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1. **Introduction**

The United States’ (US) foreign policy trend of intervention in the Middle East has long been accepted as a truism in international relations and politics. For decades, the US has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to peace in the Middle East and has made commendable efforts to mediate the Israel-Palestine conflict. While Washington-Palestinian relations experienced tension during Trump presidency, the victory of Biden left the Palestinians upbeat. Today, one year into Biden's tenure, the Palestinians continue to hold mixed expectations of the Biden administration’s ability to advance the peace process.

This paper attempts, in particular, to analyze the Palestinians’ expectations of the of the Biden Administration, as articulated by high officials and leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO): a legitimate authority representing the Palestinian people recognized by Israel in 1993.[[2]](#footnote-2) An approach that aims to understand Palestinian expectations can yield major benefits: it can contribute to making progress toward better conflict resolution, help advance the peace process, and likely revive the two-state solution. In fact, ignoring Palestinian expectations might lead to misunderstanding, miscommunication and could perhaps interrupt or even thwart the peace process entirely.

To identify these expectations, this paper relies on Palestinian and international news sources, along with open governmental data published by the US government and the Palestinian Authority. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section presents the efforts that different US administrations made to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The second section summarizes President Trump's policy towards the Palestinians, highlighting actions that provoked strong condemnation by the Palestinians. The third section presents President Biden's policy toward the Palestinians in the first year of his administration, emphasizing the main differences between Biden and Trump’s decisions. The fourth and final part presents the overarching Palestinian expectations from the Biden administration.

1. **The Essential Role of the US in Promoting Israeli-Palestinian Peace**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been of great importance to the US and at the front lines of its foreign policy. Despite the challenges and difficulties of negotiating a final solution and the skepticism about the chances of successful mediation, the US has had and will likely continue to have a crucial role as an active provider of state mediation and shepherding the peace process. In essence, there is still no country in the world that can compete with the unprecedented efforts made by the US in promoting the peace initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians. The US is a country weighted with a tremendous responsibility, a longstanding commitment, and well-established mediation practices that has been proven effective in some occasions.

For decades, with the exception of President Trump, American mediators exerted tremendous efforts using different approaches to conflict resolution that led to either holding negotiation meetings between Israelis and Palestinians, or to producing interim agreements as in the case of agreements reached in the Oslo Accords between 1993 and 2000. Although the US was not actively involved in the direct negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians in this case, it invested a vast amount of time and resources to implement the agreements, during which the Oslo 1 Accord was signed in the White House in the presence of President Clinton. It was a significant first agreement that outlined steps whereby the Palestinian Authority would be granted de jure recognition, rights to self-determination and limited autonomy, along with investment plans for economy and development, in exchange for which the Israelis were to be given the security guarantee under the peace deal.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is largely possible as a result of US mediation efforts that have transcended multiple administrations.

1. **Reviewing President Trump’s Policies towards the Palestinians**

During his administration (2017-2021), President Trump invested significant diplomatic efforts in establishing and advancing Israel’s relations with neighboring countries, leading up to the Abraham Accords. During this process, he managed to help Israel reach normalization agreements with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. Nevertheless, President Trump’s attempts to mediate the conflict between Israel and Palestine resulted in dismal failure.

From the very beginning of his presidency, Trump characterized his policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “the ultimate deal”, an approach that blocked the negotiations and avoided a middle ground perspective that could mediate between the parties' interests, subsequently compromising peace efforts and increasing injustices. In regards to the Palestinians, Trump pursued contentious policies and a provocative plan regarding key issues of the conflict, most notably recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital (2017), leading the Palestinians to cut their diplomatic relations with Washington; closing the PLO’s Washington office (2018) and moving the embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem (2018), serving as an outright dismissal of Palestinian aspirations for statehood; reshaping decades of US policy on settlements in the West Bank and the Golan Heights, affording more favorable treatment to Israeli settlement in the West Bank; and cutting off aid, particularly from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as a pressure tactic for Palestinians to accept his plan (2018).

The Trump administration did not engage with the Palestinians or include their narratives when making regional decisions, in contrast to previous US mediators who recognized the Palestinian entity as a crucial partner to the peace process with Israel. These mediators managed to bring Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiation table in an attempt to reconcile their interests, assist in finding a resolution to the conflict, and to encourage an agreement without imposing one.

Trump’s tough stance on the peace process has aggravated the Palestinians and produced further disenchantment with the prospect of a settlement. Hostilities between Washington and the Palestinians have mounted, both hindering and creating uncertainty for future negotiations. Trump’s first misconception was believing that he could impose a peace plan on the Palestinians without their involvement.

1. **From Trump to Biden - A Shift in the Approach**

On January 20, 2021, President Joe Biden began his tenure as the 46th President of the United States. Since his inauguration, the Biden Administration has acted on a number of fronts to reverse Trump's policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Below is an overview of the key issues that the Biden Administration has addressed that diverge from Trump’s policies:

* Prioritizing and promoting diplomatic relations with the Palestinians and preparing to reopen the Palestinian office in Washington.**[[3]](#footnote-3)**
* Resuming aid to Palestinians and exhibiting willingness to help Palestinians create economic opportunities and address infrastructure challenges.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Supporting an eventual two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Returning to the UN Human Rights Council and engaging in efforts to restore international law.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Supporting the Israel-Hamas ceasefire during the recent violent escalation in May 2021 after the East Jerusalem eviction battle.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Recognizing Palestinian entitlement to assert its interests, receive equal guarantees of rights, security, freedom, opportunity and dignity.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Advocating against settlement expansion in the West Bank.

Given the aforementioned policy shifts, it is clear that even in President Biden’s first year, he has enacted a distinctly different and nuanced approach, characterized by a willingness to accommodate Palestinian needs, particularly those that were ignored during the Trump presidency. Biden is not pushing his agenda the same way as Trump, instead taking gradual and calculated actions that will be critical to repairing the broken trust in US-Palestinian relations. Mending these relations will create the conditions for Israeli-Palestinian negotiation and will increase the prospect for peace and stability in the future.

Nevertheless, President Biden maintained a number of policies enacted by former President Trump, notably keeping the American embassy in Jerusalem. It is unlikely that the Biden Administration is going to roll back the decision of relocating the embassy to Jerusalem - a decision made in 1995, but suspended by previous presidents. Furthermore, Biden has not yet fulfilled his promise to reopen the consulate in East Jerusalem, which provides the Palestinians with a direct liaison to Washington. This would send a clear message that the US is truly intending to advance the two-state solution. Biden is facing some pressure from Israel to not reopen the consulate, asserting that Jerusalem is the undivided capital for Israel. As a result, it is still unclear whether Biden will keep or break his promise. In addition, there is no telltale sign that Biden intends to take upon himself the task of mediating the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Much of the Biden administration’s current foreign policy is focused on other critical and immediate priorities such as COVID-19 recovery, US-China relations, and more recently the Ukraine crisis.

With that said, Biden signaled continued US engagement in the latest escalation that broke out between Israelis and Palestinians in May 2021 after the eviction battle in East Jerusalem.[[9]](#footnote-9) The joint cooperation and the coordination of US efforts helped both the Gaza Strip and Israel seal the ceasefire deal that resulted in a significant de-escalation of violence and reduction of tensions.

1. **Expectations for President Biden to Reverse Trump Policies towards the Palestinians**

"We do not expect miraculous transformation, but at least we expect the dangerous destructive policies of Trump to totally stop," said Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee, as reported in Al-Quds news.[[10]](#footnote-10) In line with Ashrawi, quite a few Palestinian leaders indicated on numerous occasions their expectations for Biden’s policies and actions.

To overcome setbacks from the Trump presidency, revive negotiations, and get the peace process back on track, there is a critical need to understand the overarching expectations Palestinians have for the Biden Administration. These expectations have been explicitly articulated by high-level officials and leaders of the PLO, although this analysis does not include Palestinian public opinions.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is worth mentioning that while the PLO has the legitimacy and capacity to represent the Palestinian people, in effect the Palestinian people as well as Hamas's leaders may hold different expectations for the Biden Administration as well as divergent attitudes regarding the resumption of Palestinian-US relations.

The Palestinian expectations for President Biden can be described as consisting of the four following elements outlined below.

1. **Restoring Relations with Washington**

The Palestinian Authority is seeking for ways to upgrade its status and restore its relations with Washington. Mohamed A-shtayyeh, the Palestinian Prime Minister, who announced the renewal of contact with the Biden Administration after his call with the White House, as reported in Al-Quds news, stated, "We discussed ways to restore Palestinian-American relations, especially in terms of opening diplomatic offices and the consulate, returning US aid, supporting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and ways to advance the political process.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Recently, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price reported that Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, stating, "They discussed the importance of strengthening the US relationship with the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people, as well as the need to improve quality of life for Palestinians in tangible ways. They also discussed the challenges facing the Palestinian Authority and the need for reform.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

"Restoring the Palestinian leadership's relations with the administration of US President-elect Joe Biden is a step in the right direction, especially with the role that America aspires to be as one of the sponsors of the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis," clarified Zaid Al-Ayoubi, Fatah movement leader, in his statement to Sputnik Arabic.[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, the PLO Executive Member Ahmed Majdalni indicated that the two-state solution is the only way to resolve the conflict.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Boosting the Palestinian Economy and Improving Welfare**

The Palestinians prioritize the Biden Administration’s efforts to revitalize their economy, which has deteriorated following a Trump policy that cut more than 200 million USD in humanitarian aid to the Palestinians as a means to impose his "peace plan". Furthermore, the Israeli Knesset passed a law in 2018 to deduct the tax payment from the Palestinian Authority, on the grounds that this amount is being paid to families of Palestinians who were killed or imprisoned by Israel for carrying out terror attacks against Israeli targets.[[16]](#footnote-16) In addition, financial contributions and funds from Arab countries dropped in 2020, according to data published by the Palestinian Finance Ministry and reported in Al-Quds.[[17]](#footnote-17) Consequently, Palestinians have been dealing with financial difficulties and insurmountable economic challenges.

The Biden Administration announced the resumption of economic and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians. In response, the Palestinian News and Info Agencyreported that Abbas is appreciative of the US aid efforts to the Palestinian people and of the support for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip.[[18]](#footnote-18) It was also reported that President Abbas expressed readiness to coordinate joint Arab and international efforts to rebuild the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians are also seeking to improve the economic wellbeing and the quality of life for the public. To match their expectations and to respond to their needs, the US-Palestinian Economic Dialogue (USPED) was renewed. A meeting was held between senior US and Palestinian officials on December 14, 2021, marking the first of such meetings in five years. According to a joint statement on the United States and Palestinian Authority Renewal of the US-Palestinian Economic Dialogue: "The two sides discussed key topics, including infrastructure development, access to US markets, US regulations, free trade, financial issues, renewable energy and environmental initiatives, connecting Palestinian and American businesses, and addressing obstacles to Palestinian economic development".[[19]](#footnote-19)

Gaining economic power and strengthening prospects for cooperation with the US can serve as a foundation for Palestinians to assert their autonomy and encourage the adoption of beneficial policies for the Palestinian people.

1. **Taking a Stand against Israeli Settlements and Promoting Compliance with Human Rights and International Law**

Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank, which is in defiance with international law and the Roman Statute, is considered one of the primary issues facing Palestinians today. Palestinian leaders consistently affirm that they will not accept a settlement that infringes on their fundamental and historical rights. Accordingly, the Palestinians stress the issue of halting the construction of settlements in the West Bank.

The settlement issue and other violations of Palestinian rights have been continuously raised by President Abbas in his meetings and calls with the Biden Administration. For example, in a recent telephone conversation between President Mahmoud Abbas and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, as reported by Aljazeera, Abbas emphasized, "The importance of ending the Israeli occupation, halting of the settlement activity, and putting an end to settler's attacks and terror, as well the importance of respecting the situation in the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), ending the eviction of Palestinians from their neighborhoods in Jerusalem, stopping the abuse of prisoners and detaining bodies, and stopping the tax deductions stifling the Palestinian economy".[[20]](#footnote-20)

Abbas’s statement conveys Palestinian expectations that the Biden Administration protect human rights, respect the principles of international law, and take appropriate measures to halt Israeli settlement expansion and other violations of Palestinian rights.

1. **Commitment to the Two-State Solution and Avoiding a One-Sided Approach to Resolving the Conflict**

Despite the daunting reality for Palestinians and the challenges and difficulties of negotiating   a final solution, the Palestinians seem to be willing to support a long-lasting peace with Israel, understanding that a two-state solution is significantly important.

In a meeting between President Abbas and US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, the Palestinian News and Info Agency reported that Abbas expressed the importance of a two-state solution and said that, "Israel must stop unilateral measures that undermine the two state solution".[[21]](#footnote-21) In another meeting with Secretary of State Blinken, Abbas stated that he is ready to work with international parties, specifically with the Middle East Quartet, to reach peace and security in the region. He also aspires to establish a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side with Israel.

These statements from Palestinian leadership demonstrate that the Palestinians are depending on the US, as well as other international partners, to advance the peace process and the two-state solution.

1. **Conclusion**

One year ago, during the contentious and decisive 2020 US presidential election, the Palestinians anxiously awaited the results that would determine their future. Biden’s victory signified the end of four turbulent years under President Trump, and revived a palpable sense of hope that Biden would reverse unfavorable policies that led to injustices against the Palestinians. Today, a little over one year into Biden's tenure, the Palestinians seem to be willing to take a leap of faith with Biden. They continue to hold high hopes for Biden to turn back Trump’s policies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, albeit mixed with a degree of skepticism and caution.

Despite this renewed hope, the Palestinians do not expect Biden to make the conflict his utmost priority, nor to make a sharp turn in the American traditional position that has been criticized as favoring Israel over them. Moreover, given the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the US’s limited scope because of the sensitive issues of conflict, there is no expectation that Biden will produce a comprehensive peace plan immediately or find a panacea solution. Instead, the understanding is that the administration will revive the temporary demise of the previously-negotiated peace agreement and re-commit to the two-state solution.

In addition, the Palestinians have been looking for a way out from their economic and financial crisis, and trust that the Biden Administration can bring about transformation, stable economic growth and prosperity. They are looking to revitalize their relationship with Washington under the Biden Administration and to consolidate their condition and status, expecting the Biden Administration to open the consulate in East Jerusalem and the PLO mission in Washington. The Palestinians continue to stress their rights and aspirations, as they are concerned about the expansion of the Israeli settlements and expect the Biden Administration to take a more active role in pressuring Israel to halt expansion and construction in the West Bank.

1. \* Rawan AbuJulia is a Visiting Researcher at Mitvim Institute. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. # The White House. [Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/15/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-palestinian-authority-president-mahmoud-abbas/), May 15, 2021.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. U.S. State Department. State Department spokesman Ned Price speaks at the State Department in Washington, DC, U.S. August 18, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Palestinian News and Info Agency. 25 May, 2021. The President receives the US Secretary of State. [رئيس الجمهورية يستقبل وزيرة الخارجية الأمريكية](https://wafa.ps/Pages/Details/25129). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Palestinian News and Info Agency. 25 May, 2021. The President receives the US Secretary of State. [رئيس الجمهورية يستقبل وزيرة الخارجية الأمريكية](https://wafa.ps/Pages/Details/25129). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cook, Steven, A., [How Eviction in Jerusalem led to Israeli-Palestinian Violence](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-evictions-jerusalem-led-israeli-palestinian-violence). *Council on Foreign Relations.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alquds, 7 November, 2020. The Palestinians welcome the loss of Trump, but are being careful of Biden [الفلسطينيون يرحبون بخسارة ترامب لكن يتوخون الحذر من بايدن](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A8-%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86-%D9%8A/). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Palestinian Center for Policy Survey Research, conducts regularly [public opinion](https://www.pcpsr.org/) polls and survey research. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alquds, 01 February, 2021. [Shtayyeh Odeh announces liaison with the US](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%83%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B8%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B9/). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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14. Suptnik Arabic. The return of contacts between Palestine and America... Why and what are the guarantees? [عودة الاتصالات بين فلسطين وأمريكا.. لماذا وما هي الضمانات؟](https://arabic.sputniknews.com/20210202/%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%9F-1047989556.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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    [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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