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TAHRIR FORUM

## Biden Aims to Contain Violence in Israel/Palestine. His Policy May Be Stoking It Instead

October 26, 2023

Biden's recent attempts at deescalation do not challenge or overturn decades of America enabling Israel's violent occupation of Palestine. Instead, Biden has continued to systematically dismantle any non-violent avenues for Palestinian resistance while



strengthening the militant Israeli far right.

By Shibley Telhami



U.S. President Joe Biden delivers a prime-time address to the nation about his approaches to the conflict between Israel and Hamas from the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, October 19, 2023. Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

***Note: The following article on Israel/Palestine, titled “Biden Aims to Contain Violence in Israel/Palestine. His Policy May be Stoking It Instead,” was submitted by email to a leading newspaper on April 11, 2023. It was not published (as is the case with most submissions). What follows is the unedited text as it was submitted, providing context for the current Israel/Gaza war. This piece is being republished by the Cairo Review with permission from the author.***

As bouts of violence in Israel/Palestine have become more frequent, the Biden administration has been aiming to ‘calm down tensions’ and prevent further escalation. Instead, its policies have



played into the hands of the militant Israeli far right while undermining the most important non-violent levers available to Palestinians for legitimate resistance of life-long repression. In the process, the stage has been set for even more violence ahead.

The administration's voice is usually loudest when there are visible violent eruptions, such as rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon, or high casualty attacks in Israel or the West Bank—especially when the victims are Israelis. These are of course troubling events that could lead to escalation and do require response. But inherent in this posture is the assumption that the status quo preceding them is not itself violent and thus should be maintained. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The toxicity and violence of the daily status quo drives the bouts of lethal eruptions we are witnessing. The expansion of the illegal settlement enterprise and settler violence against Palestinians—as well as their crops, schools, homes, and villages—has pushed the daily Palestinian reality to the breaking point. And the Biden administration's reticence and reluctance to address this toxic reality in its statements and policies is, rightly or wrongly, interpreted as tacit acceptance of the situation.

The status quo is anything but peaceful and normal under a military occupation that has lasted most of a century with no end in sight. Even when the guns of occupation are silent, their coercive presence cannot be missed. Every aspect of Palestinian lives is controlled and regulated by Israel—driving, studying, farming, working, traveling abroad, access to healthcare, and even the ability to marry and live with the person you love—just to name a few. Israeli extremists have made no effort to hide the fact they want to make life as difficult as possible for Palestinians, and restrict them into a few overcrowded municipal enclaves, deport them, or worse.



The guns are often far from silent. Last year, more than 170 Palestinians, including at least 30 children, were killed across the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. In January 2023 alone, at least 29 Palestinians, including five children, have been killed. Both innocent Israelis and innocent Palestinians have died tragically over the years, but the overwhelming majority of the casualties—87% from 2000-2014—have been Palestinian. Since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, nearly a million Palestinians have been imprisoned, many without charges. Currently, over 1,000 Palestinian detainees are being held by Israel without charge or trial, the highest number since 2003.

In fact, when one takes a close look at what it's like to be a Palestinian at this moment, what stands out is how the overwhelming majority have endured this apartheid-like system and daily humiliations with perseverance and self-control—not violent resistance. Palestinians and Israelis who want to see an end to the occupation, dehumanization and violence are waiting for President Biden to see them, hear them, and act consistent with shared values.

To start, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza face an overwhelming disadvantage in resources and power, much of which has to do with decades of extraordinary American support for Israel that has given Israel military and political primacy in the Middle East and enabled it to maintain its occupation for most of a century. This asymmetry of power means that Palestinians cannot possibly have a chance of success in peaceful resistance without the help of the rest of world.

Biden is making that nearly impossible.

There is a lot on Biden's plate at home and abroad; no one expects major peace efforts, especially given the dire state of politics



among Israelis and Palestinians. But Biden must stop making a bad **f**ituation worse. The president has actually spent much effort on Israel/Palestine already – principally assisting the Israeli government in avoiding the peaceful consequences of its transgressions by shielding Israel at the United Nations from even diplomatic condemnation of its actions. In the face of Israeli settlement construction in violation of international laws Biden's diplomats worked hard last month to shield Israel at the UN from a Security Council resolution that would hold Israel accountable. This month, Biden prevented a mere UN statement condemning Israel's provocation at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem that led to violence and bloodshed.

Since his election, Biden has adopted and pursued the expansion of Trump's Abraham Accords, which decoupled ending Israeli domination of Palestinians from peace with Arab states — one of the few levers Arabs had to influence Israeli behavior. In the process the US played into the hands of Israel's far right which has always argued it can have its cake and eat it too. The president even went on a highly controversial trip to Saudi Arabia last summer that he said was aimed at advancing Israeli interests.

The US has also made it a priority to fight peaceful international levers to influence abusive Israeli behavior. And, unlike several of our European allies, Biden has failed to forcefully push back against Israeli government efforts to target Israeli and Palestinian civil society and human rights organizations.

These efforts show that those explaining the administration policy based on its "crowded agenda" aren't seeing that this issue has actually been high on the administration's agenda. The problem is that, rather than advancing peace and coexistence the efforts may have done the opposite.



The inevitable outcome is that, on the Palestinian side, those advocating non-violence will lose ground as despair increases and those advocating military resistance will gain ground. On the Israeli side, the empowerment of the militant far right and its ascendance into positions of power promises more violence, which they appear to seek, in pursuit of the “last war.”

Some ask: Why should Washington ‘single out’ Israel when the world is full of other human rights abusers? Because Israel is not just any country. In many respects it’s the country in the world that we are most intertwined with due to unparalleled American diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic support, which has made us complicit in entrenching what has become a one-state reality akin to apartheid – a category that stands out even in the midst of pervasive international illiberalism.

The president appears to be a throwback to another era of Democratic politics, when a knee-jerk embrace of Israeli policies was the safe political bet, though his support for Israel may go beyond politics into the personal, as he has stated. But this unprecedentedly dangerous moment demands something very different. This Israel is different, and this coming collapse into violence and settler vigilantism led from the offices of elected Israeli cabinet members will be like nothing we have seen before.

It is clear that Biden’s constituents have not been with him on this issue, as polling shows that more Democrats now sympathize with the Palestinians than with Israel. Even Democratic members of Congress have grown critical of his posture on this issue. Silence and lack of action serves to enable the dangerous Israeli far right and sets the stage for more hopelessness and violence. It puts gas on the fire.

The clock is ticking. The president must lead, as he has done





elsewhere, and we must stop being part of the problem and start being part of the solution.

***Shibley Telhami** is the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a non-resident senior fellow at the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution. He has authored or edited numerous books, including The Stakes: America and the Middle East, Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords, International Organizations and Ethnic Conflict, and Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East. He was a member of the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World and served on the Iraq Study Group. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and serves on the board of the Education for Employment Foundation.*

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