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BULLETIN

What will be U.S. Policy Towards Israel and Palestine after the Elections?

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The latest chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most resonant foreign policy themes in the U.S. presidential election campaign. This is because of the traditionally high importance of the issue of support for Israel in U.S. domestic politics. The Middle East crisis will be one of the main challenges for the new administration, regardless of who wins, with pressure on the parties for a ceasefire be the most likely action.

Biden's Presidency and Israel. Since the beginning of his term in 2021, Joe Biden has continued the traditional pro-Israel line in U.S. foreign policy and his [administration has upheld most of the decisions of Donald Trump's presidency](#). Although relations with the Palestinians improved and some funding for them was restored (e.g., for UNRWA), the lack of U.S. diplomatic support contributed to the cancellation of [the 2021 Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections](#). [The U.S. also failed to take new initiatives to reactivate the peace process](#). The burden of diplomatic efforts focused on deepening regional cooperation between Israel and Arab states. However, there was no expansion of [normalisation agreements](#), although talks on [Saudi Arabia joining the process](#) before the start of the Israel-Hamas war were well advanced.

The Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and its aftermath, including [Israel's ground invasion of the Gaza Strip](#) and the drawing of other members of [Iran's "Axis of Resistance"](#) into the conflict, has made the situation in the Middle East a renewed priority for U.S. foreign policy. [U.S. financial and material assistance](#) has been a critical factor enabling Israel to implement its war effort. It has included a steady supply of armaments and the direct involvement of U.S. military forces, both operationally (including in countering [Iranian missile attacks](#)) and in deterrence ([especially in the first phase of the conflict](#)). The U.S. also has maintained far-reaching diplomatic support for Israel in the face of rapidly

mounting [international criticism of its actions](#) (including at the U.N.), while allocating substantial humanitarian support to the Palestinians. At the same time, the Biden administration has sought, through political pressure, to influence the [decisions of the Israeli authorities](#) on their conduct of military operations and protecting civilians, as well as in the negotiations for the release of hostages and a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. The effectiveness of this pressure has remained limited in many areas, as evidenced by Israel's conduct of its campaign in the southern Gaza Strip and contestation of proposals for the territory's future administration. Despite growing international criticism of Benjamin Netanyahu's government, the U.S. has chosen so far not to, for example, halt arms deliveries (only temporarily and on a limited basis) or [extend sanctions on Israel's far-right](#). Israel has also primarily maintained its support in Congress, which was evident in the joint chamber, cross-party invitation for Netanyahu to visit the U.S. in July.

Election Campaign. The situation in the Middle East is one of the few foreign issues that is a factor in mobilising voters for both parties. Although a relatively small percentage of the electorate identifies it as the most critical issue determining electoral decisions, it is crucial for certain groups of voters in the so-called swing states (e.g., Michigan, Pennsylvania), [primarily Jewish and Arab Americans](#). [This poses a political challenge for Democrats in particular](#). The polarisation of their electorate, the rise in sentiment critical of Israel, and

voters who view Biden's policies toward the conflict negatively could weigh on Kamala Harris' electoral chances if Arab-American or young voters opt out or support moves to independent, but not viable candidates. At the same time, a more significant policy revision towards reducing support for Israel—as demanded by the Democrats' progressive wing—would likely generate significant opposition from the moderate electorate, which is overwhelmingly pro-Israel. Such changes would also offer an opportunity for [Republicans to be sharply critical of Harris](#).

The Democratic candidate has primarily continued the administration's line [in her election campaign](#), declaring support for Israel's confrontation with Hamas and Hezbollah while stressing the need for a quick ceasefire due to the situation of Palestinian civilians. Paying attention to the context of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and support for Palestinian national rights are elements of the message that distinguish her stance from Donald Trump's. On the other hand, the common factor is a declaration to further develop Israeli-Arab normalisation.

In his election campaign, Trump has made heavy use of the ongoing Middle East crisis, accusing the Biden administration of causing it. The Republican campaign is trying to capitalise on the polarisation in the Democratic electorate on this issue while accusing Harris of playing both sides, of being both pro- and anti-Israel in targeted messages to constituencies, as well as submissive in her approach to Iran. Trump maintains unequivocal support for Israel's actions in his speeches. Personal contact between him and Prime Minister Netanyahu, temporarily interrupted in late 2020 after Netanyahu recognised [Biden's election victory](#), have also improved. The Republican candidate, though, repeatedly [points to the need for a swift end to Israeli-led military operations](#) and the restoration of "peace in the region". Domestically, he has also sharply criticised pro-Palestinian protests taking place at universities and elsewhere, even suggesting the need to "deport" their participants. He also has been critical of the continued support for the Democrats by American Jews. As is normal for him, Trump's messaging is vague on the specific shapes of future policy. On the one hand, circles associated with the Israeli far-right play a significant role in Trump's campaign, which may indicate a return to policies supporting its agenda, such as [the annexation of Jewish settlements](#). On the other hand, isolationist tendencies, represented by

[a growing number of Republican politicians](#), are very much in the election message.

Conclusions and Outlook. The ongoing election campaign has limited the Biden administration's dexterity towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The scale of the crisis and criticism of the administration's actions may have antagonised and demotivated some voters. This would hit support for the Democratic candidate harder, especially with polls showing near dead-even support for both candidates. However, this approach to the Middle East crisis has increased criticism of the U.S. and lowered its credibility among foreign partners. It cannot be ruled out that after the election and before the next administration is sworn in that Biden will implement unused means of pressuring Israel, such as withholding a veto in the U.N. Security Council on the conflict or extending sanctions to ministers from Israel's far-right. Israel will seek to keep things as they are until the new president is inaugurated, using the leeway created by the transition period.

From the Israeli government's perspective, a Trump victory is seen as potentially more beneficial. Still, his campaign message and the earlier nature of his presidency indicate that extinguishing conflicts in the region may take priority over other aspects of Israeli-American relations. The isolationist tendencies of Trump and parts of the Republican establishment may favour a rapid reduction in U.S. involvement in the Middle East in its current form, including a change in the nature or even a decrease in material support for Israel. If Harris, who is also pushing for a quick end to the war, wins, Israel's political resistance to diplomatic pressure will probably increase. Still, the new Democratic administration will also be ready for a more aggressive approach. The outcome of the congressional elections remains a crucial factor to the chances of implementing the programs of both candidates.

The chances of a sharp overhaul in U.S. policy towards Israel and Palestine under either electoral scenario remain slim, but the potential for long-term change will grow. The state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has now produced the highest number of casualties and scale of destruction since its historic beginning. That requires U.S. policy action beyond short-term stabilisation. An equally important factor is the generational shift in the U.S., particularly (but not exclusively) on the part of young Democratic voters. It will provide a constant impetus for the evolution of positions among political elites in directions less favourable to Israel.