

# The United States Hourglass and the War against Hamas

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**The US administration continues to provide Israel with political backing to continue the war against Hamas. However, Israel must avoid taking US patience for granted and remember that at a certain point, perhaps fairly soon, the US political clock will no longer be synchronized with the Israeli military clock. Therefore, priority must be given to a policy that supports retaining the US commitment and securing the space for political action to enable the fighting to continue until the military objectives are achieved.**

Since the start of the ground offensive in the Gaza Strip the US administration, under the leadership of President Biden, has continued to give Israel its unequivocal support. The President and senior administration officials state repeatedly that Israel has the right and the duty to defend its citizens, and in general, the administration agrees with the aim of the war as defined by Israel: the defeat of Hamas. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken repeated this again at a press conference with Arab foreign ministers (November 4).

There is an ongoing dialogue between the US and Israeli leaderships, apparently on the following issues:

**Humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip:** It appears that Israel has adjusted its policy to the demands of the administration, and the dialogue is currently focusing on the demand for humanitarian pauses, mainly to allow the release of hostages, although based on public pronouncements there is still no agreement on this subject. In any event, the administration stresses that it is not talking about a ceasefire, which it believes would serve the interests of Hamas.

**Strict observance of the laws of armed conflict,** including separating the enemy from the civilian population and making efforts to avoid harming civilians as much as possible. The administration demanded that such efforts be incorporated into operational plans, and so far it appears that Israeli moves, particularly the separation between the north and south of the Strip and the definition of “safe areas” for the civilian population, meet US expectations.

**Engaging in the question of “the day after”:** On this issue there is a clear division between Israel’s views and those of President Biden and his administration. After meeting with the head of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, Blinken said: “I think what’s clear is that with regard to the day after, with regard to the future of Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinian views, Palestinian voices, Palestinian aspirations need to be at the center of that.” It is not clear to what extent these differences will affect the

breathing space that the administration grants Israel, although undoubtedly the absence of Israeli readiness to discuss the issue will have a negative effect on the administration's patience for the continued military campaign, and will increase its suspicions regarding Israel's objectives for "the day after."

### **What Drives US Support for the War in the Gaza Strip**

President Biden's emotional support for Israel and his clear sense of pain following the Hamas attack, as reflected in his speeches of identification with Israel, showed that he does not see this as just another round of hostilities. Rather, this is an event that in addition to shaping the Israeli psyche, will have enormous significance in the regional and international arenas for years to come. This war is perceived as part of the global struggle between the "good" and the "bad" – the "new" axis of evil, which in Biden's eyes includes China, Russia, and Iran and the elements they support.

The display of practical support for its ally Israel derives from President Biden's view that the United States must defend its allies. This is similar to the approach demonstrated by the administration in its support for Ukraine since the start of the war with Russia.

Moreover, the administration also sees the war as an opportunity to reshape the Middle East. Biden has already stated that there will be no return to the "status quo as it stood on October 6." In his eyes, the defeat of Hamas by Israel will help strengthen the moderate countries of the region, promote a political solution to the Palestinian issue, and encourage normalization between Israel and Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, it is clear to the administration that Israel's failure to achieve its objectives against Hamas will strengthen the motivation of Iran and Hezbollah to challenge Israel, which will affect the status of the United States in the region and beyond.

The administration's position is also significant for the US domestic front: with rising criticism of Israel's war in the Gaza Strip and consequently of US support for Israel, the President is eager to strengthen his image as a leader, particularly at the start of an election year.

### **US Administration Considerations**

*The military campaign:* The administration wants the campaign to succeed. US elements have advised and are advising Israel, although they do not appear to have an alternative military plan to secure the success of the operation. If the IDF is perceived to be mired in the situation and unable to achieve the goal of defeating Hamas, the administration will be less willing to grant Israel time. In any case there may be a difference between the time needed to achieve Israel's declared military goals (months or more) and the administration's demands (a few weeks, at most). The administration is not conducting a public debate with Israel on the military aspect of the operation, although the US media have reported that there is some criticism of Israel on this matter within the administration.

*The humanitarian situation in the Strip:* The administration is currently invested in the effort to highlight the importance of ensuring humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip,

including efforts to achieve “humanitarian pauses,” which it argues will help in the release of the hostages and assist Gaza civilians while not damaging Israel’s war effort against Hamas. So far the administration remains opposed to a ceasefire, but an incident leading to large numbers of civilian casualties (striking a hospital?) and/or a severe humanitarian crisis (outbreak of disease?) could spur the administration to demand a ceasefire.

*Regional deterioration:* The administration is investing major efforts to prevent a regional decline. This risk was identified immediately after the Hamas attack in the western Negev and messages were sent to Iran and its allies through several channels, warning them against trying to widen the campaign. It appears that the fear of a regional war, with problematic global consequences, is currently guiding the administration to contain its response to the attacks by Iranian allies on US targets in Iraq and Syria. However, an escalation of the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah and/or of actions against US targets (particularly if they involve many casualties) will force the administration to react.

*Conduct of the Israeli government:* The logic that underlies Biden’s support for the military action is that its success will open the way to an Israeli-Palestinian political process and serve the vision of two states. Even if it is not clear whether such an objective is attainable, it is important to the administration for the Israeli government to act responsibly and avoid any actions in the West Bank that might torpedo this vision. Administration spokespersons forcefully condemn the violence of settlers toward West Bank Palestinians, fearing that such actions will further erode the US ability to support Israel, logistically and morally. Moreover, it is possible that the administration assumes that the political situation in Israel will change after the military campaign, which can facilitate the promotion of political moves. If the administration believes that Israel is not prepared for such an outcome, or even that it is consciously working against the logic of a political settlement on “the day after,” it will be hard for it to continue supporting Israel as it pursues the military campaign.

*US domestic issues:* Although at present the administration does not appear worried by the implications of its policies for the President’s political situation as the election year approaches, it is already clear that as the pictures of civilian casualties and destruction in the Gaza Strip multiply, the administration will face growing criticism for its support of Israel, particularly among parts of the public that have traditionally supported the Democratic Party. Polls conducted in the United States indicate growing criticism among younger Democrat voters, as well as a loss of support for the administration among Muslim voters, mainly in states such as Michigan (with a Muslim population of about 3 percent), which could tip the scales in the 2024 presidential elections. There are also media reports of a “revolt” brewing in the State Department, led by elements critical of the administration’s policy.

### **Insights/ Recommendations**

In previous rounds of fighting in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and particularly between Israel and Hamas, any discrepancy between the critical media and public opinion in Europe and the United States toward Israel and support for its actions quickly diminished. In contrast, in the weeks since the start of the current war, the leaders of

these countries have remained steadfast in their support for Israel, notwithstanding growing public criticism. It is clear that President Biden and his administration are the firm leaders of this trend, and at least in public, excluding aspects of the efforts to send humanitarian aid into the Strip, there is little significant difference between the US administration and most European leaders on the issue of supporting Israel.

For Israel, the position of the US administration is what will determine the breathing space that enables it to pursue its military objectives in the war against Hamas. Therefore, in addition to the military efforts, Israel must focus on ensuring US support for as long as necessary in order to achieve its military objectives while deterring Hezbollah from escalation that will expand the war to the northern front.

The immediate aim is to prevent increasing calls for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. At least the administration still understands that a ceasefire, unlike a short humanitarian pause, is likely to strengthen the pressure to stop the fighting, thus allowing Hamas to recover and even regain some of its governmental and military capabilities. To be sure, Israel has no direct influence on some of the elements dictating the administration's position. However, in addition to highlighting Israel's efforts to uphold the principles of humanitarian aid and protect civilian lives in Gaza, if the goals of the war can be clearly presented in a way that shows them to be achievable, there is a greater chance of retaining the administration's support for Israel.

Even in Israel's difficult political reality, it is vital to present a viable outline of a political resolution that takes US interests and ideas into account. In this context, Israeli spokespeople, particularly official figures, must avoid statements that provide fuel for Israel's opponents and grounds for withdrawing support. It is particularly essential to think about "the day after," while avoiding damaging (and unrealistic) expressions such as "the conquest of Gaza" or "transfer of Palestinians."

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