

Hopes of an assertive policy on Middle East issues were never high. Faced with a broader and deeper set of initial challenges than any US President since FD Roosevelt in the 1930's, it was forecast that President Biden would split his focus 25/75 on foreign policy issues. Within that 25%, the Middle East would take a relative back seat, concentrated on an effort to re-engage Iran in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which is intended to remove the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon. The traditional focus on negotiations for a settlement of the longstanding Israel/Palestine issue would not be a priority: there was no expectation of an early initiative to resume negotiations of the kind so diligently pursued by John Kerry during the Obama Administration.

So it has proved, but with perhaps even less action on the Israel/Palestine front than the already low expectations. In the very first days of his presidency, Biden appointed Rob Malley as his Special Envoy on Iran. Malley is an able, experienced and subtle diplomat. He was the lead US negotiator for the JCPOA and is very dovish on Israel/Palestine issues. The latter renders him a figure of great suspicion to the Israel lobby in the United States who, like Prime Minister "Bibi" Netanyahu's Israel, are strongly opposed to revival of the JCPOA. Malley is well placed to walk the fine line between offering the Iranians enough to re-engage them in negotiations and generating an intolerable degree of pressure on the new Administration to toughen the American stance to the point where Iran walks away. Not easy.

The JCPOA is the only sure way of controlling the Iran nuclear programme and ensuring that Iran does not produce the bomb. This matters greatly in terms of global non-proliferation efforts. At the time the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed in 1970 it was expected that by now perhaps 25 states would have developed nuclear weapons, 20 more than the recognised nuclear weapon states. To date, only India, Israel and Pakistan have done so, decades ago. But if Iran were to develop a weapon it would almost certainly provoke a wider, uncontrollable breach of the Treaty, creating a much more dangerous world. The priority given to the issue by the Biden Administration seems fully justified.

Elsewhere on the Middle East agenda it appears that the focus will be on implementing the Abraham Accords, a prime achievement of the Trump Administration. If so, it looks as if the Biden Administration have cherry picked the more attractive elements of Trump as benign, indeed entirely unobjectionable, wins. The objective of the Trump Administration on the Israel/Palestine dossier was to create irreversible facts on the ground – moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Israeli sovereignty over the Golan heights. It looks very much as if Trump's ambassador (David Friedman, widely described as 'Israel's ambassador to the US') has achieved that objective.

Relations at the head of government level have cooled from the Trump/Netanyahu mutual admiration society. Bibi was delayed in receiving his first call from President Biden. The President of the Palestinian Authority, Mohammed Abbas ('Abu Mazen'), is still waiting for his first call from Biden. He was offered one from Blinken but foolishly rebuffed the offer. Underlying the Palestinian position is disappointment at lack of action on corrective issues such as reopening the Palestinian office in Washington and a US diplomatic presence in Arab East Jerusalem.

Partly such inaction reflects the perennial slowness of new Administrations, whether Democrat or Republican, to get up and running. It always takes far longer than one would think, partly due to the need for thorough background checks and Senate approval. At the time of writing, Biden has yet to nominate an Assistant Secretary for the Near East Bureau. The professional expertise of the names in current circulation to staff the bureau lies mainly in the Gulf and Iraq rather than Israel/Palestine. There's no heavy hitter to push the issue. But it's also becoming apparent that Gulf and Israeli interests trump those of the Palestinians.

Dragoman

A contributing factor is that the Palestinians are weak and divided. The Palestinian Authority lacks legitimacy. Legislative elections were last held in January 2006. There has been considerable enthusiasm among Palestinians for the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) scheduled for 22 May, which are seen as an instrument to restore legitimacy, unite the West Bank and Gaza, produce a government of national unity and end the inertia of the past 15 years. But the ruling Fatah party of Abu Mazen has split into three competing lists, while Israel, Egypt and Jordan among others fear that the Islamist Hamas party might win the election, and there are many spoilers on both sides who have been fomenting violence. Abu Mazen doesn't show any enthusiasm for elections and it looks more than likely that he will use the current violence and/or Israeli refusal to allow Palestinian voting in East Jerusalem as reasons to postpone, which in reality means cancellation. In that event, expect instability.

Meanwhile, Presidential elections for the PA are also long overdue. Abu Mazen is in his mid-80's, and is a heavy smoker in poor health. He is widely unpopular among Palestinians, and his family circle are tainted with corruption. There is no current prospect of Presidential elections being held. If there were, Hamas have made clear that they would not run a candidate. But Abu Mazen would be heavily defeated by Marwan Barghouti, currently serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for murder and by far the most popular Palestinian politician.

In my view the tragedy of the Middle East is that whereas we in the West pay lip service to democracy, when it comes to it, we almost invariably in practice attach higher priority to what we think of as stability.



Sir Kieran Prendergast, KCVO, CMG

Sir Kieran Prendergast KCVO, CMG led a distinguished career in the British Foreign Office, serving as British Ambassador to Turkey and High Commissioner to Zimbabwe and Kenya. Sir Kieran remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution through his role at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.