



Cautious Optimism in Ramallah Regarding Biden

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Palestinian Authority (PA) has a long wish list for the Biden administration, but its initial approach will be restrained and realistic. It is understood among the Palestinian leadership that the new administration will not address the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the short term. Regardless, Israel must establish reliable channels to President-elect Biden, and the sooner the better.

When President-elect Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 US presidential election, color returned to the cheeks of senior Fatah officials in Ramallah, particularly within the close circle of Mahmoud Abbas. The hope is that four years of diplomatic standoff are about to come to an end and a more balanced US policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be put in place.

Both the leadership in Ramallah and the people on its streets are optimistic that this change in US policy will occur. The PA has a long wish list for the Biden administration, including the reversal of some of President Donald Trump's executive orders that they believe severely damaged the Palestinian cause.

One outspoken Palestinian personality, Dr. Nasser Quidwa, acting head of the Yasser Arafat Foundation (and a veteran diplomat), blamed Trump for causing "lots of problems and lots of trouble for American influence around the world. For us Palestinians, the most important aspect of the [US] election was who is leaving office, not who is entering it...there is a huge difference between Trump and Biden...because the administration that is leaving has played the most destructive role against the Palestinian cause and Palestinian national rights."

The PA cut off all contact with the US administration soon after Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital at the end of 2017. Palestinians were

furious at that decision, as they view East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state.

Unconfirmed reports are spreading in Ramallah that preliminary understandings have already been reached between PA officials and incoming US presidential aides. If true, these understandings could be the result of informal behind-the-scenes contacts conducted mainly in Washington.

However, according to unofficial remarks by high-ranking Fatah political activists in Ramallah, it appears that on a practical level, the dominant assessment of the PA regarding the expected policy of Biden's administration is restrained and realistic. It is understood that Biden intends to focus during the earliest phase of his term in office on the challenge of containing the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on more pressing foreign relations topics—the reshaping of a binding agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, tensions in the Asia-Pacific, and other outstanding international matters. The thinking within the Palestinian leadership is that “anyone who thinks the new American administration will be required to address the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the short term lives in illusions.”

Fatah activists are nevertheless very relieved that Biden is entering the White House and Trump is leaving it. They express the hope that the Biden administration will reassess US policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a way that will dramatically reverse what was considered the Trump administration's unbalanced policy. The general Palestinian public also believes Biden's electoral victory will lead to an improvement in Palestinian-US relations.

It is likely that several meaningful as well as symbolic acts will be manifested shortly after Biden's inauguration. They include:

- reopening the PLO office in Washington
- renewing US financial assistance to the PA
- reviving American support for UNRWA
- reopening the American consulate in East Jerusalem
- strongly opposing the expansion of Israeli settlements and any implementation of sovereignty by Israel.

The Palestinian leadership is planning a cautious and pragmatic approach to the new administration rather than an over-eager approach involving the presenting of problematic and controversial demands. The leadership seems to understand that it is not realistic to expect Biden to undo Trump's clear-cut political decisions, particularly on the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the moving of the US embassy to the holy city.

The PA's policy is already visible in its decision to renew full coordination with Israel in the security and civilian domains, as well as in its readiness to accept tax refunds and tariffs from the Israeli Ministry of Finance.

The PA's political approach to the new administration will be accompanied by a renewed public interest in reviving the political process with Israel through coordination with Egypt and Jordan. In this regard, the historical role of the Quartet (the EU, Russia, the UN, and the US) in providing international sponsorship would be much welcomed. The desired format would be the convening of an international conference early in 2021. PA FM Riyad al-Malki said on December 20, "We are ready for cooperation and dealing with the new US administration, and we are expecting that it would re-draw its ties with the state of Palestine." It is well-known that Biden supports the two-state solution, and he is likely to seriously consider the emerging Palestinian initiative.

In the prevailing circumstances, Hamas in Gaza is not interested in initiating a military escalation with Israel. Its restraint reflects its need to contain the out-of-control spread of coronavirus in the Gaza Strip, a problem that could constitute an existential threat to its rule in the Strip. Therefore, a scenario in which Hamas prioritizes an unofficial ceasefire (a "*hudna*") with Israel is a possibility. Israel could, indeed, "rescue" Hamas by providing vaccines to the Palestinians of Gaza.

Palestinian society would like to see an end to the division between its two largest factions, Fatah/the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This objective, while unrealistic at present, is the society's ultimate goal.

The optimism among the Palestinians vis-à-vis the potential for a positive working relationship with the Biden administration signals a new and serious constraint on the Israeli government: namely, the challenging of the "Netanyahu Doctrine" as manifested in the Abraham Accords. The expected renewal of US policy to prioritize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should motivate Israel to establish reliable channels to Biden, and the sooner the better.

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