

I have it on good authority that Abu Mazen, the ageing, ailing but obstinately long-lived President of the Palestinian Authority, feels 'excited and relieved' at Joe Biden's victory in the US Presidential election. If so, he's right to feel relieved. President Trump's Administration has pursued – and continues even now in its final months to pursue – a relentless policy of creating facts on the ground, each of which is intended both to be irreversible and to narrow yet further in favour of Israel the scope for a two-state solution based on a return to 1967 borders.

As for 'excited', Abu Mazen will almost certainly be disappointed. There are several reasons for this. The first is that new American Administrations invariably take a considerable length of time to hit their stride: six months or more is quite normal. This is largely due to the fact that a sizeable number – approximately 5000 across the system – of senior positions are filled by political appointees, many of whom require Senate confirmation. Unless Democrats win the runoffs for both Senate seats in Georgia, the Senate will remain in Republican hands, which is not going to make for a smooth or speedy confirmation process.

The second is that the Israel/Palestine issue looks likely to feature low on the agenda of the incoming Administration. There is forecast to be a 75/25 split between domestic and foreign policy preoccupations. In the Middle East, Iran will be the immediate priority. Preparatory work is well under way to find ways to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 (which brought the Iran nuclear programme under international supervision), from which the Trump Administration withdrew in 2018. This will be far from straightforward, not least because Iran has begun to move away from compliance and because the Trump Administration is trying even now to make revival more difficult, by imposing yet further sanctions on Iran. None of this leaves much bandwidth for Israel/Palestine.

A further reason why Abu Mazen is likely to be disappointed is the policy of the Democratic Party, reinforced by the personal position of both president-elect Biden and Kamala Harris. The Democrats are often described as a 'big tent' party, with a wide range of views on most issues. But support for Israel enjoys a broad consensus, and on Israel/Palestine the centre of gravity is not on the left of the Party. 30 years ago, it was possible for a Democratic platform to say that it was 'time to end the occupation'. This time round Joe Biden struck the word 'occupation' from the political platform. He and Kamala Harris are staunch supporters of Israel.

So, with prime focus on domestic issues and Israel/Palestine well down the list of foreign policy priorities, what can we expect of a Biden Administration? It's clear that the President-elect takes a centrist-right view on Israel related matters. He doesn't agree with the occupation or like the settlements, and he has said he will reverse moves that 'significantly undercut the prospects of peace'. But this does not imply expending significant political capital on Israel/Palestine. A certain amount will depend on the stature and attitudes of those he chooses for key positions such as Secretary of State, National Security Adviser and Ambassador to Israel. A serious outbreak of violence could also force the Administration to pay more attention to the issue.

A Biden Administration is also likely to revert to a more normal relationship with the Palestinian Administration and Palestinian institutions. This could include allowing a PLO office in Washington to re-open, and resuming desperately needed funding to UNRWA and other UN bodies. The Biden Administration will also oppose outright any Israeli attempt to engage in formal

# Dragoman

annexation of areas of the West Bank. Meanwhile, de facto annexation of the West Bank proceeds apace, with new settlement units being approved at a higher rate than any year since Peace Now began keeping records in 2012, and demolition of Palestinian housing also taking place at a record rate.

What the Palestinians cannot expect is that Biden will reverse key steps taken by the Trump Administration, such as the move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and of the Golan Heights as part of Israel. The most he might do is find a way to indicate that Jerusalem remains a matter for negotiation, perhaps by indicating that the US recognises the Palestinian aspiration to a state with East Jerusalem as its capital. To that extent, Trump's policy decisions have indeed succeeded in creating irreversible facts on the ground.

The Biden Administration's commitment on Israel/Palestine is unlikely to resemble that of Obama. It seems a lot longer than four years since John Kerry, as Secretary of State, devoted so much time and effort to trying to negotiate a viable two state solution. It's a little less than four years since the UN Security Council adopted, by 14 positive votes and a benevolent American abstention, Resolution 2334, which condemned in forthright terms all Israeli attempts to change the demographics of territory captured in 1967, including East Jerusalem and the West Bank, also condemned all settlement activity in the occupied territory as illegal, and called for an intensification of efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of relevant UN resolutions and land for peace.

We seem a long way from SCR2334: a long way too from the Arab Peace Initiative of the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, which offered normalisation in return for full Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory. The Abraham Accords are not a substitute, though they are certainly welcome. They formalise a process between Israel and the Gulf Arabs that had been under way on the ground for more than a decade. They cannot be described as peace agreements, since the Gulf states were not at war with Israel. And whereas the Gulf is more than 1000 miles from Israel, the Accords do not address the conflict right next door. Indeed the Palestinians, who are the ones in conflict with Israel, were neither consulted about nor are mentioned in the Accords. The Gulf Arabs have had little sympathy for the Palestinians ever since Arafat foolishly sided with Saddam Hussein over the first Gulf War. The Palestinians are often their own worst enemy. Abu Mazen is well past his sell by date. But haven't we nevertheless taken our collective eye off the ball?



## **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 was head of Political Affairs at the UN under Kofi Annan from 1997-2005. Sir Kieran remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution through his role at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.