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As America's likely next president, Biden can undo Trump's damage and differentiate himself from the Democratic party's radical left and toothless right. But he has to abandon ambiguity.

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For just a moment, forget America's resurgent coronavirus crisis, the street protests, primaries, and Trump's tweets. On July 1, a Middle East status quo of sorts that has held since the Six Day War was due to be shattered.

That is the date that the Israeli government, according to the coalition agreement that established it, can start the process of annexing up to 30 percent of the West Bank, pursuant to the "permission" granted by Kushner's and Trump's "Deal of the Century." Despite the fact that apparently it will now be [postponed](#) a bit, the government's intention to implement annexation remains the same.

Since January 2020, the shape of world politics has changed rather dramatically, but Benjamin Netanyahu is still committed to annexation, despite considerable domestic and accelerating international opposition.

Nations and [international bodies](#) have fiercely denounced it as a [breach](#) of international law, and a move that would forever destroy the possibility of a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. [Jordan](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#) have warned that it will reverse Israel's rapprochement with the Arab world.

Hundreds of former senior Israeli [military and security](#) commanders have criticized it for providing nothing for Israel while risking violence and international isolation. Large numbers of American Jewish [scholars](#) and [policy experts](#), including not a few with unimpeachable [rightwing credentials](#) have deplored it on similar grounds. 191 [Democratic members](#) of the House of Representatives have criticized it.

We don't know how much of this storm of denunciation Netanyahu has taken aboard, but nothing he has said challenges the assumption that some sort of

annexation is still firmly on the government's agenda.

The U.S. president giveth – and, most probably, only the U.S. president can taketh away. Not Donald Trump, of course, who has remained uncharacteristically silent on this as the deadline approaches, though, admittedly, he has his reelection and jus a few other things on his mind. It seems unlikely he will reverse the open invitation to annexation his 'peace plan' issued.

However, at this point it looks probable that we will have a new president on January 20, 2021, and his name is [Joe Biden](#). What does he think of Israel's planned moves?

In May, Biden [told](#) supporters at a virtual [fundraiser](#):

"I do not support annexation. Israel needs to stop the threats of annexation and stop settlement activity because it will choke off any hope of peace...The fact is, I will reverse Trump's undercutting of peace."

That's good. But notice the ambiguity of the statements. Biden has refused to clarify what he would do about annexation carried out before he becomes president, assuming he does. He has already said he [would keep](#) the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem if elected. That implies that he will not reverse American recognition of Israel's actions preceding his inauguration more generally.

On June 16, the organization of which I am president, Partners for Progressive Israel, sent [a letter](#) to Biden, asking that he clarify his statement and make clear to the Israeli government that, if he becomes president, the U.S. government will not recognize any annexation. To date, no answer has been received, nor has Biden provided any clarification.

Thus a window exists from July 1 to November 2 (or January 20), during which U.S. policy officially encourages annexation, without any countervailing statement from the likely next president.

Would that make a difference? Almost certainly it would, as shown by the record of the Obama administration.



U.S. President Barack Obama meets Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations in New York, September 21, 2011. Credit: REUTERS

While Barack Obama was unsuccessful in pushing Israel and the Palestinians to take effective steps towards peace, he did succeed in preventing Bibi from taking extreme negative actions, most importantly annexation itself. If Biden clearly declares he will not recognize it, there will be no external support

– and precious little internal support.

While one poll of Israelis by the Israel Democracy Institute showed half of Israelis support annexation, that drops steeply to [one-quarter](#) if the U.S. does not support it. Another poll, carried out by the Geneva Initiative, showed [less than a third](#) of Israelis supported annexation while over 40 percent opposed it. Even the settlers themselves are [divided](#) over [annexation](#); some of their leaders fear it will provide tacit Israeli approval of a future Palestinian state.

Such a statement by Biden would set out a marker that would undercut more [radical currents](#) both within and outside the Democratic party that demand a wholesale revision of American support for Israel.



Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., right, and former Vice President Joe Biden, left, return to the stage after a commercial break in a Democratic presidential primary debate at CNN Studios, March 15, 2020. Credit: KEVIN LAMARQUE/ REUTERS

It would also confirm the ineffectiveness of compromise talk from voices from the right of the Democratic party. The Democratic Majority for Israel, a centrist group that generally avoids any criticism of Israel, opposes annexation but, significantly, [does not ask](#) Biden to pledge not to pledge non-recognition of annexation. This is a toothless criticism that would be easy for Bibi to ignore.

Annexation is the critical issue of the hour. It is a move that could reset the dynamics of the Mideast towards a direction conducive to violence. By moving to forestall it, Biden will have placed himself within the international consensus, while differentiating himself from both his left and his right.

American Jews, as well as being overwhelmingly anti-Trump, are also strongly [in favor](#) of the two-state solution (64 percent in favor, 24 percent opposed), which annexation would likely destroy as a viable option. With a full-throated opposition to annexation, Biden could show that he is hearing the Democrats' newer, younger voices, while also making a move popular with the mainstream.

There is not a lot of time left to forestall annexation. Mr. Vice-President: Are you listening?

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