

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Biden's West Bank visit leaves Palestinians feeling little will change

US president's trip highlights the limits of what Washington can do to help those in the occupied territories



US president Joe Biden shakes hands with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem © Evan Vucci/AP

Felicia Schwartz and **James Shotter** in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

When Joe Biden was elected US president, Palestinians hoped to receive greater US support after his predecessor Donald Trump marginalised them and pursued policies that overtly favoured Israel.

But as Biden visited the occupied West Bank on Friday on his first trip to the region as president, the limits of what Washington is willing or able to do for the Palestinian cause were underscored.

Speaking alongside Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem, Biden reiterated his support for a two-state solution, but said the goal “seems so far away” and that Palestinian people experience daily pain and hardship. “The Palestinian people are hurting now, you can just feel it,” he said.

But, he said, the US “cannot wait . . . for every issue to be resolved to deliver on the needs of the Palestinian people that exist today,” as he unveiled new assistance measures worth more than \$300mn

Biden promised that a 4G telecommunications network would be rolled out in the occupied territories, a basic service long blocked by Israel. He also pledged to invest in Palestinian health facilities, but showed no progress on a promise to reopen the shuttered consulate in Jerusalem that was the de facto diplomatic mission to the Palestinians. That requires Israeli sign-off, which the US has not secured.

He called for an end to violence between Israelis and Palestinians and acknowledged the death of veteran Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, which the US has said was probably the result of Israeli fire. Biden, who has been under pressure from US lawmakers, said the US would continue to insist on a “full and transparent accounting of her death”.

Standing beside him, Abbas made no mention of the assistance but implored him to re-establish the peace process. “Isn’t it not the time for this occupation to end? And for our steadfast people to gain their freedom and independence?” he said.

Palestinian commentators echoed Abbas. “In terms of substance, and it pains me to say this, I can’t say there’s anything really different [between Trump and Biden],” said Diana Buttu, a Palestinian analyst and former adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team.

The trip’s choreography says much about where Biden’s priorities lie. After meeting Abbas, he flies to Saudi Arabia, where he is pressing leaders to pump more oil as he tries to tame fuel prices and looks to integrate Israel more deeply into the region.

Israel already has relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco as part of a Trump administration initiative known as the Abraham Accords, and Biden is looking to expand it. Until those deals Arab powers had said formal ties with Israel would only come after the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The move infuriated Palestinian leaders who felt betrayed.

Other Trump administration policies remain in place. Trump reversed decades of US policy, by moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to the disputed holy city. Both Israel and the Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital and under previous peace initiatives, its status was to be determined as part of a settlement.

The Biden administration has worked to re-establish political contacts between the US and the Palestinian Authority, which collapsed after the embassy move. Biden restored much of the aid cut by the Trump administration, about \$500mn in total before Friday’s announcements.

Biden is also encouraging better relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Abbas and Lapid held the first phone call between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in five years shortly before Biden’s visit. Biden says Israel will agree to reconvene an economic dialogue with the Palestinians.

Dan Shapiro, a former US ambassador to Israel, said that steps such as providing

... funding to hospitals in East Jerusalem illustrate Biden's commitment to keeping the door to a two-state solution open.

“Supporting [the hospitals] is about more than just healthcare. It's also about building the institutions of a future Palestinian state, and a way for Biden to signal his commitment to a two state solution, even though there are no negotiations on this at the moment,” said Shapiro, a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council.

However, years of paralysis in peace talks and continued expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank have fuelled deep frustration among Palestinians, many of whom have lost faith in the prospect of a two-state solution, and the US's ability to facilitate it.

“[Biden] is dreaming. If he was serious, it was 20 or 30 years ago that he could have had two states. There is no place for two states any more,” said Walid Abu Tayeh, who arranged a protest against the US administration outside an East Jerusalem hospital that Biden visited on Friday morning.

“It's bullshit. It's peanuts,” he added of the economic measures announced on Friday. “We don't need 4G: we need freedom, we need our rights.”

Mariam Barghouti, a Palestinian writer and researcher, said that the economic measures were “like someone giving charity in order to alleviate some guilt”. “It's the same thing as Trump: it's this focus on economic prosperity without addressing the real problems,” she said.

“It's not money that we need. It's the removal of checkpoints, it's the removal of Israeli pressures not just on hospitals but on cultural institutions.”

“He is here for one day,” said Sami, a tour guide watching from a nearby café as dozens of Israeli soldiers cordoned off the East Jerusalem hospital where Biden was speaking on Friday morning. “Did you think he would change anything in that?”

