

How the PA Should Approach the Biden Administration

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Brief Analysis

The Biden administration will exhibit a blend of Trump's and Obama's policies towards Israel and Palestinians.

Palestinians should not have high expectations for the incoming Biden administration—issues like the Covid-19 pandemic, U.S. domestic affairs, and the threat of Iran will certainly receive priority over Palestinian issues on the Biden agenda. When the administration does involve itself, it is likely to adopt an amalgam of policies from past administrations, including the Trump administration. None of these policies will be effective, however, without active efforts from Israeli and Palestinian leadership.

Setting Realistic Expectations of the Biden Administration

Biden's approach towards Israeli and Palestinian leadership will probably minimize surprises. In that sense, Biden is likely to continue with some of Obama's policies while also building on existing dynamics from the Trump years.

Where Biden is expected to enact policies reminiscent of the Obama and Clinton administrations, his administration will be unlikely to disregard the Palestinian cause and adopt Israeli right-wing policies favored by Trump. Furthermore, Biden may bring some balance to the United States' stance on Palestinian issues by pushing for an acknowledged Palestinian state with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital. And if he does make such overtures, he will not make them as Trump did. Unlike Trump, Biden has no "Deal of the Century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Additionally, Biden can be expected to move in greater cooperation with international allies as he makes any efforts to address Palestinian issues.

Furthermore, the new administration will probably not encourage expanding Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. Biden may even revive Obama's policy of considering the illegal Israeli settlements on occupied

Palestinian territory as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace. In this vein, the Biden administration is expected to support the Oslo Accords, which Trump cast aside. In another return to Obama-era policies, Biden is likely to resume U.S. economic and humanitarian aid to Palestinians and may re-open the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington. Generally, unlike Trump, Biden would support the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nonetheless, the Biden administration will show some continuity with Trump's policies. Notably, while Biden may not ignore Palestinian interests as Trump did, he will almost certainly give more weight to Israeli concerns. Moreover, it is hard to imagine the Biden administration pursuing drastic changes to Trump's legacy, like moving the U.S. embassy from Jerusalem back to Tel Aviv. Similarly, it is doubtful that Biden will resume U.S. funding to the UNWRA, though he may resume efforts to pursue U.S. involvement in the international organizations Trump abandoned. Finally, building on the Trump administration's actions, Biden will encourage more Arab states to normalize their relations with Israel as part of peace engagement.

Room for the PA to Recalibrate

Looking forward, while these policies may not be the centerpieces of the Biden administration's foreign policy, the weight of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in popular dialogue will force him to make some efforts for progress on the issue. Fortunately, there is a constructive role for the Biden administration to play. Recently, security cooperation, the transfer of PA tax revenues collected from Palestinians by the Israeli government, and timid cooperation in facing the Covid-19 pandemic have been as far as Israel and the PA have been willing to proceed in the depth of their relations. Here, the Biden administration can play a role in paving the road for more constructive engagements.

For such progress to occur, the Palestinian leadership must not take Biden for granted. The PA should not seek to force the president's hand with a long list of demands. Generally, the PA should begin to approach their political leverage in the region more realistically. Palestinian leadership vehemently opposed Israeli normalization with the United Arab Emirates, but only succeeded in creating enmity between the PA and Gulf governments who otherwise ardently support the Palestinian cause. It would be a blunder for the PA leadership to continue opposing the normalization policy.

Moreover, the PA needs to understand that while the United States remains unscathed, Palestinian interests suffer severely from the kind of direct collisions with the United States that happened under both the Obama and Trump administrations. In avoiding such collisions, the PA should stop pushing for the maximalist UN resolution and develop a coherent, realistic peace plan that considers both sides' interests and security concerns.

Unfortunately, current Israeli and Palestinian leaderships seem unlikely to make these kinds of reasonable steps towards peace. Other factors, however, like the Covid-19 pandemic and its depressing impact on the people and economies under the Israeli and PA governments, could be a catalyst for positive engagement. Furthermore, looking forward to the next four years, new leadership with courage and vision could arise under the right conditions and steer the two nations towards peace.

Most importantly, popular attitudes and civil society will have to bend towards peace. If Palestinian and Israeli leaders are unwilling to engage in negotiations or final status talks, it likely means their constituents are not pressuring them to do so. In that case, there is not much the Biden administration can do.

In the short term, the Biden administration will be busy in its first hundred days addressing disastrous Trump policies for managing the Covid-19 pandemic, building the economy, mending ties with allies, and polishing U.S. global image. The PA should take advantage of that period to get its house in order and come up with new fresh ideas to get back on the negotiation table. ❖

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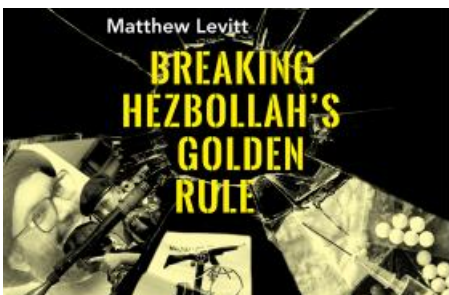
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