden has won.

Channel 20, it is important to note, is Netanyahu’s home channel, the Israeli version of what Fox News was for Trump until it called Arizona for Biden on Election Day. It is unabashedly right-wing and completely aligned with the prime minister and his party. It is also the only station to which he regularly gives interviews.

Why is any of this important? Because, if Netanyahu wants, he can ignite a crisis with President-elect Biden. It is all a question of what he decides is more

important – the image of someone who can stand up to an antagonistic president or the preservation of Israeli-American relations.

But even if politics were taken out of the mix, Israel would still have a deep-rooted problem with the Biden administration. This is not because Biden or Vice President-elect Kamala Harris are anti-Israel, but because of something deeper – an institutional problem Israel has with the Democratic Party.

Israel's trouble with the Democratic Party is no secret and is the result of two trends – one originating in Israel and the other in the United States. Countless research papers, polls, and symposia have been written and held to discuss the challenge but here is the bottom line – Israel today is perceived in progressive circles as right-wing, nationalistic, populist, racist, and overly religious.

Just look at the way the vast majority of American Jews (70-75 %) voted for Biden while in Israel there was an overwhelming majority that preferred Trump.

Talk to a Democratic member of Congress and you will hear a mouthful. It will include criticism of the way Netanyahu has cozied up to Trump, the continued stalemate with the Palestinians, and the discrimination of progressive Jews on matters of religion and state in Israel.

EVERY CONVERSATION will also eventually get to the speech Netanyahu gave before Congress in 2015 against the Iran nuclear deal, perceived as a personal assault on President Barack Obama.

This is why with a Biden administration coming into office, Israel needs to work immediately to start repairing relations and creating new lines of communication. Time is of the essence and failure to do so will undermine Israel's security in the Middle East.

There are a number of immediate steps that Israel can take. The first is starting to reach out already now to the Biden administration and to begin trying to influence the way its officials view topics of mutual interest.

After Trump was elected president in 2016, Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer was spotted at Trump Tower, meeting shortly after the election with the president-elect and his team.

Israel needs to begin doing that again now. It might make sense to move up the transition between Gilad Erdan and Dermer and put the former minister, currently serving as Israel's envoy to the UN, in Washington sooner than originally planned.

This would be so he could start meeting with Biden officials as opposed to Dermer whose role in organizing Netanyahu's 2015 speech burned some of his relationships with Democrats.

In addition, Israel needs to start reaching out to progressive Jewry. If Israel had a normal government, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi would be perfectly positioned to do that. The problem is, like many other issues in Israel right now, the government simply does not get along.

There are other steps Israel could take but they include strategic thinking and planning. Different communication strategies, different narratives, and a completely different approach to minority communities.

Dani Dayan, who returned to Israel this past summer after a successful term as Israel's counsel general to New York where he invested his time working with progressive communities, said that Israel needs to learn "democratic speech."

"We have to show that we know how to connect to liberal values in the US," he said. "We need a national outreach project to the Latino community and we have a chance to succeed there."

According to Dayan, Israeli diplomats need to gain a better understanding of the different ethnicities that make up America today. "Israelis, in general, and our politicians, in particular, don't do that partly because the political culture in Israel is conservative and right-wing," he said.

But most importantly, he said, is for Israel to stop paying lip service to bipartisanship and to actually act like it cares about bipartisanship.

He couldn't be more right. The time to start doing that? Yesterday.

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