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The Israeli- Palestinians Political Process: A Guide for the Perplexed for the Coming Biden Era

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Joe Biden's Presidential victory will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the struggle for Middle Eastern regional hegemony and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the campaign, President-elect Joseph Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris rarely made clear statements regarding key regional issues. **In the upcoming reports of our series Middle Eastern Game of Thrones, we attempt to characterize possible directions of the new administration's regional policies, their impact on key issues, and the primary dilemmas facing Israel. This paper will deal with the expected impact of Biden's election on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**

THE ISSUE: POLITICAL DYNAMICS PROFOUNDLY CHANGES DURING TRUMP

- 1. The "Palestinians First" paradigm, which was anchored in the Arab Peace Initiative and formed the foundation for the Obama administration's approach to the conflict, has collapsed.** The Arab Peace Initiative stipulated that Arab states' normalization with Israel would come only after the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the initiative transformed from an opportunity into an obstacle because it did not adequately address the structural failures underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mainly the PA-Hamas split, which, at this time, does not allow for an achievable and permanent agreement. **The Abraham Accords reflect a new outlook, which maintains that the resolution of the conflict is not necessarily the threshold condition for improving Israel's status in the region. Furthermore, the unconditional support for the Palestinian issue no longer holds the same weight as it did in the past in terms of legitimacy in domestic Arab politics.**
- 2. The Palestinian "diplomatic intifada" has clearly reached a dead end.**
 - In the past decade, the PLO and PA have given up on negotiating with Israel. Instead, they have adopted a confrontational approach, which employs rhetoric associated with entities promoting the delegitimization of Israel in the West. This approach emphasizes and advances Palestinian anti-Israel activities in international organizations.** This strategy aims to isolate Israel, it calls to boycott Israel and intends to impose principles for a permanent resolution of the conflict based on the Palestinian narrative. Although the PA has expressed its desire for Palestinian reconciliation, in practice, the "diplomatic intifada" created a deliberate bifurcation between the PA and Hamas, eventually becoming the PA's *raison d'être*.

- **The Palestinian strategy collapsed with the loss of support from Arab countries.** Arab unity on the Palestinian issue was the cornerstone of Palestinian efforts to coordinate with the US and EU regarding fundamental issues of the conflict, especially regarding the settlements, by bypassing Israel. The coordination with Egypt has been central to this confrontational approach. However, Egypt disappointed the Palestinians by publicly supporting Israel's agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan.

THE SIGNIFICANCE: NO DIPLOMATIC U-TURN DURING THE BIDEN ERA

3. **The Palestinians will commit to negotiations, but it is doubtful whether they will be able to politically deliver.** The PA is expected to renew its commitment to negotiations, at least outwardly stating so, as well as security coordination with Israel. Moreover, the current circumstances create the possibility for the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership, which may show greater pragmatism in order to not be left behind. Despite this, the PA-Hamas split, the erosion of the PA's legitimacy, and the preparations for the post-Mahmoud Abbas era will make it increasingly difficult for the Palestinians to achieve the pragmatism required to be part of a broad diplomatic agenda, should they want to.
4. **In light of this, a return to the Obama framework will lead to a dead end.** The Obama administration's diplomatic agenda adopted the "package approach" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, i.e. the pursuit of a singular, comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, which settles all historical issues and defines Israeli-Palestinian relations in a permanent status. This approach failed during the Obama era. Even now, it holds no validity in light of the Palestinian political crisis, as well as in face of the significant gaps between Israelis and Palestinians concerning numerous issues, such as the status of refugees and Jerusalem, not to mention Hamas' ongoing control of the Gaza Strip.
5. **Moreover, Biden's victory is expected to freeze the recent PA-Hamas reconciliation proceedings, perpetuating the split and forestalling efforts to reach a settlement with Hamas, mediated by Egypt, and achieving a political agenda vis-à-vis the PA.**
6. **Hence, the political reality will not allow Biden to make a diplomatic U-turn.** The Biden administration is expected to adopt policies on a number of issues that are opposite to Trump's approach, such as US policy toward international organizations and UN agencies. However, although the Biden administration is expected to reverse Trump's decisions and renew budget flows to the PA, open PLO offices in Washington, and perhaps even give a budget to UNWRA, the President-elect will not be able to revert to the "previous" rules of the game, which underpinned the diplomatic process.

DIRECTIONS: A POLITICAL AGENDA KNOWN IN ADVANCE

BIDEN'S POLITICAL MENU

7. **At this point, the Biden administration's willingness to be involved in the Middle East and the Israel-Palestinian conflict remains unclear.** In almost every scenario, America's domestic struggles with COVID-19 and its economic repercussions will take precedence over foreign affairs. However, if we assume

that the new administration will be “drawn in”, like its predecessors, to play some role, it will face numerous dilemmas and considerations, which will make it possible to create some maneuvering space:

- **A major setback for the Trump plan is expected** - The Trump plan painted a future reality of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which was impractical because the Palestinians opposed it. However, at same time, the plan validated political actions without any Palestinian consent, as long as these actions did not contradict the future reality. This approach enabled the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem and paved the way for Israel’s normalization agreements with select Arab states. **It is expected that the Biden administration will attempt to alter this dynamics, both for political reasons and in light of the Palestinian position. However, it is clear that some of the measures initiated or encouraged by the Trump administration are irreversible**, such as the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem and recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Golan Heights.
 - **The Biden administration is expected to support the momentum of normalization** - The incoming administration will be able to showcase significant diplomatic achievements if it knows how to effectively leverage current dynamics and bring forward normalization agreements between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as additional countries. **Nevertheless, this approach may face opposition from the Democratic Party’s progressive wing.** Some of the members of this wing are expected to adopt the prevailing Palestinian narrative that normalization undermines the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.
8. **Hence, while it is expected that the US diplomatic agenda will be the vision of a permanent settlement based on a two-state solution model, in practice, it is likely to be pragmatic and focus solely on upgrading and strengthening the PA’s control in the West Bank**, improving Palestinian quality of life through economic and humanitarian assistance, and initiating joint projects and ventures. Separately, this agenda will also make way for advancing additional normalization agreements. **The Biden administration is expected to impose red lines upon Israel, which will include opposition to annexation and further settlement construction.**

ISRAEL’S APPROACH

9. **Israel must try to reach a security regulation with Hamas since both sides have a shared interest in such an agreement. Israel should prioritize Egyptian mediation. The Israeli-Egyptian relationship has grown in importance in light of the shared perception of a Turkish threat in the eastern Mediterranean basin.** For that reason, Israel should forestall the involvement of Qatar, an ally of Turkey.
10. **At the same time, Israel should not be portrayed as believing that it is easier to reach a settlement with Hamas based on a strategy of deterrence with no diplomatic agenda, rather than to engage with the PA.** Despite its shortcomings, the model of relations with the PA is preferable to the model with Hamas and Gaza.
11. **In the first stage, Israel must rehabilitate its ties with the PA and strengthen its stability as it returns to coordinate security with Israel.** In recent years, the aging PA leadership has lost its internal legitimacy. The defeats encountered by the Palestinians during the Trump era, as well as the failure of the diplomatic

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intifada, undermined the PA's raison d'être. These setbacks strengthened Hamas' presence in the West Bank and emboldened voices calling for the PA's dissolution. These two alternatives - Hamas's takeover of the West Bank and the PA's dissolution - clearly make the PA's existence the lesser of two evils.

End.