

Opinion – Israel-Palestine Policy Under Biden

Written by Cindy May

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CINDY MAY, JAN 1 2021

Joe Biden's election has generated optimism that the United States will meaningfully reengage in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. President-elect Biden will undoubtedly take a more equitable and multilateral approach to the conflict than his predecessor, but his tenure is unlikely to usher in a significant change in the US policy. As a longtime ally to Israel who has spent more than forty years as a Democratic senator and vice president, his views on the conflict firmly reflect those of his party's mainstream. We can thus expect Biden's approach to Israel and Palestine to be a return to the status quo that was maintained by previous Democratic presidents.

President Donald Trump has pursued a staunchly pro-Israeli agenda that included recognising Israeli settlements in the West Bank, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, and cutting diplomatic ties to the Palestinians by closing the US consulate general in East Jerusalem and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) mission in Washington, DC. These policies have weakened the Palestinian position and all but destroyed the US's credibility as a mediator for the two parties.

Biden is unlikely to give Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli right the same level of unreserved support that they enjoyed under Trump. However, there will be marked continuity between the administrations on some key issues. Biden criticised Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem but has stated that he will not move it back to Tel Aviv. Like Trump, Biden is also a staunch proponent of the US security guarantee to Israel and does not support leveraging US aid to temper Israeli settlement activity. He is also firmly opposed to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. His nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, insisted that the Biden administration would push back against the movement and make efforts to denounce Israel at the United Nations.

There will, however, be notable changes in Biden's policies. He plans to reengage with the Palestinians by reopening the US consulate in East Jerusalem and the PLO mission in Washington, DC. He is also committed to restoring aid that supports 'Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, economic development, and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip' (Biden n.d). However, that aid is conditioned on the Palestinian National Authority stopping payments to the families of Palestinian prisoners and accused Palestinian attackers who were killed by Israeli military and security. The president-elect has also indicated that he will return to the US's long-standing position of opposing unilateral annexation of territory and settlement activity that may damage the prospects of a two-state solution. From the Palestinian perspective, this will be a welcome shift away from the Trump administration's legitimisation of these activities, but in practice it will likely amount to little more than a rhetorical shift.

With a number of pressing domestic and foreign policy issues, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the rise of China vying for his attention, the Israel-Palestine conflict is unlikely to feature prominently in Biden's foreign policy agenda during his first years in office. Unlike many previous presidents-elect, he has not announced any initiatives to address the conflict. Blinken noted that the two parties are not ready to negotiate and predicted that the administration will initially take a "do no harm" approach. While this reserved policy will do little to resolve the region's endemic security and humanitarian issues, it will at least restore some balance to the American position, a prerequisite if the US is to serve as a mediator to the conflict in the future.

A return to disengaged stability is a modest but nevertheless important improvement to the prospects for peace. With

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the recent collapse of Netanyahu's government, Israel will have its fourth election in two years in March. While the political right will likely remain dominant, Netanyahu's position is in question. Should he fail to retain power, perhaps fresh Israeli and American leadership would provide an opening to consider returning to negotiations in the future. Under Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's tenures, there has been little hope of meaningful progress with the peace process.

Instead of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Biden wants his Middle East agenda to focus on reviving the Iran nuclear agreement and further winding down US military commitments in the region. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a hallmark accomplishment of the Obama-Biden administration, and the president-elect is committed to rejoining the agreement if Iran returns to compliance. However, returning to the agreement may prove to be nearly as difficult as it was to negotiate the first time. America's regional allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are opposed to the deal. Fear of growing Iranian regional influence under the terms of the JCPOA played no small part in convincing the UAE to sign a peace deal with Israel.

The current pragmatist Iranian regime, under the leadership of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, has signalled that it is open to rejoining the deal if the US lifts sanctions, but Rouhani is facing an election in June. Hardliners won by a comfortable margin during parliamentary elections in February 2020, and there are calls for reparations for US sanctions. Finally, Biden faces significant domestic opposition to the deal with those from both parties wanting more robust security guarantees included in the agreement. The combination of these circumstances will mean that the nuclear agreement will occupy a sizeable portion of Biden's initial Middle East policy, leaving little political capital to spend on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

While Biden is set to spend much of his early months in office reversing Trump-era policies, from rejoining the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organisation to reengaging with European allies, Israel-Palestine policy is one area where change is likely to be more measured. Biden's tenure will not foster the policy shift needed to promote the peace process or change Palestinian fortunes, but after four years of neglect by the Trump administration it will nonetheless be a welcome reprieve for the Palestinians and may provide the equanimity the region needs to avoid conflict.

About the author:

Dr. Cindy May is a Fellow in the International Relations department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests include Middle East politics, US foreign and security policy, and terrorism.