



Can Biden Save Israel from Itself?

Description

WORLD : For a long time, I've been having a debate with my friends in the Israeli peace camp. Frustrated in the post-Oslo era over their failure to change the prevalent skepticism among Israelis about the chances for Israeli-Palestinian peace, they contend that pressure from the "international community" will help transform the political balance in Israel and strengthen the hands of those who support the establishment of an independent Palestinian State.

In that context, the possibility that the United States, Israel's superpower ally, will lead the effort to move Israel toward accepting the two-state solution is seen as a realistic scenario. In other words, the Americans could help Israel save itself.

The Israelis, according to this thesis, just don't understand their real interests and pursue policies that could lead to the ruin of the Jewish state. The role of Washington, as a friend, is to press Jerusalem to change its diplomatic direction.

That would lead to an agreement with the Palestinians that would include a withdrawal from most of the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian State with its capital in East Jerusalem.

It was George Ball, one of Washington's "wise men," who in 1977 published an article in Foreign Affairs with the provocative title "How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself." This article quickly became part of the American diplomatic lexicon and—soon enough—a cliché.

Ball published the essay after the election of President Jimmy Carter, who, together with his national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, planned to impose on Israel a peace accord under the auspices of an international conference chaired by the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, the Israelis and the Egyptians sabotaged that plan, preventing the Soviets from taking part in the diplomatic process and negotiating directly with American mediation, leading to an Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement that most Israelis backed.

From that perspective, the notion that the United States had to save Israel from itself to pursue Arab-Israeli peace is a meaningless intellectual exercise.

Israel signed the peace agreement that responded to its national security needs while cooperating with the White House. In a way, the surprise Israeli and Egyptian moves helped save the American diplomatic initiative.

On the other hand, the Oslo peace process resulted from an Israeli initiative with very little involvement by the Americans. It led to an accord with the Palestinians, proving that Israel is an independent diplomatic player that is driven by its interests and can make peace with the Arabs without an American “savior.”

This may sound like a chapter in Political Science 101. Still, in principle, the American president is elected to steward and secure U.S. interests rather than those of foreign countries like Israel.

Israel’s citizens didn’t elect him as their president, which suggests that he doesn’t have an obligation to save them and certainly not to make decisions about war and peace in their name. The government elected by the Israeli citizens has that responsibility.

The United States has occasionally used its diplomatic and economic power to pressure Israel to change its policies—like when President Dwight Eisenhower demanded that Israel withdraw its troops from Sinai in 1956. But that move was aimed at promoting American interests in the Middle East as opposed to saving Israel from itself.

Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush threatened to reduce the military and economic aid to Israel as part of tactical moves to get Israel to change specific policies.

But they didn’t see those steps as a means of forcing Israel to make concessions over core national security interests, such as agreeing to the establishment of a Palestinian State. Such concessions were supposed to emerge due to direct negotiations with the Arab side.

From that perspective, President Joe Biden’s support for Israel in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack was driven mainly by strategic considerations to prevent Iran, the patron of Hamas, from expanding its power in the Middle East and threatening U.S. interests there.

There is no doubt that Biden would have preferred to beat Hamas in a blood-free war without the scenes of destruction and dead babies in Gaza, which hurts the administration’s credibility in the Arab World and among Arab-American voters.

The criticism from Washington, whether from the White House or Democratic senators, is aimed at demonstrating to those critics at home and abroad that the U.S. government is “doing something” to restrain Israel without taking more severe steps, like cutting military aid.

But the idea that Biden is going to come to the assistance of those who seek to remove Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from power and schedule an election in Israel is wishful thinking on the part of Israeli politicians and pundits.

The latter have to understand that if they fail to convince the majority of Israelis that an independent

Palestinian State would pose no threat to Israel, such a state will not be established. If they want to save Israel, they have to do that themselves. The Americans won't do the job for them.

by Leon Hadar

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