How Trump Can Avoid Transition Traps Set By Biden

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 21.01.2025

Transitions of presidential administrations are tricky, and all the more so when, as from Biden to Trump, control is passing from one political party to another. There is much change, and there is much effort to avoid change. From my experience in previous transitions, this is especially true for transitions that pass from a left-leaning government to a conservative-leaning government. The majority of the government's employees identify more with the left than right—Harris won more than 90 percent of the vote in D.C., 74 percent in Montgomery County, Maryland; more than 65 percent in Fairfax County, Virginia. This is especially true as a conservative government that defines itself against the Washington establishment comes into power. So this particular transition, even more than most others, features a mad race by those loyal to the ideas of the previous administration to lock the new administration into policies of the outgoing administration.

There is a window of opportunity for the outgoing administration to do this during transition because before the new team can take over, its most senior members must be confirmed by the Senate. At the outset, the unconfirmed personal staff of the president — the national security Advisor or special assistants — are the only ones on board. Because of security clearance requirements and the fact that an official has no authority to hire employees before he himself holds a position, second-tier and deeper down political appointments are slow to be filled. As a result, even those few aides who are installed in the first days of the president's terms still must rely on staff, bureaucracy, and in some cases even the appointees of the previous administration. An isolated president with a few lone staffers and no supporting bureaucracy is highly vulnerable to having policies and ideas foisted upon him unwillingly, unwittingly, or even somewhat dishonestly. I saw this in action myself in the transition in 2001. Indeed, as late as 2005, one major proliferation/arms control policy issue came up that demanded a fundamental policy reconsideration. When that was raised, the bureaucracy refused to allow the issue to be discussed because, it said, there had already been a final high-level policy decision. When? In early February 2001 — namely in the first weeks of the George W. Bush administration, before any staff below the cabinet level

had come on board, and when even some cabinet members had not yet been confirmed.

There's room for such bureaucratic finagling both in the final days of the departing administration and in the early days of the new one.

Avoiding this transition trap depends largely on savvy and determination of some of the top staff of the new administration who take office immediately on January 20 in positions that do do not require confirmation. They will help set and monitor the implementation of policy on behalf of the president. But they are outnumbered by the permanent bureaucracy and the holdovers from the outgoing administration. As a result, these early staffers sometimes get overwhelmed, manipulated, and barreled over into fulfilling the policy set by the previous administration. That can functionally lock the incoming administration into the failed strategic concept of the outgoing administration.

The outgoing Biden administration has set such a "transition trap" in place for the incoming Trump administration when it comes to Middle East policy. Trump's "America First" policy may be somewhat undefined, but he and his surrogates during the campaign promised a sharp departure from Biden's administration and the entrenched foreign policy bureaucracy. One clear principle is to treat friends better than our enemies, because strong friends who project power both secure American interests and reduce their reliance on constant investment of American power. In terms of the Middle East, the most marked feature of this is strong support for Israel, and more respect to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain to protect themselves and defend against those who would challenge them.

The departing administration had an alternative view. The unapologetic assertion of regional power was seen as provocative and the support for allies had to be tempered by our desire to moderate and integrate (some would describe this as appease) our enemies. Israeli power was seen to make Israel too secure to be pliable to adopt policies preferred by Washington but rejected locally. The rising influence of progressivism on the left, moreover, sharpened this hostility to Israeli, Saudi, and UAE power and influence.

The actors during the transition include not only residual staffers but also foreign powers such as Qatar and Turkey. They aim to tether the new administration to the past and to prevent it from embarking on a new path.

The Biden team's strategic outlook in the Middle East rested on two pillars. First, that Iran can be moderated, integrated, and harnessed to provide regional stability. Second, that regional instability is primarily driven by the failure to solve the Palestinian problem, which in turn can only be solved by the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1948 armistice lines. The Abraham Accords were dismissed as a marginal event and not a real peace treaty — let alone strategic bloc forming — because they did nothing to bring about a solution to the Palestinian problem. Moreover, the solution to the Palestinian conflict was informed in the Biden era by ideas President Obama (much of the Biden team hailed from that administration) himself sketched in a meeting with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations a decade ago: Israeli strength reduced Israel's longing for peace, hardened Israeli will to reject compromise, and rendered it more immune to American pressure to impose concessions.

After October 7, 2023, these two pillars were reinforced in Washington rather than being discarded. The Biden administration resisted Israeli victory and destruction of its enemies akin to the 1967 victory. The administration restrained Israel's effort to bear down on all the proxies constituting Iran's ring of fire, and it capped and diminished Israel's strikes against Iran itself. At the heart of the State Department's greatest efforts was the attempt to tap into Israeli vulnerabilities — such as the hostages — and desires — like peace with Saudi Arabia — and leverage them to impose on Israel strategic weakness and dependency. The Biden team hoped to be able to impose on Israel policies that Israel would normally reject as either strategically dangerous or ideologically repulsive. That explains the Biden team's efforts throughout the war to increase Israeli dependency and vulnerability and to prevent a solid Israeli strategic victory.

At the same time, Israel suffered trauma and vulnerability after October 7. Its world of ideas and paradigms — deterrence, condominium with Palestinians, status quo, slow moderation of the Palestinian political orbit — all crashed. Israeli weakness and pain did not make Israel pliable and dependent as President Obama had theorized a decade earlier but drove Israel into a defensive crouch and war it believed was its second war of independence — a desperate battle just to survive with little or no latitude for compromise, goodwill, or tolerated vulnerability. Israel was in its own battle of civilizational survival against absolute evil. As such, the world of the Biden team was dramatically different from the world as seen by

Israel.

The incoming Trump administration's view of the region is much more aligned with Israel's view of the world and the region that it is with the Biden team's view. So the effort in this transition of the Biden team has been to ensure that policies, agreements and statements are made that lock the new administration into the Obama-Biden strategic paradigm, thereby derailing and sabotaging the principles of the "America First" agenda. This is similar to how the Obama administration, by allowing the enactment of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2334 of December 23, 2016, attempted to lock the incoming first Trump administration into its policies rejecting any Israeli legitimacy beyond the 1948 ceasefire lines.

In its twilight days, thus, the Biden administration has focused its efforts into obtaining a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. But Hamas would settle for nothing less than a full Israeli defeat and a return to the status quo ante of October 6 in terms of a powerful Hamas state ruling over all Gaza with improperly regulated access to resupply its weapons and access to the world through Egypt. Moreover, the aims of Hamas were not altogether opposed to every aspect of U.S. policy, which also sought to prevent a decisive Israeli offensive victory and reoccupation of Gaza. So to pursue its objective and to secure a ceasefire, the administration leveraged what was at its disposal to prevail over Israel — namely Israel's hope to retrieve its hostages, its practical need to obtain arms supply from the United States, and its diplomatic need to have an American cover internationally. The war, the Biden team hoped, could actually advance the ideas that Israel cannot win militarily, must concede to the Palestinians in order to make peace, and that Israeli weakness can successfully impose Israeli malleability, and thus makes more likely peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state. To the extent that either the Gaza or Lebanon ceasefire are premised on Israeli hopes of U.S. support for addressing the Iran nuclear issue, they also again subjugate Israel to fiat by Washington on the Palestinian issue accordingly.

If the United States under the Trump administration adopts and carries through both agreements, and if it forces Israel neither to react to violations nor jettison either agreement at critical phases to finish the war that could not be finished under the Biden administration, then essentially the incoming administration perpetuates the world view on the Middle East that embodied the previous

administration. Trump will be caught in the transition trap set by Biden.

A second trap concerns peace with Saudi Arabia. The Abraham accords were grounded in the idea that there is an overarching strategic interest for the UAE, Bahrain and others to align with Israel to face common enemies and to take advantage of the common capabilities to advance the economies, survival, and interests of each. Essentially, the big innovation was to remove the Palestinian veto over peace with Arab countries.

The Biden administration, through the ceasefire to the Gaza conflict, has essentially now reversed the Abraham Accords approach. It has instead welded progress in pursuing an Israeli-Saudi peace to the Palestinian issue. That grants the Palestinians — any Palestinian faction whether Hamas or the PLO — a veto over an Israeli peace treaty with any Arab country: the lowest common denominator Palestinian faction attains thus the ability to derail it. Apologists for this approach attribute it to accommodating Saudi public opinion, supposedly aroused by Al Jazeera images of Gaza. Yet the Biden attempt to make a Saudi-Israel agreement contingent on Palestinian participation in fact predates October 7, 2023. It is driven by Obama-Biden ideology, not by Saudi public opinion. The Biden administration had already *in 2022* forced Palestinian representation and involvement in all the Abraham Accords working groups, in effect paralyzing them and making them moribund.

The third phase of the Gaza cease-fire — a regional state-building effort to rehabilitate Gaza — is essentially transformed also into the first phase of a peace-process between Israel and Saudi Arabia. So, under the terms of the cease-fire, Israel must accept a devastating, life-threatening strategic defeat in Gaza and allow essentially a Palestinian entity run by Hamas and its international supporters to arise there in order to get through the third phase and get into the serious process of making peace with Saudi Arabia. This forces Israel, if it wishes to have peace with Saudi Arabia, to suffer a catastrophic defeat in Gaza.

This is another “transition trap” set by Biden for Trump. By weakening Israel and depriving the U.S. of a strong ally, it renders the new Trump team unable to build a policy anchored to “American First” principles upon which it would most pride itself.

The ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas may be necessary in order to

retrieve whatever live hostages Israel is able to repatriate. Retrieving those hostages has been an Israeli war aim from day one.

But it is a vital American interest under advertised "America First" principles to allow Israel to restart the war in Gaza and complete the destruction of Hamas, and also to allow Israel to enforce unilaterally U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1701 and 1559, which are embedded in the Lebanon ceasefire. If Hamas emerges with a story of victory in any form, not only will Israel face another October 7 soon, and not only will antisemitism explode exponentially globally, but cities and towns all over the West will suffer from a newly energized and encouraged global jihadi effort.

A new, dangerous narrative is already emerging regionally. Prominent Syrian Islamists aligned with the new Syrian government now argue that Syria's Baathist regime fell not because Israel had annihilated the Hizballah/IRGC security infrastructure and substructure of Syria's regime, leaving it unable to even mount a minimal defense of itself, but because the momentum of the great "victory" of Oct 7 "Al-Aqsa flood" had translated into a regional tide that swept out Assad & ushered in the beginning of a new Islamist era that will liberate Jerusalem, destroy the "Zionists," and defeat the West. As long as Hamas rules Gaza and argues it survived, and thus won, the war, this view will grow and will haunt Israel, Europe, and America.

The best way for Trump to escape the transition traps set by Biden is for the new president to understand when it becomes necessary for Israel to abandon the ceasefire agreement. After the last hostage Israel can hope to still retrieve has been liberated, Israel will have to finish the war in a way that results in an unambiguous, incontrovertible, complete victory.

This isn't only my own opinion. It's a view widely held by perceptive and serious senior figures in Israel and in America.

"Nobody will attack us, rape our women, burn people alive, kill 1,200 people, do the atrocities that Hamas did, and survive this," the founder and chairman of Israel's Defense and Security Forum, General Amir Avivi, said the other day. "As long as we keep this strategic understanding that we need to eradicate them, then they will also learn the price for doing what they did to us. They need to be eradicated."

The CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Mark Dubowitz, said, “If you think Israel will let Hamas’s murderers, rapists, and torturers escape justice, you don’t understand post-Oct. 7 Israel. Justice will come, and it will be decisive.”

Only a devastating defeat of regional radical threats will deflate global jihadi confidence and momentum. It will restore an era of peace through strength and make America safe again.

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