

President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Thursday will seek to reset the tone of U.S.-Israeli relations in their first White House meeting and find common ground on Iran despite differences on how to deal with its nuclear program.

In talks overshadowed by the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the two leaders will try to turn the page on years of tensions between Bennett's predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, who was close to former President Donald Trump, and the last Democratic administration led by Barack Obama with Biden as his vice president.

In what's been planned as a low-key meeting, Bennett wants to move on from Netanyahu's combative public style and instead manage disagreements constructively behind closed doors between Washington and its closest Middle East ally.

The visit gives Biden an opportunity to demonstrate business as usual with a key partner while contending with the complex situation in Afghanistan. Biden's biggest foreign policy crisis since taking office has not only hurt his approval ratings at home but raised questions about his credibility among both friends and foes.

Topping the agenda is Iran, one of the thorniest issues between the Biden administration and Israel.

Bennett, a far-right politician who ended Netanyahu's 12-year run as prime minister in June, is expected to press Biden to harden his approach to Iran and halt negotiations aimed at reviving the international nuclear deal that Trump abandoned.

Biden will tell Bennett that he shares Israel's concern that Iran has expanded its nuclear program but remains committed for now to diplomacy with Tehran, a senior administration official said. U.S.-Iran negotiations have stalled as Washington awaits the next move by Iran's new hardline president.

Briefing reporters ahead of the meeting, the official said: "Since the last administration left the Iran nuclear deal, Iran's nuclear program has just dramatically broken out of the box."

The official said that if the diplomatic path with Iran fails, "there are other avenues to pursue," but did not elaborate.

Bennett has been less openly combative but just as adamant as Netanyahu was in pledging to do whatever is necessary to prevent Iran, which Israel views as an existential threat, from building a nuclear weapon. Iran consistently denies it is seeking a bomb.

The two leaders are expected to speak briefly to a small pool of reporters during their Oval Office meeting but there will not be a joint news conference, limiting the potential for public disagreement.



U.S. President Joe Biden speaks during a Cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington, U.S., July 20, 2021. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

### **At odds on Palestinian issues**

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Biden and Bennett are also divided. Biden has renewed backing for a two-state solution after Trump distanced himself from that long-standing tenet of U.S. policy. Bennett opposes Palestinian statehood.

The consensus among Biden's aides is that now is not the time to push for a resumption of long-dormant peace talks or major Israeli concessions, which could destabilize Bennett's ideologically diverse coalition.

But Biden's aides have not ruled out asking Bennett for modest gestures to help avoid a recurrence of the fierce Israel-Hamas fighting in the Gaza Strip that caught the new U.S. administration flat-footed earlier this year.

Among the issues that could be raised in Thursday's talks is the Biden administration's goal of re-establishing a consulate in Jerusalem that served the Palestinians and which Trump closed. Biden's aides have moved cautiously on the issue.

The administration has also emphasized that it opposes further expansion of Jewish settlements on occupied land.

Bennett, 49, the son of American immigrants to Israel, has been a vocal proponent of settlement building.

Today I met with Israel's Prime Minister [@naftalibennett](#). We discussed the importance of the U.S.-Israel partnership, including America's commitment to Israel's security. I look forward to continuing our friendship and working with the Prime Minister and his government. [pic.twitter.com/iLoDCArDOa](https://pic.twitter.com/iLoDCArDOa)

— Secretary Antony Blinken (@SecBlinken) [August 25, 2021](#)

Biden's advisers are also mindful that Israeli officials may be concerned about the apparent failure of U.S. intelligence to predict the swift fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Biden intends to reassure Bennett that the end of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan does not reflect a "de-prioritizing" of the U.S. commitment to Israel and other Middle East allies, the senior U.S. official said.

Biden will also discuss with Bennett behind-the-scenes efforts to get more Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel, the senior U.S. official said. This would follow in the footsteps of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, which reached accords with Israel brokered by the Trump administration.

On Wednesday, Bennett met U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. He was expected to discuss, among other issues, the replenishing of the Iron Dome missile defense system that Israel relies on to fend off rocket attacks from Gaza.

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