

Biden's First Year

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It has been 300 days since Joseph Biden was inaugurated president. There’s no question that he’s had a rough go of it. He’s had to contend with a united Republican Party committed to blocking his every move and a handful of Democratic senators and members of Congress wanting to chip away at key components of his signature domestic legislation. Biden has also had to deal with the chaos left behind by his predecessor. Despite these obstacles, he has had some successes.

Between now and his first anniversary in office, interest groups of all sorts will evaluate the extent to which the Biden administration has been able to fulfill the commitments he made during his campaign. During the next few months, I will, on occasion, take a look at a number of the pledges candidate Biden made to the Arab American community in 2020. Because developments in Israel/Palestine are on my mind, this is where I will begin.

During the 2020 campaign season, I was involved in the negotiations with the Biden team over the language that would shape its platform on Middle East-related issues. When it came to Israel/Palestine, I was pleased that they were willing to insert some language we had failed to have included in earlier years. This platform does, for example, speak about the equal worth and value of Israelis and Palestinians. It also condemns Israeli settlements, language we were unable to have inserted into the Obama or Clinton platforms.

Where we focused our pressure in 2020 was on our insistence that the Biden campaign accept the principle of conditionality, tying US political and economic assistance to Israel on their policies in the occupied territories. We failed to have any language of this sort inserted in the platform, and it is the absence of conditionality that, as we shall see, is the reason why the Biden administration has been unable to deliver on its other campaign pledges in this area.

In both the 2020 Biden platform and his campaign’s “Plan for Partnership” with the Arab American community, Biden addressed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict thusly.

“Joe Biden believes in the worth and value of every Palestinian and every Israeli. He will work to ensure that Palestinians and Israelis enjoy equal measures of freedom, security,

prosperity, and democracy.”

“His policies will be grounded in a commitment to a two-state solution, where Israel and the future viable state of Palestine will live together in peace, security, and mutual recognition.”

“Biden opposes any unilateral steps by either side that undermine a two-state solution. He opposes annexation and settlement expansion and will continue to oppose both as President.”

“As President, Biden will take immediate steps to restore economic and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, consistent with US law, including assistance to refugees, work to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza...”

“... reopen the US consulate in East Jerusalem...”

“... and work to reopen the PLO mission in Washington”.

Even a cursory glance at the list makes it clear that with the exception of item #4, the Biden administration has failed to deliver on, or even make progress towards, any of the other pledges they made in addressing Israel/Palestine.

The lives and worth of Palestinians have repeatedly been subordinated to those of Israelis. Israel has continued to take unilateral measures that make a two-state solution impossible to even imagine. And it appears that the Biden administration has surrendered to Israel and pro-Israel “hawks” in Congress on reopening both the Jerusalem Consulate (which is actually in West, not East, Jerusalem) and the PLO office in Washington.

During the past ten months, the situation confronting Palestinians in the occupied territories has appreciably worsened. The Gaza war, which was precipitated by provocative Israeli actions that threaten to change the status quo at the Haram Al Sharif and efforts to evict Palestinians from their homes in Jerusalem and by Hamas’ foolish and costly use of rockets, resulted in the deaths of more than 200 Palestinians and a dozen Israelis, devastation to Gaza’s infrastructure, and the destruction of the homes of tens of thousands. Dozens of Palestinian demonstrators in the West Bank also lost their lives to Israeli fire.

The Biden administration had only a timid response to both Israel’s actions in Jerusalem and its disproportionate use of force in Gaza and the West Bank. And the aid the US has offered Palestinians, while welcomed, was \$360 million, a paltry sum when compared to Israel’s \$3.8 billion annual aid supplemented by an additional \$1 billion to replenish its “Iron Dome” defence system.

Israel’s new government has announced plans to significantly increase the number of settlement housing units in the occupied lands and has “legalised” a number of previously “unauthorised” settlements, this growth is strategically planned to further consolidate Israeli control over the territories and make impossible the establishment of an independent viable Palestinian state. At the same time, Israel has continued to demolish Palestinian homes and do nothing to curb the spike in organised settler violence and harassment directed at Palestinians living near illegal Israeli settlements. To make matters worse, the Israelis have declared leading Palestinian human rights monitoring and advocacy groups to be terrorist-affiliated.

In the face of these Israeli actions, the Biden administration has done little more than express “deep concern”, which the Israelis dismiss out of hand. Doing nothing more concrete to cause Israel to change their policies of settlement growth, creeping annexation, and increasing the pressure on captive Palestinians contradicts all of the goals set by the Biden team.

In an effort to defend the administration’s inaction, some apologists express concern that a more combative stance against the new Israeli government would threaten its stability and risk bringing Netanyahu back into office. They also suggest that challenges to Israel will cause blowback from both Republicans and some Democrats in Congress. While this may be true, subordinating Palestinian rights to concerns for Israeli or domestic politics certainly calls into question the Biden administration’s stated commitment to the “equal worth and value of both Israelis and Palestinians”. It renders their pledges to Palestinians hollow and more performative than real. President Biden still has time to course correct and demonstrate desperately needed leadership in making good on his platform promises. It’s what he should do.

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