

# The War in Gaza and a Growing Divide between the United States and Israel

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**The United States administration, while continuing to provide assistance to Israel for the military campaign in Gaza and the efforts to release the hostages, is now devoting most of its efforts to promote a plan to shape the regional architecture on the day after the war, although it is clear there is still a long road ahead. As the administration sees it, the burden of proof that the war entails a political opportunity rests on Israel. It has identified, perhaps for the first time in such clear fashion, readiness for this on the Arab side, albeit conditional on progress toward a solution of the Palestinian issue. The gaps between the United States and Israel are expected to grow wider, since the administration feels the Israeli government is not cooperating in promoting a political outline for the day after the war. Even now, the administration is not hiding its criticism of the Israeli government's conduct, but for the moment has refrained from wielding excessive pressure. The gaps between the policies of the US and Israel could have a negative impact on the President's willingness to continue investing in the effort to protect Israel's positions and give it practical assistance in the war.**

More than three months since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip, the United States administration continues to demonstrate considerable involvement in the events. It refers frequently to ongoing developments and highlights its preferences regarding the continuation of the military campaign and the political actions to follow. A [statement](#) issued by the White House on January 19, following a telephone conversation between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, can be seen as a summary of how the US administration currently views the leading issues on the agenda.

**The war effort:** The administration recognizes the need for Israel's continued military pressure on Hamas and its leaders in Gaza, and welcomes the change in the IDF's conduct from broad maneuvers to focused operations. The administration is still firm in its opinion that Israel should not be forced to accept a ceasefire, which in its view will help Hamas rebuild its strength. But contrary to the declarations at the start of the fighting, it appears that the administration no

longer stresses the defeat of Hamas as an objective, but is content with general statements about ensuring that Hamas will be unable to repeat the attacks of October 7. At the same time, the administration notes that it continues to ensure that Israel has everything it needs to defend itself. The administration estimates that continuation of low intensity fighting reduces the danger of sliding into a general war against Hezbollah in the north.

**Increasing humanitarian aid and preventing harm to civilians:** In his conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Biden expressed his satisfaction with Israel's decision to permit the entry of flour to the Strip directly from Ashdod Port. In the administration's eyes, the transition to targeted operations will allow the expansion of direct transfers of aid from Israel to the Strip. Since the start of the war, the administration has demanded consistently that humanitarian aid enter the Strip – partly a function of Israel's required compliance with international laws of war, and partly due to an understanding that this will make it easier to maintain space for political maneuvering in the context of support for Israel, at home and in the international arena. Against the background of ongoing pressure on Israel on the subject of aid, the administration is still careful to praise Israel for the steps it has taken, while stressing that this they are not enough and that Israel has the obligation to continue minimizing harm to civilians.

**Release of the hostages:** In every public reference to the war, the administration emphasizes its efforts to bring about the release of more hostages. The White House stated that President Biden's senior adviser on Middle East affairs, Brett McGurk, recently met secretly in Doha with the Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, to discuss efforts to formulate a new agreement for release of hostages. The issue was also the focus of a meeting between National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and the Qatari Prime Minister at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. US spokespersons, while not revealing too much about the content of these talks, stressed that the discussions are "very serious and intensive" and the administration hopes they will soon bear fruit.

**The day after the war:** The White House announcement following the conversation between Biden and Netanyahu stressed that "the President also discussed his vision for a more durable peace and security for Israel fully integrated within the region and a two state-solution with Israel's security guaranteed." In the background are the extensive efforts by the administration, led by National Security Adviser Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken,

two senior figures who at the Davos forum presented the administration's views on the regional significance of promoting an agreed political outline for the day after the war in Gaza. The central message: there is a genuine chance of accelerating the process of normalization between Israel and Arab countries, headed by Saudi Arabia. In his speech, Sullivan [described](#) the vision discussed by Biden and Netanyahu. The main points are as follows:

- The United States maintains that after the war there must be a reality whereby Israel has security and the Palestinians have their own state. He said, "I know that in this moment, when there is so much anger and pain and so much uncertainty, it's hard to imagine. But it really is the only path that provides peace and security for all."
- Accelerating the normalization process is linked in the eyes of the administration with providing a political horizon for the Palestinians. Sullivan stressed that the Israeli government has clear views on this subject (by implication – views that do not accept the link between the two processes) and it will have to choose the path that ensures its own security. According to Sullivan, President Biden thinks that the best way of doing this is in the framework of a two-state solution that guarantees Israel's security. In this context, Sullivan stressed that even before October 7, the administration was convinced that negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would not succeed and therefore tried to build a framework with Saudi Arabia that would also include the Palestinians.

In this respect there is particular significance to remarks by [Secretary of State Blinken](#) that "you now have something you didn't have before, and that is Arab countries and Muslim countries even beyond the region that are prepared to have a relationship with Israel in terms of its integration, its normalization, its security....But you also have an absolute conviction by those countries, one that we share, that this has to include a pathway to a Palestinian state." To achieve this, there must be a strong and revitalized Palestinian Authority that is able to serve its people. Blinken stressed that normalization with Israel combined with the establishment of a Palestinian state would bring about a significant change in the region – Iran would be isolated and would have to make its own decisions.

Blinken likewise repeated the message he underscored in Ramallah, that the Palestinians too must make decisions and must have a government that meets the needs of the people. Israel, however, must help the Palestinian government and not actively oppose it. In his conversation with Netanyahu, the President spoke of the progress required to ensure the income of the Palestinian Authority

for payment of salaries, including for the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank. This is in light of the administration's dissatisfaction with Israel's delay in releasing the PA's tax revenues and approving the entry of Palestinian workers to Israel.

The administration is indeed already working hard to promote a regional architecture for the day after the war. It stresses that the road ahead is long and replete with obstacles, but it is determined to present a clear vision and invest the attention and resources of the President and his senior advisers to the promotion of this objective.

As the administration sees it, and as is clearly shown in Secretary Blinken's remarks, the burden of proof that the war in Gaza entails a political opportunity to reshape the Middle East rests with Israel. The administration has identified, perhaps for the first time in such clear fashion, readiness for this on the Arab side – conditional on progress toward a solution of the Palestinian issue. The administration expects Israel to provide it with some kind of opening to promote its political vision, but so far it apparently believes that Israel is dragging its feet and not responding to this demand. It has, therefore not shied away from expressing its frustration, mainly through leaks to the American media. Presumably the President does not intend to give up and the pressure on Israel on this subject will get stronger, and this assessment remains intact after the Biden-Netanyahu conversation. The subject was at the focus of the conversation, and the President also told journalists later that it's not impossible to achieve a two-state solution even with Netanyahu in power. "There are a number of types of two-state solutions. There's a number of countries that are members of the UN that...don't have their own military; a number of states that have limitations, and so I think there's ways in which this can work."

President Biden continues to demonstrate steadfast support for Israel and has not been dragged into the growing demand from Democratic lawmakers to condition aid to Israel on its positive response to US political initiatives. However, the complex situation of the election campaign for the presidency and Congress, which in any case is expected to be confrontational, could limit the President's room for maneuver if he is unable to show political achievements in his foreign policy. And while the administration has so far refrained from applying levers of pressure on Israel, its assessment that the Israeli government is not ready to cooperate on promoting its vision for the day after the war could have negative consequences for the President's willingness to continue investing in the defense of Israeli positions and giving it practical assistance in the war.

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