

# Does Abbas intend to run for president after all?

Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 02:28

AMMAN: Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, who signed the decree for this year's elections, has yet to announce whether he intends to run for president.

In the past 10 years, he said on at least three occasions that if and when elections take place he will not stand. But Fatah strongman Jibril Rajoub has repeatedly stated that 85-year-old Abbas is the party's only candidate for president.

Polls conducted as recently as December suggest that Abbas would lose in a head-to-head contest against Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. Under the current power-sharing understanding between Fatah and Hamas, however, the Islamist movement has agreed not to challenge the Fatah nominee.

While the largely youthful Palestinian population under occupation has not known any leader other than Abu Mazen (Abbas's nom de guerre), he faces a mix of apathy and rejection.

Senior advisers to the president told Arab News that it is "too early" to talk about the presidential race, scheduled for July 31, because all attention now is on making sure the legislative elections take place on May 22 and a new government is formed to represent all of the Palestinian areas occupied in 1967.

Najeeb Qadoumi, a member of the Palestinian National Council, told Arab News that the Palestinian leader's achievements cannot be dismissed. Abbas persuaded 138 nations in the UN general assembly to recognize Palestine as a nonmember observer state, he said, and also stood up to "the most powerful man in the world," US President Donald Trump, in defeating the so-called "deal of the century."

Qadoumi highlighted Abbas's boycott of the Trump administration after it moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem and announced its vision for peace that included the annexation of a third of the West Bank. US President Joe Biden and his team have announced that they plan to reverse many of Trump's decisions that affected Palestinians, including its legalization of Israeli settlement activities. The new US administration also unambiguously stated its support for a two-state solution, and has resumed dialogue with the Palestinians.

## **SPEEDREAD**

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in a head-to-head contest against Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.

While many in Fatah's Central Committee favor Abbas as a consensus leader, it is still unclear whether he will decide to run for the highest office. However his followers have in recent weeks noticed a sharpening of nationalistic rhetoric from him, especially in publicly disclosed statements encouraging Palestinians in the Jordan Valley to resist Israeli policies and attempts at settlement expansion.

"These are the words of a man who is planning to run," a senior Palestinian leader told Arab News.

Whether his previous statements that he would not run were genuine or a bluff, if he does decide to stand he will have a significant problem to deal with: The publicly announced intention of imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti to run for president from behind the bars of an Israeli cell, where he has been held for almost 20 years.

The most recent poll suggested that if Barghouti runs, he could expect to receive 62 percent of the Palestinian vote. His ally Hatem Abdel Qader, a Fatah leader in Jerusalem, said Barghouti has no plans to run for the legislative council and will only stand for president.

Fatah Central Committee member Hussein Sheikh visited Barghouti in jail on Feb. 11 and reportedly offered him top spot on the Fatah list of candidates, along with the chance to name 10 others on the party's official list, but the offer was rejected.

A possible compromise solution that has been suggested is the creation of the office of vice president and have the Fatah ticket include candidates for both positions. However this would require a change in the law that could only be implemented after the elections for the legislative council take place.

If it happens, Barghouti could be included on the ticket as the candidate either for president or vice president, which could help increase his chances for release, especially considering Abbas's age.



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Massive numbers of Palestinian voters sign up for polls  
Abbas poll decree lifts hopes of Palestinian unity

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## [Heavy snowfall, gales as winter storm hits Middle East](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Wed, 2021-02-17 20:33

BEIRUT: Snow blanketed parts of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel on Wednesday, covering areas it has not reached in years, disrupting traffic and postponing vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 and even exams at some universities.

It snowed for the first time in years in Marjayoun in southern Lebanon, and in Bayda in northeast Libya.

Gale force winds knocked out electricity in vast parts of Lebanon, forcing many Lebanese, already used to power cuts, to rely on generators for longer

hours. Rescuers pulled four motorists out of their snow-covered cars, the National News Agency said.

The first snow this winter in the Syrian capital, Damascus, did not prevent the Premier League soccer tournament from going ahead, as Army Sports Club and Al-Karamah faced off despite the snow that covered the pitch, the Syrian Al-Watan daily reported .

In the mountains of Syria's Sweida province, snow was as high as 15 cm (6 inches), according to the official state news agency SANA. Roads in some provinces were blocked. In the central province of Hama, bulldozers shoveled snow to open roads while vehicles skidded on ice, causing traffic disruption. The University of Damascus called off mid-term exams scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday in all its branches around Syria because of the extreme weather conditions. The country's ports remained open. Later, local authorities in the provinces of Sweida, Quneitra, Daraa and Tartous suspend school on Thursday due to the storm and heavy snowfall.

In the opposition-held northwestern Syria, civil defense teams have been building dirt mounds since Tuesday around camps for the displaced to prevent rain from flooding the crowded areas. Nearly 3 million displaced people live in northwestern Syria, mostly in tents and temporary shelters. Heavy rainfall last month damaged over 190 displacement sites, destroying and damaging over 10,000 tents.

In neighboring Lebanon, Storm Joyce hit late Tuesday with gale force winds registering between 85 km/h (52 miles/h) and 100 km/h (62 miles/h). The storm is expected to get stronger Thursday.

Breaking a warm spell, the storm brought heavy rainfall, a sharp drop in temperatures and the heaviest snow fall in Lebanon this year. Snow is expected to cover areas of altitudes as low as 400 meters, according to the meteorological department. Nearly a dozen roads in eastern and northern Lebanon were closed to traffic because of the snow. A beachside club and restaurant were submerged in water as waves nearly 4 meters (13 feet) high slammed onto the shore.

The Israeli Meteorological Service forecast heavy thunderstorms and cold temperatures across much of the country, with snowfall at higher altitudes expected later on Wednesday, including in Jerusalem. On Wednesday night, Israeli police closed the main road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem due to snow.

Heavy snowfall covered the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights near the border with Syria.

In Jordan, the COVID-19 vaccination drive was suspended due to severe weather conditions. Schools and universities also put off classes. Jordan's Prime Minister Bishr Al-Khasawneh announced that Thursday will be an official holiday for both the public and private sector due to the snow storm.

Osama Al-Tarifi, director of the operating room of the Arabia Weather site, said snow has reached 20 cm (8 inches) in the mountains of Ajloun in northern Jordan, where snowfall has been non-stop since Tuesday night. Heavy snow is expected in the capital, Amman, on Wednesday.

Wind exceeded 100 km/hour (62 miles/h) in some areas in Jordan.

In Libya, snow blanketed the country's northeast mountains as snowfall continued since Tuesday, covering forests and roads in some areas in the North African country.

Residents of the Jabal Al-Akhdar area in the far northeast part of Libya took

their children out for fun, some making snowmen and others starting snowball fights.

"I was surprised, actually, by the number of families who came here to take pictures to remember the snow," said Ali Al-Shairi, an amateur photographer from the eastern city of Bayda, which is known for recurrent snow in Libya but has not seen any for a couple of years.

In neighboring Egypt, heavy rain and windy weather prevailed on Wednesday and was expected to last into Thursday, the country's meteorological agency said. Authorities in South Sinai province, which includes touristic hubs, canceled touristic activities, including safaris and cruises to weather the storm.













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Saudi Arabia issues weather warnings including chance of snow  
Algerian Sahara desert town dusted with snow

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## Arab Christian figures rebut argument for removing US sanctions on Syria

Wed, 2021-02-17 23:32

NEW YORK CITY: When the time came for Bashar Jaafari, Syria's former UN permanent representative, to leave New York, only one person saw him off at JFK airport: his loyal office assistant.

The symbolism of the moment perhaps eluded the lady as she waved goodbye to the diplomat disappearing through the throng of travelers: Nothing more than Jaafari's lonely departure could embody the image of Bashar Assad's regime as it stands isolated on the world stage today.

Jaafari went back to Damascus where he would take up his functions as deputy minister for foreign affairs, back into the arms of a regime that was his sole supporter at the UN headquarters.

He had for years used the time allotted to him at the Security Council to blame the West for the misery Syrian people live under. He once called Western nations "Ali Baba's thieves without borders," there only to pillage Syria's wealth, both material and cultural.



The UN Security Council members seem to harbor no doubt that only the regime is behind the atrocities inflicted on Syrians, and that only the regime's corruption is able to account for the ever-worsening economic disaster.  
(AFP/File Photo)

Jaafari's insults did nothing, however, to alter the member states' stance on what are now firmly established facts, regularly emphasized by the secretary-general's reports on Syria. In every council meeting, representatives called on Assad to come clean about his chemical weapons which, they repeated, he has used against his own people.

They rejected Assad's plans for "sham elections." And when the regime, backed by Russia, organized a conference designed to encourage Syrian refugees to return to "now safe" Syria, the Americans dismissed it as "a dog and pony show."

Apart from Russia, which reliably comes to the regime's defense, Security Council members seem to harbor no doubt that only the regime is behind the atrocities inflicted on Syrians, and that only the regime's corruption is able to account for the ever-worsening economic disaster.

Isolated and paralyzed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act's sanctions, the regime has been using every ruse in the book to find a way around them. The changing of the guard in Washington, coupled with the appointment of senior White House advisers keen on a thaw with Iran, may be just the break Assad and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah had been waiting for.



Isolated and paralyzed by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act's sanctions, the regime has been using every ruse in the book to find a way around them. (AFP/File Photo)

"We as Syrians are afraid of those advisers who have good ties with the Iranians," said Ayman Abdel Nour, a Syrian reformist. "Are they going to sell us out – like they did under (President Barack) Obama – as the icing on the cake of another nuclear accord?"

A widely publicized letter sent to President Joe Biden on Jan. 21 by Michel Abs, secretary-general of the Middle East Council of Churches, and co-signed by Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan, Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, argued that "unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States make the economic plight of the Syrian people worse."

The signatories include also other clerics besides officials and civil personalities with close ties to the Assad regime.

As scholars of modern Middle East history can attest, the Assad regime has a long history of using minorities as a means to burnish its image abroad while keeping its crimes under wraps.

When Hafez Assad came to power in 1970, he presented himself from day one as the "minority protector" and the antidote to rising Islamic fundamentalism. In the name of fighting radicalism, Assad the father erased entire towns, carried out brutal massacres, and tightened his minority Alawite regime's iron fist on the nation as its absolute ruler.



A handout picture taken on April 20, 2014 shows Assad (C) visiting the ancient Christian town of Maalula which his troops had recently recaptured from rebels. (AFP/SANA/File Photo)

His son Bashar continues to use the Christian minority in his various attempts to get around the sanctions, and as he desperately tries to regain some sort of international recognition.

Thus, he sent four patriarchs to Washington in 2013 to meet with President Barack Obama. When the latter watched them repeat the same talking points from small paper notes hidden in their pockets, he was infuriated.

“It was a disaster, that meeting,” remembers Abdel Nour, who met with the four patriarchs at their hotel lobby before their meeting with Obama.

“It was very clear that the patriarchs were the regime’s intelligence messenger. So, when they returned the following year, Obama refused to meet with them.”



A Syrian military defector using the pseudonym Caesar, while also wearing a hood to protect his identity, testifies about the war in Syria during a Senate Foreign Relations committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, March 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Assad had more tricks up his sleeve, so to speak, as the sanctions' noose continued to tighten. In 2017, After he declared victory in Aleppo, he went on to seek the Vatican's public support.

In order to get it, he gave the Holy See two offers the latter could not refuse: The first was a license to build a Roman Melkite faculty of theology open to seminarians from all over the Middle East.

The second was a visit he personally paid to a Syriac Catholic youth camp. All smiles, he posed for the cameras that showed him buddying up with the Christian youths.

#### **ASSAD REGIME IN NUMBERS**

- \* **128,000** People believed murdered in Syrian jails by Assad regime.
- \* **\$ 7.6bn** Estimated Iranian line of credit to Assad regime since 2011.
- \* **70%** Decline in Syria's per capita budget spending since 2010.
- \* **\$902m** Syria's projected budget deficit for 2021.

**\* \$117bn Estimated cost of rebuilding Syria's physical assets.**

Patriarch Younan, who was appointed by the Vatican, was very pleased. He and his Roman Melkite counterpart sent Pope Francis telegrams lauding the generosity of the president and imploring him to send a delegation to meet with Assad.

"The pope could not say no. These are his two patriarchs for the whole Middle East, not just Syria," said Abdel Nour. "They have constituencies in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. So, he sent that delegation. And Assad used the photo-op to show the world that he has the Vatican's support."

Again, however, the Vatican quickly moved to distance itself from Assad's "actions."

Thus, when Abdel Nour, who is also the editor-in-chief of All4Syria, Syria's leading independent news outlet, got wind of the Jan. 21 letter, he was alarmed.

He says he picked up the phone and called the signatories. He learned that some had been coerced to sign; others had sought changes to the letter before agreeing to sign, but their names were added anyway without any changes made.



Syrian Christian Orthodox worshippers take part in parade marking Palm Sunday at the Church of Saint Elias in the Syrian capital Damascus on April 9, 2017. (AFP/File Photo)

One signatory was on a hospital bed when Abdel Nour called him. The patient had not even heard of the letter, he said.

An examination of the background of one of the letter's signatories, SOS Chrétiens d'Orient (SOS-CO), reveals that the French NGO knowingly transferred money and equipment to the pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF).

The Nov. 2020 report compiled by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also claimed there are close ties between SOS-CO's founders and NDF leaders.

The US Treasury Department defines the NDF as "a pro-Assad, Iranian-affiliated militia." It sanctioned one of its top leaders late last year for his alleged role in the massacre of more than 70 civilians.

What alarmed Abdel Nour most was the sophisticated, efficient language of the letter. It was written by highly respected Christian dignitaries who wrote a single, simple demand: that sanctions be lifted.



Assad (C) walking with Christian and Muslim clerics during an annual conference organised by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) in Damascus. (AFP/File Photo)

This is the kind of letter that gets attention in Washington, D.C. "They worked very hard on it. They started writing in December, two months before Biden took the oath of office," said Abdel Nour.



“And they submitted it to him on January 21, his second day in office, hoping to capitalize on the new momentum. The letter makes it look as though all the suffering of the Syrian people is due to the Caesar Act sanctions against the figures of the regime.”

Something needed to be done, said Abdel Nour, who is president of the non-profit Syrian Christians for Peace. Work on a new letter then began. A response was written and signed by prominent Christian and Muslim figures from six Arab countries.

They included members of the Christian Arab Congress; the Jordanian diplomat Marwan Muasher; and Lebanese former MPs Fares Souaid and Ahmed Fatfat; in addition to Iraqi intellectuals and politicians, university rectors and famous writers.

The signatories wrote that, in Assad, the world is dealing with a leader who has been summoned by European courts for his war crimes and crimes against humanity.

They argued that Syrians are suffering indeed, but for reasons that have nothing to do with sanctions: The regime has found ways to steal humanitarian aid, sell the goods on the market and use the profits to finance its military operations against civilians.



Syrian civil defence volunteers search for victims following Syrian government air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta rebel-held enclave of Douma, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on March 20, 2018. (AFP/File Photo)

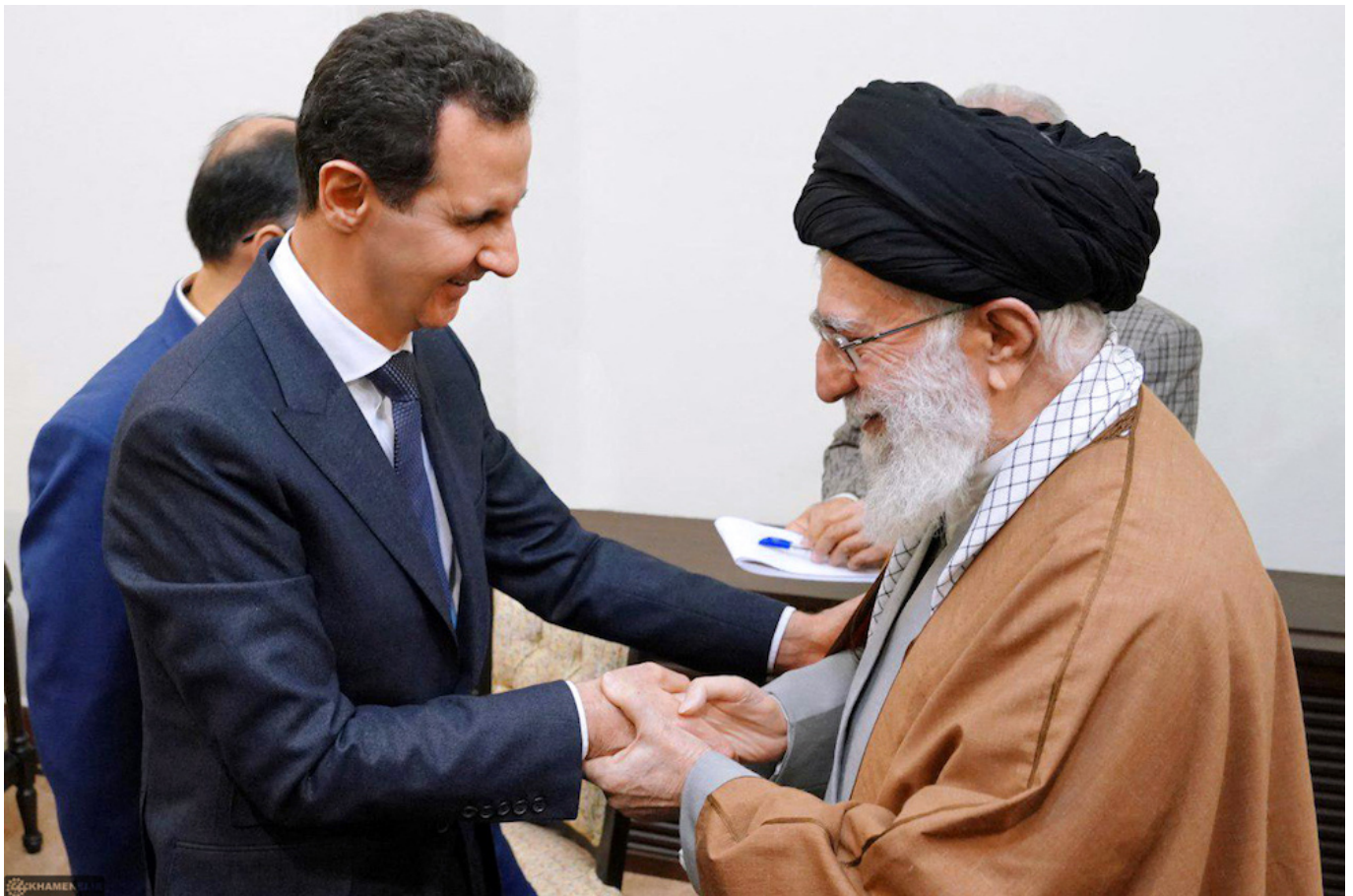
They called for aid to be delivered directly to impoverished Syrian citizens

living in refugee camps under the supervision of international organizations.

The letter also pushed to put a stop to any increase in humanitarian supplies, contending that it is not the quantity of aid that is the problem, but the way it is distributed. Instead, according to the signatories, it would be more than enough for the US to push for a full implementation of Resolution 2254, which called for a ceasefire and political settlement.

The letter apparently did not go unnoticed at the State Department. Anthony Blinken, who during his five-hour Senate confirmation hearing last month did not once mention Syria, called UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and discussed some of the letter's recommendations: Both reaffirmed their commitment to the political process under the Security Council Resolution 2254 and the extension of a cross-border authorization to deliver aid and help relieve the suffering of the Syrian people."

The issue again came up during a call between Blinken and his Turkish counterpart. "Blinken showed he is an official who has dignity," commented Abdel Nour. "He read a credible letter from a reputable group of signatories and he adopted it as policy."



Assad met Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei in 2019 during his first visit to the Islamic Republic since the start of the Syrian conflict. During the meeting, Assad expressed his gratitude to Iran for all that it had done for Syria during the conflict. (AFP/File Photo)

Abdel Nour, whose podcast *Risala Ila Sourriyyin* (Letter to Syrians) has 1.5 million weekly listeners, said the US still has no strategy for dealing with

the Syrian crisis, although the State Department is fashioning one. He believes it will not be separate from the strategy for the Middle East, which includes Iran.

In a list of recommendations that he was asked to share, Abdel Nour urged the State Department team to heed the lessons taught by the Obama-era 2015 nuclear accord: “The deal did not prevent the Iranian regime from expanding and taking control of Arab capitals. It put US allies (the GCC countries) in constant danger. The nuclear agreement should not be reinstated without first addressing the concerns of Arabs who live in the region. Then there is the case of Iran’s ballistic missiles which, if developed, will reach European capitals.”

That the nuclear agreement needs to be updated is, to be sure, Blinken’s own stance. But in a Security Council that has been for years paralyzed by US-Russia sparring, is an updated deal a realistic option?

“I think so,” replied Abdel Nour, “because in the past two years Iran has shown its hostile face. It has shown how much damage it can inflict on Saudi oil facilities using Yemen and Iraq. And that’s very dangerous. What they also did against the American embassy in Iraq is unacceptable.

“This will not pass. There will be retaliation.”

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*With inputs from Oubai Shahbandar in Washington, D.C.*



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Syrians dread impact of Caesar Act sanctions aimed at Assad  
Syrian Christians 'pray for peace'  
EU mulls more Syria sanctions after chemical ruling  
Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check

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**[Biden makes first call to Israel's](#)**

# Netanyahu after delay

Wed, 2021-02-17 23:30

TEL AVIV/WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden made a long-awaited first phone call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday after a delay that had seen Washington deny it was snubbing Israel's leader.

There had been speculation that the Democratic president was signaling displeasure over Netanyahu's close ties with former President Donald Trump, who called the right-wing leader two days after his inauguration in 2017. Biden has spoken with about a dozen other world leaders since taking office on Jan. 20. The White House had said that Netanyahu, who differs with Biden on some Middle East issues such as Iran, would be the first regional leader he would call.

The delay in the traditional courtesy call was also widely regarded by analysts as a sign that Biden did not want to be seen boosting Netanyahu ahead of Israel's March 23 elections.

Some said it could foreshadow chillier relations if Netanyahu wins re-election, but there were no immediate signs of tensions in relatively bland accounts of the call released by the two governments.

"It was a good conversation," Biden told reporters in the Oval Office where he was meeting US labor leaders.

Biden and Netanyahu spoke for about an hour on issues including the "Iranian threat" and Israel's newly established relations with Arab and Muslim countries, Netanyahu's office said in a statement. "The two leaders noted their longstanding personal connection," it added.

The White House said they discussed, among other issues, the need for "continued close consultation" on Iran.

Biden told Netanyahu he intends to strengthen defense cooperation with Israel and stressed his support for normalization of relations with its neighbors. He also "underscored the importance" of working toward peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the statement said.

The White House had denied that the delay in a Biden call was meant to disrespect Netanyahu, with spokeswoman Jen Psaki saying last week that it was "not an intentional dis."

Netanyahu this week acknowledged differences with Biden over Iranian and Palestinian issues, but said the two enjoy a strong working relationship. The Israeli leader may find the two countries' alliance tested if Washington restores US participation in the Iran nuclear deal, from which Trump withdrew, and opposes Israeli settlement building on occupied land where Palestinians seek statehood.

Netanyahu was almost in lock-step over Middle East policy with Trump, who took a staunchly pro-Israel approach.

An Israeli diplomat told Reuters that Israel had been concerned about the delay in Biden calling Netanyahu, but was mindful that the US president was dealing with other issues first, such as the coronavirus pandemic and challenges from Russia and China.

The fact that Netanyahu was the first Middle East leader called was taken as a positive sign, the diplomat said.



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Biden's first call with leader in region will be with Israel's Netanyahu – White House  
Presidents Biden and Xi hold first phone call amid tense US-China relations

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## [Kuwait's emir postpones parliament meetings for a month](#)

Wed, 2021-02-17 22:04

RIYADH: Kuwait's emir issued a decree on Wednesday to postpone parliament meetings for a month starting from Thursday, state-run KUNA reported. Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah issued the decree based on Article 106 of the constitution, KUNA said without providing further details. On Jan. 24 the emir reappointed Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah to nominate a new cabinet and the premier had been holding consultations with MPs ahead of doing so.

(With Reuters)



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Saudi Arabia's King Salman receives letter from Kuwait emir