PODCAST

Biden in the White House: Alaa Tartir on Implications for Palestine

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Alaa Tartir · December, 2020

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Alaa Tartir 0:00

The US aid to the Palestinian Authority largely aims to solidify the role of the Palestinian Authority as a subcontractor to Israel, the Israeli occupation. It made the Israeli occupation cheaper and longer. It also benefited the Israeli economy, and it entrenched Palestinian fragmentation.

Yara Hawari 0:28

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

Several weeks ago, we saw the election of Joe Biden to the White House after a campaign trail that took place amidst a global pandemic. Trump, on his part, has yet to fully concede, citing unproven claims of election fraud and corruption. Yet

most of the world has recognized a Biden win. As such, a lot of people around the world have breathed a sigh of relief, and there have even been massive celebrations in the US and other places around the world.

But many progressive critics are also warning that the work is yet to be done. And particularly vis-à-vis Palestine, Biden is hardly an ally of the Palestinians.

To discuss all of this, and in particular what the US elections mean for the Palestinian struggle for liberation, I'm joined by Dr. Alaa Tartir, program and policy advisor for Al-Shabaka, and also a research and academic coordinator at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and a global fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Alaa, welcome.

Alaa Tartir 2:01

Thank you, Yara. Thank you for hosting me.

Yara Hawari 2:03

Alaa, it's been a tumultuous year in Palestine, not only because of the pandemic but also because of various US policy maneuvers which have helped to further entrench Israeli domination. Could you briefly talk us through some of these?

Alaa Tartir 2:17

Yes, sure. The Trump administration, over the past few years, took the US policy towards Israel and Palestine to another dangerous level.

It did so by building on previous administrations' policies and steps, and it's really important to keep that in mind — that the Trump administration built its intervention and its policies on what the other previous administrations did. But also they built their interventions and took it to this other dangerous level because

of the nature and kind of leadership on both sides, the Palestinian and Israeli sides.

And of course, this is why we witnessed so many dangerous moves. We witnessed the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. We witnessed the cut of USAID. We witnessed the support to Israeli annexation plans and the settlement expansions. But fundamentally, we witnessed a violation of international law at all levels, and it was a really dangerous trend that we saw over the years with Trump in the White House.

But also the announcement that came earlier this year about the so-called "Deal of the Century" was the main output that the Trump administration delivered, and it was a major sellout of Palestine and the Palestinian cause.

And before leaving office, the Trump administration continued its attempt to marginalize Palestinian leadership and the Palestinians at large from the political processes that are taking place, through these so-called "Abraham Accords" and the normalization deals between some Arab countries and Israel.

So these are some of the steps that the US administration under Trump took. And the list is long, and the harm that's been caused is really deep, and now the new incoming administration needs to deal with all these issues and decide what to do with them.

Yara Hawari 4:20

Alaa, thank you for that. I think that was a really good summary of what's been going on with regards to US policy maneuvers, and it really sums up and highlights how these maneuvers are not anything particularly new, but really a continuation of US foreign policy towards the Palestinians for decades.

You recently published a piece with the Peace Research Institute Oslo, where you discuss the Biden presidency, Palestine, and the prospects for peace. And you

open the piece by claiming to be a party pooper — which is a claim I'm all too familiar with — and you go on to say that you are not coming from a rejectionist or a pessimist position.

So what kind of position would you say that you are coming from?

Alaa Tartir 5:04

Well, with the Biden administration coming to office in January, so many observers started already talking about a remarkable difference vis-à-vis Palestine-Israel, but also with others. And I wanted to be this spoiler or party pooper, because I just don't think this will be the case.

I think what's important to keep in mind is that the Biden administration is starting from a very low bar — whatever they do would be better in relative terms — but that doesn't mean that it's better for true and real peace, or that it's really the desired policies by millions of people, let's say the millions of Palestinians that we have. Starting from a low bar does not mean that we will witness the remarkable differences.

What I argue is that we will witness a continuation of what other US — be it Democrats or Republicans — administrations attempted to do over the years. And importantly, they failed over the past decades, as far as Palestinians and peace are concerned. So in this sense, of course, the Biden administration would be perceived differently by different actors, but what is the fundamental point when it comes to Palestine-Israel is that the only remaining constant variable is that this new administration will continue to be a dishonest broker for peace — and that is a continuation of what we've seen before.

And this is not a rejectionist or pessimistic perspective, because in fact this is based on solid, strong, empirical evidence that we can see over the years, from the early years when Biden showed his support to Israel decades ago through

financial aid and financial means. He sees Israel as the only true ally in the entire region, and cannot believe that the US could even threaten Israel with cutting aid. His views about Israel are well established.

But also it's very important to keep in mind that Biden is not a stranger. Biden was with Obama for eight years in the White House, and we know very well what happened under the Obama administration. The views are very clear. Also, looking at his electoral campaign, seeing what he promised Israel and what he wanted to deliver to Israel are very clear signs of what to expect.

So I'm not optimistic about all of that, because what we will be seeing is a return to the old normal. And returning to the old normal is neither good news for peace nor for justice, let alone for freedom and equality for Palestinians. And this is what we will witness with the Biden administration.

Yara Hawari 7:52

In the late eighties, Biden has a famous quote where he says that if there was not an Israel, the US would have to create an Israel. And here he was referring to the US interests in the Middle East and how Israel actually safeguards those interests. He's a big supporter of this idea that Israel is this bastion of Western democracy in an uncivilized place — such a common orientalist and racist notion that Biden has clearly spouted throughout his career.

I think for Palestinians, that has to be something that we really highlight — that someone like Biden is not going to be a savior. And indeed, in that same piece, Alaa, you write that Biden will not be a savior for the Palestinians but will be a savior for the peace process.

Can you explain what you mean by that?

Alaa Tartir 8:44

As I mentioned earlier, what we will witness with Biden is a return to the old normal. And the old normal will actually mean the revival of the so-called "peace process," with the emphasis on the process.

It's a peace process that's been ongoing for the past decades, going back to the early nineties. And this is what the US administrations over the decades wanted to do and knew how to do: to prolong this process that delivers very little, and actually harms the Palestinians every year because it fails to deliver and solidifies the Israeli settler colonial project on the ground.

So we just need to make it very clear that Biden is not there to help the Palestinians. The US administration is not there to save the Palestinians and to ensure liberty and freedom — or even statehood, if that's what the Palestinian leadership wants. They are there to reengage in a long process — that so-called "peace process" — where they invest lots of energy, lots of money, just for the sake of reviving that process and then start having conversations. But these conversations are anything but meaningful.

And just to be very clear, what we will witness under a Biden administration is something that other administrations have done over the past years. So this is why it is really important: if we're looking for sources of hope, we shouldn't look at the US side of the world. That is not a side bringing hopes for the Palestinians, or peace and justice.

So let's be very clear from the Palestinian side: any US administration will stick to its position as a dishonest broker for peace, will stick to its position as a party that will mainly and only deliver for Israel, even if they give bits and pieces of aid money to the Palestinians. But that will not ensure their freedom or dignity.

Yara Hawari 10:59

Alaa, a lot of people are talking about this reinstating of aid to the Palestinian

Authority and UNRWA with the Biden administration, and they're framing this as a win for the Palestinians. Why is that not necessarily the case?

Alaa Tartir 11:13

Well, framing US aid to the Palestinians as a win is fundamentally wrong and problematic, and actually it is just not correct. The US aid delivered to the Palestinians over the years was highly conditional, highly politicized, and mainly secured Israel at the cost and expense of the Palestinians — i.e., the US aid to the Palestinians was as much to Israel as it was to the Palestinians. In other words, the US aid to the Palestinians was designed around the US-Israel relationship. It didn't put the Palestinians in the core of this aid delivery system, but rather framed and designed the US aid intervention through the Israel-US close relationship.

So thinking about the US aid as a win for the Palestinians is really not accurate. And I always argue that cutting the US aid to the Palestinians will not really be a bad idea, as many people want to say. Because after all, the US aid to the Palestinian Authority in particular largely aims to solidify the role of the Palestinian Authority as a subcontractor to Israel, the Israeli occupation. It made the Israeli occupation cheaper and longer. It also benefited the Israeli economy, and it entrenched Palestinian fragmentation. And with all of that, it denied the potential for Palestinian democracy or Palestinian development.

I always argue that, for all these reasons and many others, cutting the US aid to the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority is actually not a bad idea. Of course, there will be major consequences, especially in the short term. But what I argue is that in the long term, this is really an opportunity for the Palestinians to reframe the aid intervention, to make it more effective in terms of delivery for the Palestinians. Sadly, the Palestinian political leadership did not seize that opportunity over the past years when the aid was cut, and instead of creating and reinventing aid policy, they kept the same policy in place.

And now with the new US administration, it is very likely that we will see all these aid funds from the US being channeled again to the Palestinian Authority, and in particular to the security forces and to the security sector.

And here, let's remember that it was under the Obama-Biden administration where Palestinians were promised billions of dollars through the US Secretary of State at the time, John Kerry. They designed the plan that they called the Palestine Economic Initiative to deliver billions of dollars — ranging between four and eleven billion. Of course, that plan failed and hardly delivered.

At the time when it was declared, I argued that this plan was problematic in terms of design; it had lots of harmful consequences, and it had very flawed economic rationale. But this is what Biden knows. He knows Kerry's billion-dollar plan. He knows that through this plan — which we call an "economic peace" plan, which means let's give Palestinians all these funds and then that makes them happier Palestinians and then they engage in the process of political reconciliation and negotiation — this economic peace plan, or a "peace dividends" plan, failed miserably over the decades. But this is the only thing that Biden knows. The only thing that he could do is just to come up with a fancier title for his economic plan, but fundamentally it will be in line with the previous administrations' plans.

Yara Hawari 15:04

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And on the same tangent, reinstating aid to the Palestinian Authority is not necessarily something that Israel is against, based on this idea that comes with economic peace — that Palestinians could be subdued with money, buying the Palestinians out. And I think for this reason and for other reasons, Prime Minister Netanyahu was likely quite sincere in his congratulations to Biden, not only

because of this but also because of their decades-long friendship, unlike Netanyahu's relationship with former President Obama.

So how do you think this personal relationship between the two bodes for the Palestinians?

Alaa Tartir 16:05

As we mentioned earlier, all US administrations delivered for Israel. And that is the main objective for this close relationship between Israel and the United States. And as we said earlier, Biden views Israel as the only true ally in the entire region.

Therefore, the Israeli leadership wished that Trump continues and stays in office, because they took from him whatever they really wanted. And if he stayed for an extra four years, they would have gotten even more, and they could have solidified the systems of apartheid and colonial dominance.

But he's not in office now. But Israel knows very well that the so-called "bond" between Israel and the US will not be shaken regardless of who's in the office, be it Democrats or Republicans, because of all the institutional support behind the person in the White House. And this is why they will continue their partnership.

There were even some reports saying that the Israeli leadership will go and ask Biden for even more military aid. And they know that this is a spot where Biden will feel very comfortable with giving more aid, as under Obama they promised Israel and committed to $38 billion over ten years.

So with Netanyahu, he is happy to do business with anyone in the White House, and he will deal differently with the Biden administration than with the Trump administration. But the bottom line is that both — be it Biden or Trump — will only and mainly deliver to Israel.

Of course, we will witness some internal Israeli dynamics with Biden's arrival to the

office. We are already talking and we're already hearing all the conversations about new elections from the Israeli side. Benny Gantz is trying to reposition — or position — himself as the leader to do business with the Biden administration, already hinting at new elections. There will be consequences and some implications for the Israeli internal political dynamics. But Netanyahu congratulated Biden and the administration because they know that they will not fail them.

Yara Hawari 18:30

There's also this argument that under a Democratic president, there will be more space for maneuver for those people fighting for justice — not just on Palestine but on other issues as well. And we know that there are more progressive voices in the Democrat Party who have been critical of the US policies vis-à-vis Palestinians — and here I'm thinking in particular of the famous "squad," which includes Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Do you think they would be able to push the party in a more radical direction when it comes to US foreign policy vis-à-vis Palestine and Israel?

Alaa Tartir 19:12

Absolutely. This is a very important issue, because the struggle continues and these progressive voices have the opportunity now to join forces with the Palestinians and justice-seekers around the world to try and reverse some of the harmful policies of the US. Of course, I'm not under any delusion that a fundamental shift will happen. As I said before, the US will always be the one delivering for Israel, and this is again based on a decades-long history.

But it is important to have these progressive voices to push for a different agenda, to hold the American administration accountable, especially vis-à-vis international law. Because as we said earlier, the Trump administration violated all kinds of

international laws and norms that we have, and the new administration will try to reposition itself vis-à-vis international law. So framing the Palestinian struggle within the overall international law framework will mean that these progressive voices have the further duty to ensure that the incoming US administration will stick to that. And that's a big deal if it is achieved, because that affects realities on the ground, it affects how settlements and colonies are perceived, how the UN could intervene in all of that.

So any kind of progressive voices will not create remarkable institutional shifts in the party or the US administration, for the reasons that we mentioned earlier. But they could hold the administration accountable.

But we also need to be careful with what we celebrate and with how we celebrate. We talked earlier about the US aid to Palestine. It is very clear — or it should be very clear — that resuming and restarting that aid should not be particularly celebrated. And here, for the progressive voices, they said: okay, if we want to restart the international aid, then we need to have more accountability mechanisms in this aid that ensure that aid will not go and support the occupation, will not land in the Israeli economy, will not solidify Palestinian authoritarianism, and all of that. So it's a long process, but these progressive voices have really an important role to play at the moment.

Yara Hawari 21:36

Now, what about the Palestinian Authority in all of this? Under the Trump administration, they were totally immobilized on an international level, and they were very much forced to look at internal dynamics as really the only thing that they could do — such as reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and also elections, noting that there haven't been Palestinian elections for a very long time.

Do you think all of this will be abandoned now?

Alaa Tartir 22:04

Well, this is a very important and very big question at the same time. What is becoming a priority for the Palestinian leadership at the moment is to reengage with the incoming US administration, regardless of how much it will cost them.

As we witnessed recently, the Palestinian leadership reversed many of the decisions that it took in order just to show a gesture and just to show signs to the US administration that "we're ready to do business, we're ready to come back to the negotiation table, we're ready to receive your aid, we're ready to come and resume our diplomatic relationships." So that desperate leadership is just putting again all its eggs in the US basket.

And it is really unfortunate, but also problematic and dangerous, that the Palestinian leadership does not learn from all their past mistakes over the decades. And by that, they are harming the current and future generations of the Palestinians by investing — or putting all their eggs — in the US basket.

And this is why we're witnessing now that focus on how to revive the relationship with the US, and not to focus on internal Palestinian dynamics — such as reconciliation, elections, and creating a legitimate, representative, accountable Palestinian leadership. And that is really the harm, or one of the harms, that the current leadership is causing for the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian struggle for freedom.

And precisely by having this focus on the US and not having the inward-looking focus — what the Palestinians need, and the Palestinian leadership must do now, is to take care of the internal dynamic and not to branch out and reach out to the US and tell them "we're ready for business, we're happy to resume security coordination."

That is not what the Palestinians need. They need a representative, legitimate,

accountable leadership. They need a clearly defined and accountable style of governance frameworks that can deliver to the Palestinians and care more about the Palestinians. They need a political system where Palestinian people would be in the core of their political system and not on the margin. They need a Palestinian political scene that is unified, or at least where there is a clear conversation between the different parties towards establishing a different political system than we see now. They need democratic institutions, as opposed to the current authoritarian institutions.

The list is really long, and this is what the Palestinian leadership should do and how they should position themselves. But it is very clear that they are not interested and also not willing to do that, because they still believe the US could deliver the two-state solution and could deliver Palestinian statehood — which is a myth. It's delusional.

Yara Hawari 25:03

Thank you, Alaa. And I think that the PA's delusion was really highlighted with that remarkable statement that the resumption of the security coordination with Israel was a great win for the Palestinian people. It was really quite remarkable, indeed.

Thank you, Alaa. I think from all of this, it's really clear that this is not a time for celebration but rather a time for continued work to challenge Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. So again, thank you, Alaa, so much for joining me.

Alaa Tartir 25:36

Thank you very much, Yara.

Yara Hawari 25:41

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