

# The US, Israel, and the Ongoing War in Gaza

Eldad Shavit and Chuck Freilich | No. 1798 | December 12, 2023

The US administration continues to support Israel's goal of defeating Hamas, which is why it has thus far refrained from calling for a ceasefire and even went so far as to use its veto power to block a Security Council resolution. However, the administration has presented Israel with clear boundaries, especially when it comes to ensuring humanitarian aid to Gaza and the protection of civilian lives. It has also expressed some degree of frustration with what it sees as Israel's insufficient response to US concerns and with the lack of a vision for "the day after" the war, following the administration's presentation of what it believes should guide the postbellum discussion on the future of the Gaza Strip. Despite the understanding that it is clearly in the best interests of the United States to support Israel until its military goals are achieved, Israel must recognize that a significant change in the position of the Biden administration – which faces increasing domestic and international pressure – could occur quickly, with far-reaching implications for Israel's military and political maneuvers. Ensuring, therefore, that the United States continues to stand steadfastly by Israel means continuing to be attentive to American interests in terms of the humanitarian elements of the conflict – and perhaps especially those interests related to the preferred US solution for Gaza and its integration in a broader regional arrangement, as part of US efforts to advance a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Even after two months of fighting, the US administration continues to support Israel and has refrained from making any comment that could be construed as a call for a ceasefire. Indeed, last week the United States exercised its veto power to block a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. On December 7, 2023, US Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer stressed that "we have not given a firm deadline to Israel, [it is] not really our role. This is their conflict." He added, "Frankly, if the war were to stop today, [Hamas] would continue to pose [a threat], which is why we are not in a place yet of asking Israel to stop or to force [a] ceasefire." He went on to say that "the United States believes that there are many legitimate military targets that remain in southern Gaza." Vice President Kamala Harris, who unveiled [the Biden administration's policy](#) during the COP climate conference in Dubai, reiterated that

President Joe Biden was adamant that Israel has the right to defend itself against the “brutal and horrific” Hamas attacks, which is why the administration supports “Israel’s legitimate military objectives to eliminate the threat of Hamas.”

At the same time, Harris took a more critical tone when repeating the basic conditions that the administration has laid out since the start of the war: strict adherence to international law in terms of humanitarian aid to Gaza and protection of the lives of “innocent” civilians. Indeed, since the combat resumed after the week-long ceasefire, and against the backdrop of US concerns that the Israeli military maneuver in southern Gaza will lead to widespread civilian casualties, there have been increasingly frequent calls from senior US officials to their Israeli counterparts to avoid killing “innocent people.” US Defense Secretary Llyod Austin went even further when he spoke about his experience of combat in built-up neighborhoods in Iraq. “The lesson is that you can only win in urban warfare by protecting civilians,” Austin said. “If you drive [Gaza’s civilians] into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.”

At the same time, the US – including Secretary of State Antony Blinken – has stressed that Israel is attentive, if not yet attentive enough, to US calls to reduce civilian casualties. For example, the National Security Council spokesperson praised Israeli efforts to conduct precision strikes and the publication of a map showing safe zones in the Gaza Strip, which he described as unusual compared to the conduct of other modern militaries. This followed National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan blaming Hamas for violating the ceasefire agreement, after it refused to release women hostages as part of the ceasefire agreement.

The administration also misses no opportunity to bring up the principles that it believes must form the basis for rebuilding Gaza “the day after” the war. These principles, which were drafted at the start of the war in internal dialogue and in conversations with the United States’ regional and international allies, are: no forcible displacement, no reoccupation, no siege or blockade, no reduction in territory, and no use of Gaza as a platform for terrorism. Similarly, the United States stresses that it wants to see the Gaza Strip and the West Bank unified under the control of a “revitalized” Palestinian Authority. In her conversations with regional actors, Vice President Harris stressed that there must be regional agreement and support for three key issues that will bring an end to the conflict, so that Hamas can no longer rule Gaza and Israel can be secure. In return, there will be a full political horizon for the Palestinians, along with hopes of economic opportunity and freedom:

- a. Reconstruction: The international community must invest significant resources to support the short and long term reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.
- b. Security: The Palestinian Authority security apparatuses must be strengthened so that ultimately they take responsibility for security in the Gaza Strip. Until then, there must be security arrangements that are acceptable to Israel, the people of Gaza, the Palestinian Authority, and international partners. In any scenario, however, “terrorists will not be permitted to continue to threaten Israel.”
- c. Government: The Palestinian Authority must be revitalized so that it can serve the will of the Palestinian people – ensuring that they benefit from the rule of law and a government that operates transparently for the good of the people. As far as the administration is concerned, this revitalized Palestinian Authority must have the ability to rule Gaza, as well as the West Bank.

An analysis of all the official comments made by members of the US administration – including an article by President Biden published on November 18 in the *Washington Post* – shows clearly that notwithstanding the occasional criticism by some officials of the way that the IDF is conducting the war, the United States still sees Israel’s military operation against Hamas as a practical opportunity to defeat the terrorist organization and an opening for a possible reshaping of the reality in Gaza and perhaps even the Middle East. Moreover, Biden sees developments on the Gaza front as transformative and believes that they will have far-reaching strategic ramifications for the balance of power on the international stage over the next few years. It seems that from the very first moment, Biden understood that without defeating Hamas and rendering it incapable of ruling the Gaza Strip, the “axis of evil,” as he calls it, which includes China, Russia, Iran, and their allies, will win. This is an outcome that the United States cannot support.

The administration is well aware of the massive criticism of its policies – both from Democratic lawmakers and from large parts of the American public who traditionally support the Democratic Party. There also appears to be increasing reservations among some of the civil servants in the State Department and even within the White House. Indeed, there was a report that some 500 members of the administration sent an extremely critical and unusual letter to Biden. The administration is also aware of the harsh criticism leveled against it and against Israel in the US media, especially the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which feeds Congressional and public anger. And still, Biden and his team

continue to send out messages that underscore his conviction that his position is correct. The administration is doubtless keen for Hamas to be defeated speedily, and Blinken has reportedly spoken in terms of weeks for Israel to wrap up the operation, rather than months. At the same time, the administration is demanding that Israel act more cautiously, which obligates the IDF to take into consideration the limitations demanded by the US. Israel's partial acquiescence to the US demand to allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza, including fuel, and to avoid harming civilians as much as possible, has manifested itself on the ground and allows the US to continue supporting the Israeli military campaign.

The position of the current administration is an excellent opportunity for Israel, since the depth and determination of its support sends a message of deterrence to Israel's adversaries, particularly Iran. Beyond this, the vision that the administration has proposed for "the day after," as well as its stated desire to expand the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, matches Israeli interests. They also appear to gel with the interests of the regime in Riyadh, which is waiting to see how the war in Gaza unfolds. Israel's aim for the day after it achieves all its military goals must be to ensure that the US administration continues with the same approach and takes charge of the process of reshaping the strategic reality in the region. The overall goal must be to weaken members of the "axis" and increase the motivation and interest of moderate Arab players to improve relations with Israel.

Yet despite the understanding that it is clearly in the interests of the United States to support Israel until it has achieved its military goals, Jerusalem must recognize that a change in the US position – and there have already been incipient signs of this – could happen very rapidly and have far-reaching implications for Israel's room for military and political maneuvers. Any change in the administration's position would, it seem, occur because of critical developments: first, the realization that Israel is hard pressed to achieve its military goals in a limited period of time, especially if Israeli operations lead to a significant humanitarian crisis or large scale loss of civilian life and/or the expansion of the conflict to Israel's northern border – which risks creating a situation whereby the United States would be dragged into direct involvement in the war. Currently, the administration is trying to exercise restraint in response to the significant increase in attacks against its forces in Iraq and Syria by pro-Iranian militias, as well as increased terrorist activity by the Houthi rebels against maritime targets. The administration is also aware of the security challenge that Israel confronts on its northern border, but for the time being, it remains committed to resolve the crisis through diplomatic means.

If Israel wants to ensure that the United States continues to stand steadfastly by its side, it will have to continue to be attentive to US interests regarding the future that it envisages for the Gaza Strip and Gaza's integration in a more comprehensive agreement within the framework of efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus far, it is clear that there is frustration among members of the Biden administration at Israel's unwillingness to engage in serious discussions about "the day after." In the end, both countries share the same long term goals: eliminating threats, including from Hezbollah on the northern border; standing up for Israel; and ensuring that there is long term security quiet. In order to achieve this, the administration will need Israeli cooperation when it comes to finding a way to involve leading Palestinian figures – or, in the administration's terms, in revitalizing the Palestinian Authority – in a political process that will end with the implementation of the two-state solution. Cooperation on these issues will make it easier for the US to muster the support of additional actors on the regional and international stage, to ensure that they are actively involved in the processes that will be necessary to bring stability to Gaza and to ensure its long-term reconstruction.

---

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen