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The Biden Administration and the Dilemma of the Day After in Gaza

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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As the Israeli onslaught continues in Gaza, President Biden's administration is busy trying to develop scenarios for the "day after" in Gaza. While the Biden administration and the Netanyahu government agree on the goal of neutralizing Hamas' military capacity and ending its rule Gaza, they differ about the post-war condition of the Gaza Strip and the future of a Palestinian state, which brought tensions between the two parties to the surface.

I: The US Vision for "Peace"

In light of the steadfast Palestinian resistance and its performance on the ground, more than three months into the Israeli war on Gaza, and Israel's continued brutal targeting of civilians, and the scale of destruction, which has left the territory uninhabitable, the Biden administration began searching for political solutions to confront local pressures and increasing international efforts to stop the war and find a solution to the conflict. The US vision is based on the fact that there is no military solution to Hamas,[1] nor does it have a realistic approach to what the post-war situation could be. Moreover, Israeli has failed to propose a formula that guarantees the rights of the Palestinians. Consequently, what happened on 7 October 2023 will be repeated in some way eventually.

This vision, formulated and marketed by US National Security official, Brett McGurk, centres on Saudi Arabia signing a peace agreement with Israel to normalize relations and then join other Gulf countries in contributing to the post-war reconstruction in Gaza.[2] In return, Israel would have to agree to a cease-fire and allow a new Palestinian government to run the West Bank and the Gaza Strip together, with Israel retaining "limited influence" on both sides and providing a political route to forming Palestinian state. McGurk has indicated that Israel's approval of this plan will enable the Saudi leadership to market the normalization agreement to the Saudi public, the majority of whom oppose normalization, according to a poll conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies,[3] on the basis that it helps the Palestinians. The proposal suggests a 90-day time timeline, starting from the moment Riyadh and Tel Aviv agree upon the end of the active combat in the Gaza Strip. The plan does not neglect Biden's electoral calculations. It refers to the first agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel as the "Jerusalem-Jeddah Pact", suggesting that Biden plans to later travel to the region to supervise the signing of the agreement, and use it in his effort to win a second presidential term.[4]

It seems that Anthony Blinken's recent tour in the region was primarily aimed at promoting this plan, which he confirmed in several Arab capitals and in Tel Aviv during his tour. The features of the U strategy for the "day after" the war can be summarized as:

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1 Andrea Mitchell, "Frustrations between Biden and Israeli PM Netanyahu Mount," *NBC News*, 17/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/3y37csf2

2 Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "A Top Biden Official Is Pushing an Urgent Post-Gaza Plan That's Alarming Some Insiders," *Huffington Post*, 13/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/2fdynvht.

3 The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Arab Public Opinion about the Israeli War on Gaza", Public Opinion Polling Unit, (January 2024) accessed on 23/1/2024 at: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/arab-opinion-war-on-gaza-full-report-en.pdf

4 Ahmed.

1. Saudi Israeli Normalization in exchange for Promises of a Palestinian State in the Future

US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, said that the "strategy post-October 7 is that we want to see normalization [between Israel and Saudi Arabia] tied to a political horizon for the Palestinians".[5] Sullivan's proposal insisted on four principles following the settlement, namely: "Gaza is never used for terror attacks on Israel; peace between Israel and the Arab countries in the region; a state for the Palestinians; and security assurances for Israel."[6] US officials argue that Blinken's visit to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Qatar, before heading to Israel, in his last trip to the region, sought to garner Arab support for the plan, and presenting a unified Arab proposal to Netanyahu for his post-war scenario.[7] Blinken was clear, in Tel Aviv on 9 January 2024 that "If Israel wants its Arab neighbors to make the tough decisions necessary to help ensure its lasting security, Israeli leaders will have to make hard decisions themselves."[8] He added that " many countries in the region [...] have expressed is that critical to ending once and for all the cycle of violence that is only going to repeat itself at some point in the future is through the realization of Palestinian political rights", underscoring that "this can only come through a regional approach that includes a pathway to a Palestinian state".[9] In Cairo, Blinken stated "if you build that integration, if you bring Israel in, if you make the necessary commitments to security, and you move down the path to a Palestinian state, that's the single best way to isolate, to marginalize Iran and the proxies that are making so much trouble for us and for pretty much everyone else in the region."[10]

2. Reforming and Bolstering the Palestinian Authority

"Revitalizing" the Palestinian Authority involves finding 'someone 'someone other than Mahmoud Abbas but very, very similar in almost every other way' — in terms of ties to Israel and the U.S."[11] A sense of "de ja vu" given what happened in 2002 and 2003 when Palestinian politics was reengineered to diminish the power of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

This "engineering" process weakened the authority of the late president, Yasser Arafat, ending with Abbas himself becoming president. The Biden administration aims to strengthen the power of the Palestinian Authority, which works closely with Israel and the United States to control the West Bank, and to convince Israel of the ability of this "modern" authority to bear the responsibility of governing the Gaza Strip after the end of the war, and then unification with the West Bank under Palestinian leadership. According to the Biden administration, "Arab leaders have shown a willingness to engage

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5 Barak Ravid, "Sullivan: U.S. Post-war Strategy Links Saudi-Israel Peace Deal with Two-state Solution," *Axios*, 16/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/5hf7k9zk

6 Ibid.

7 Mitchell.

8 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, 9/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/yxn39xh7

9 Ibid.

10 "Secretary Blinken's Remarks to the Press," U.S. Department of State, 11/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/w6wvdz5w

11 Ahmed.

on what their roles might be in helping usher in a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority that brings new and younger faces into the government headed by 88-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas."[12]

In contrast, the Biden administration has demanded that Israel "must stop taking steps that undercut Palestinians' ability to govern themselves effectively." He added that "extremist settler violence carried out with impunity, settlement expansion, demolitions, evictions all make it harder, not easier, for Israel to achieve lasting peace and security."[13] He also insisted that Israeli release Palestinian Authority revenues so that "they can pay their people who are providing essential services, including doing essential work in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority security forces who are playing a very important role in trying to keep peace, security, and stability in the West Bank – something that's profoundly in Israel's interest".[14]

II: The Challenges Facing the US Plan

McGurk (together with Amos Hochstein) was working on the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel, during the 7 October operation, and the outbreak of the war. It is clear that his priority is reactivating the normalization process, not dealing with the Palestinian question that they seek to marginalize. But McGurk's plan for the day after the war on Gaza, faces many challenges, the most prominent of which are:

1. The Absence of a Consensus in the White House:

The Biden administration has officially adopted McGurk's approach, which Blinken sees as "a profound opportunity for regionalization in the Middle East, in the greater Middle East that we have not had before".[15] But this effectively renders any solution to the Palestinian question a result of, not a precondition for, Arab-Israeli normalization, and it has no consensus in the White House. Some US officials believe that regional deals adopted by the Trump administration have fuelled Palestinian anger and rage, of which Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was an expression. They doubt that the Palestinian Authority will accept the "engineering" process, even considering these efforts have the support of some Arab countries, and they warn that Palestinian frustration with this approach may lead to more violence, especially as Biden's lack of credibility with the Palestinians predates the war. He lost trust when he failed to reverse some of Trump's decisions,[16] such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moving the US embassy there, and closing the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington.

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12 John Hudson, "Blinken's Optimism for Postwar Gaza Runs into Mideast Skepticism," *The Washington Post*, 11/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/2jjahz4h

13 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability."

14 Ibid.

15 Mitchell.

16 Ahmed.

2. Israeli Rejection

The Israeli position represents the greatest challenge facing the McGurk plan. Netanyahu and his far-right government reject most aspects of the plan, including the proposal to establish a Palestinian state and establish Palestinian Authority control the Gaza Strip. The Netanyahu government has so far refused to respond to US demands related to curbing the extremist settlers in the West Bank, and moving to less intensive military operations in the Gaza Strip in order to reduce Palestinian civilian casualties, and allow more humanitarian aid to reach the population.

During Biden's phone call with Netanyahu on 23 December 2023, the US administration was met with an Israeli government adamantly rejecting these demands.[17] Netanyahu has continued to ignore any US demands as long as they are not related to US provided military and political support to Israel, because Washington has expressed its opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of any post-war scenario. He said that in "must have security control over the entire territory west of the Jordan River", stressing that this is the "truth I tell to our American friends, and I put the brakes on the attempt to coerce us to a reality that would endanger the state of Israel".[18] Netanyahu promised to confirm this position after a phone call with President Biden (19 January 2024), contrary to the words of the US president, who later stated that "Netanyahu did not oppose the two-state solution during the conversation."[19]

Officials in the Biden administration and the Democratic Party accuse Netanyahu of putting his own political interests above strategic Israel interests, US interests, and the interests of Biden, who is committed to providing unprecedented US support after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, despite the possibility that this will affect his re-election campaign. They also complain that Netanyahu is "more willing to listen" to the extremist ministers in the government, specifically Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, than to the President of the United States.[20]

In addition to Netanyahu challenging Washington on issues such as the Palestinian state and the future of control over the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military leadership is also reluctant to heed the US request to reduce military operations in the Gaza Strip and reduce civilian casualties, as do the ministers in the government that Netanyahu considers partners who can work with Washington, such as Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. Gallant presented an idea for the status of the Gaza Strip after the war, before Blinken's recent visit to Tel Aviv that doesn't involve Palestinian forced displacement but neglects every other US demand. This proposal suggests that Israel will not control the civilians in Gaza, but will take responsibility for that "Palestinian side". These Palestinian entities are not

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17 Laura Kelly, "Biden Speaks with Netanyahu after Israeli Leader Rejects Palestinian State," *The Hill*, 19/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/kmn6yc9n

18 Najib Jobain, Josef Federman & Jack Jeffery, "Netanyahu Says he has Told U.S. he Opposes Palestinian State in any Postwar Scenario," *The Associated Press*, 19/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/4eh6wd2h

19 Andrea Shalal, "Biden Says Netanyahu not Opposed to all Two-state Solutions for Palestinians," *Reuters*, 19/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/2xj6tk9y

20 Barak Ravid, "Biden 'Running out' of Patience with Bibi as Gaza War Hits 100 Days," *AXIOS*, 14/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/4shpne6h

the Palestinian Authority in its current form, nor the "new" one according to the US proposal, but local "civil committees" that are not hostile to Israel (like the tribes!), formed closer to the "village relations" that Israel tried to establish in the West Bank in the 1980s. Gallant's plan stipulates that Israel reserves the right to take security and military action inside the Gaza Strip, whenever necessary. And this is similar to the reality in the West Bank. Therefore, Israel will continue to control the borders of Gaza; precluding the establishment of a Palestinian state, as Washington envisions.[21]

Conclusion

The strategy that the Biden administration is pursuing for what happens when the war on Gaza is over is out of public view, without any idea of how to implement it. On the one hand, Israel's most extremist governments probably can't be convinced, especially since Netanyahu, who is fighting to stay in office, is himself a hostage to the extreme chauvinist tendencies of the government ministers. It is thus not in the best interest of Biden, who poses a risk to his political future. And as a US official says, Biden and his administration are "pleading with the Netanyahu coalition, but getting slapped in the face over and over again".[22] Meanwhile, it is not possible to appease the Palestinian people, after the sacrifices they have made and the strong resistance they have shown, with empty promises about the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the future, but the price of these sacrifices should be tangible and current, which is the position the Arab countries should also take.

21 Assiya Hamza, "The 'Day after' in Gaza: 'The Palestinian Authority is not in a Position to Govern'," *France 24*, 14/1/2024, accessed on 23/1/2024, at: http://tinyurl.com/3rt8fmsx

22 Ravid.