

Biden's Visit and the Gaza War: United States Interests and Ramifications for Israel

Eldad Shavit, Shimon Stein, and Chuck Freilich | No. 1771 | October 19, 2023

The visit to Israel by US President Joe Biden is firm proof that the United States stands fully by Israel's side, while providing tangible support in maintaining and bolstering IDF capabilities and deterring potential threats from other arenas, primarily Hezbollah and Iran. But the visit was also designed to help Washington understand Israel's goals in the war, the prospects of success, and the plans for the day after. The longer the fighting continues, the wider the gaps will be between Israeli and US policy, due to the administration's sensitivity to developments on the ground, pressure from regional and international actors, and public opinion within the United States. The administration has already insisted on a framework that allows humanitarian aid into Gaza. Israel's dialogue with the administration on every level must focus first and foremost on military developments and Israel's immediate needs. Beyond this, it is also vitally important to present a coherent policy when it comes to the war's goals and the post-war reality, while taking US interests into account. This includes an official Israeli position on the future status and role of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip, along with the PA's ability to govern in the West Bank and the future of the two-state solution.

Since the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war, US President Joe Biden and his administration have demonstrated a solid commitment to the security and welfare of the State of Israel. Biden did not hide his disgust at the atrocities committed by Hamas and the destruction caused by its attack on the western Negev; his visit to Israel in the middle of a war is a clear expression of that. Beyond sympathy and highly important moral support, the President and his administration have, from the outset, provided Israel with the aid it needs to win a war that was imposed upon it. Judging by the public statements of US officials and the practical measures that have already been implemented, it appears that the administration's goals are as follows:

- Demonstration of the US commitment to its ally Israel. President Biden said that the support and aid that his country is granting Israel is not just for the security of Israel alone, but for the security of the United States and the world. In so doing, the administration wants to send a message of commitment to other US allies in the region and the world.
- Direct aid to Israel to help it achieve its goals in the war on Hamas, while continually replenishing Israel's military stockpiles. Biden stressed that his administration would ensure that Israel does not lack for critical equipment to defend its citizens. It was also reported that the United States has allocated

intelligence resources to help Israel secure the release of the hostages being held by Hamas, which is a key goal for the administration. It is important for the administration that Israel end this conflict with the upper hand, so it is doing all it can to help Israel ensure that the post-war reality is fundamentally different from what preceded it.

- Support for Israel's primary strategy – significantly destroying Hamas' offensive capabilities – but opposition to any plan Israel might have to retake the Gaza Strip for any length of time. Biden believes that once Hamas has been eliminated, the Palestinian Authority should be involved in reshaping the reality within the framework of the two-state solution.
- Efforts to prevent the conflict from spreading to other fronts, in part to minimize the risk that US forces could become directly involved in the fighting (even if they are only aerial forces) and the risk to US interests in the region. The administration has relayed a consistent message to other actors in the Middle East, especially Iran and Hezbollah, warning them not to use the war in Gaza as an excuse to attack Israel. Biden has repeatedly told every country, every organization, and every group that might think of taking advantage of the situation: "Don't, don't, don't." On a practical level, the administration has sent two aircraft carrier groups to the region, and, it seems, additional forces.
- Efforts to muster international support for Israel. Especially noteworthy in this context was the joint statement issued by the Presidents of the United States and France, the German Chancellor, and the British and Italian Prime Ministers, which included an explicit commitment to guarantee that Israel has the means to defend itself. Ensuring global legitimacy is a key goal for the administration since it will allow Israel greater freedom of operation. Therefore, the administration stresses repeatedly that Israel is obligated to operate in accordance with international law and that it will do everything it can to minimize civilian casualties and avert a humanitarian disaster. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stressed that at the administration's request, Israel agreed to allow the entry of humanitarian aid into the Strip from various countries and organizations, provided that it reach civilians.
- Coordination with the Sunni regional actors. Within this framework, Secretary Blinken was engaged in shuttle diplomacy between various countries in the region, with the dual goal of recruiting them toward positive and active involvement, including assistance with the hostage crisis, and considering their role in the day after scenario.

The investment of resources to support Israel comes at a time when Biden is about to begin a demanding election campaign. The possibility of facing former President Donald Trump in a close fight for the presidency will obligate Biden, over the coming months, to prioritize domestic political considerations when it comes to Middle East policy in general and the war in Gaza in particular. Biden is aware of the broad public support for Israel in the United States, and knows that voters will judge his leadership in part based on his ability to influence Israel to achieve its goals vis-à-vis Hamas and the Gaza Strip while keeping US interests in mind. Moreover, the higher the death toll of the fighting in Gaza and the worse the humanitarian situation, the sooner support

for Biden's handling of the crisis will ebb – indeed, this has already begun. In addition, the administration must ensure that its efforts in the Middle East do not impinge on its ability to address the other international challenges before it, led by the competition with China and the war in Ukraine. The political crisis in the House of Representatives and the attempts by some lawmakers to link aid to Israel with aid to Ukraine (which is increasingly opposed) could make it hard for the administration to advance significant policy decisions, such as funding or the approval of the use of force.

Beyond measures already carried out to promote American interests, it also seems likely that the administration will invest much time and effort ensuring that US goals are met during and after the conflict, in order to reshape the reality in the Gaza Strip and region. The visit by President Biden and the extended presence of Secretary Blinken in Israel, along with the visits of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and the commander of CENTCOM, highlight the importance that the administration attaches to maintaining constant contact with the Israeli leadership and other regional actors – the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority – in order to safeguard US interests, and to help Israel achieve the goals of the war as it sees them.

In the administration's view, the military campaign in Gaza, beyond critically damaging Hamas, must promote the following political principles:

- Ensuring a long-term solution that gives Israel quiet on the Gaza front and increases regional stability. One key element will be to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and create the conditions that will enable the PA to return the Gaza Strip – even if this is not an immediate goal. A concrete goal is to revive the political process, based on the two-state solution – both as part of Israel's reciprocation for standing by its side, and the effort to reshape the arena after the war. Biden has repeatedly stressed that he believes that the Palestinian Authority must be part of the arrangement, within the framework of efforts to advance the two-state solution. The US goal will be for a solution to the Gaza issue to be seen as the start of a renewed political process between Israel and the Palestinians.
- Promoting a more active role for the moderate Sunni countries – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – in ensuring peace and stability in the Gaza Strip, including the possibility that these states could participate in a multinational peacekeeping force that might be deployed in Gaza. It is likely that the administration will package its goal of creating a new reality in the Gaza Strip into its broader aspiration of advancing a regional military architecture under US leadership, which would include the expansion of normalization between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states.
- Further strengthening the deterrence of Hezbollah and Iran from any aggression against Israel. An Israeli victory over Hamas will, according to the administration, improve the chances that the Iran-Hezbollah axis will refrain in the future from risking military conflict. The US decision to make a show of its presence, including redeploying troops to the region, is designed to underscore the deterrent message.

Thus far, the United States and Israel have been at pains to show that they are on the same page when it comes to the goals of the military campaign and the means needed to accomplish them. But the longer the war drags on and the more complex it becomes, the more likely it is to encounter increased opposition in the international and regional arenas. This would increase the chances of daylight between the Israeli and US positions, especially on the following issues:

- The extent and length of the military campaign (perhaps even calls for restraint?)
- The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and ways to address it
- Frameworks for ending the war and arrangements for the day after, as well as the role and level of involvement of the Palestinian Authority after the fighting
- The role of regional and international actors after the war
- The kind of military move that will be taken if the situation on the Lebanon border deteriorates, and the role of the United States in this context
- Future policy vis-à-vis the Iranian threat and the threat from Hezbollah.

Policy Recommendations

At present, the United States is standing firmly by Israel side, providing practical assistance in maintaining and strengthening the IDF's capabilities and preparedness, and deterring threats on other fronts. Israel's goal is to safeguard this solid American support for as long as possible; ensure that the administration provides Israel with the freedom of action it needs to achieve its goals vis-à-vis Hamas; deter Hezbollah from escalating the situation on the northern front; and encourage the administration to help promote Israeli interests on the day after the fighting. To these ends, Israel needs:

- Ongoing dialogue with the administration on every level, focusing primarily on the military developments and providing answers for all Israel's immediate needs.
- Consideration of the US demand that the IDF adhere to international law and allow humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, including food and water, shelters, and medicine
- A massive public diplomacy campaign among the US public, especially those identified with the Democratic Party.

Israel must present a coherent approach to the goals of the war and the post-war reality, while also taking into account US interests: a solution to the worsening humanitarian situation; responses to the demands that will be made by regional actors; responses to the future standing and role of the Palestinian Authority, including heightened abilities to govern in the West Bank. Israel will not be able to ignore the administration's demands to refrain from any action that could undermine the Palestinian Authority or the political horizon. This will also make it easier for Israel to demand that any post-war measures are integrated into the regional alliances that the United States seeks to advance, including leveraging it to promote full normalization, especially with Saudi Arabia.

In the background to all this, Israel must show willingness to adopt new policies vis-à-vis China, as well as its relations with Russia and its role in the war in Ukraine, which will provide an answer to the demands and interests of the US administration.

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