

The United States and the “Swords of Iron” War: An Interim Assessment

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The American stance supporting Israel in the “Swords of Iron” war has been unprecedented, except perhaps in the Yom Kippur War. The United States shares the goal of destroying Hamas and creating a new security situation in the Gaza Strip and the border region. In practice, there has been an informal division of labor between the countries, with Israel targeting Hamas and the United States deterring Iran and its proxies from escalating to the point of a regional conflagration. But alongside this, the administration has set limitations on Israel’s moves and on the nature of the fighting in Gaza: demanding the reduction of civilian harm and the provision of maximal humanitarian assistance; the containment of the war to the Gaza Strip and the prevention of escalation in other arenas; blocking the expulsion of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip; and a swift transition to Phase 3 of the campaign and a reduction of its intensity. The administration is now focused on efforts to reach a deal for the return of hostages that will include a prolonged cessation of fighting, during which it will focus on ending the war and shaping a new regional order based on the establishment of a Palestinian state, normalization with Saudi Arabia, and the creation of a united front against Iran. However, Israel’s unwillingness to formulate a plan for the “day after,” opposition to the vision set out by the US administration, failure to comply sufficiently with American demands to curb civilian casualties and maximize humanitarian aid, and Israel’s intention to expand the Gaza campaign to the Rafah area have become major points of contention between the two governments, causing the administration to lose patience with what it perceives as Prime Minister Netanyahu’s obstructionism.

US policy has played a major role in influencing developments in the war in the Gaza Strip since it broke out on October 7. This article reviews the key characteristics of the American role following over five months of war, as well as presents key insights that can be drawn therefrom.

The American role so far has had three main characteristics: unequivocal diplomatic backing of Israel, along with ongoing military assistance and strategic

support, but also growing criticism of Israel's conduct and, at the same time, increasing efforts to shape the post-war situation.

From Unequivocal Diplomatic Support of Israel to Growing Criticism

Publicly—The US administration's support for Israel since the war broke out has been impressive. It adopted a distinctly pro-Israeli stance, with the president making a highly unusual visit to Israel during the fighting, as have many other senior officials. The administration continues to reiterate Israel's right to defend itself as well as its continued support for the goal of defeating Hamas. Despite mounting domestic and international pressure, the administration has refrained from placing time limits on Israel regarding the duration of the military campaign, from calling for a binding deadline to end it, or until recently, from calling for a ceasefire. Of particular note, the president emphasized that "I'm never going to leave Israel. The defense of Israel is still critical, so there's no redline where I'm going to cut off all weapons so they don't have the Iron Dome to protect them." He further rejected the claim that many US voters believe Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, and that this was the message voters sent him in the recent primaries.

However, the administration's doubts about Israel's ability to achieve its military objectives, at a cost that the administration finds acceptable, have increased as the campaign progressed. Criticism of Israel's moves first began to emerge just weeks after the start of the war. The strong underlying support for Israel and the need to defeat Hamas have continued, but as the scale of the destruction in the Gaza Strip became clear, especially the humanitarian consequences of the fighting, the criticism intensified. Over time, Israel's refusal to present a vision for the "day after" and move toward a diplomatic process, became the central focus of the administration's statements. It further expressed clear opposition to a significant Israeli campaign in Rafah, unless it presents a credible plan to evacuate the large Palestinian population that has gathered in the area.

Recent statements by the president, vice president, and other senior officials reflect a deep sense of frustration and disappointment toward Israeli policy generally and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in particular. In an unusual personal rebuke, President Biden stated that Netanyahu was doing "more harm than good to Israel and its interests," that an Israeli operation in Rafah would constitute a "redline," and that Israel cannot have "another 30,000 Palestinians dead" in order to deal with Hamas. Vice President Harris was even more outspoken, stating that the situation in Gaza has become a humanitarian

catastrophe and inhuman, and that people are starving to death and children dying of malnutrition.

Diplomatically—The US administration continues to provide Israel with diplomatic cover. At the start of the war, the administration initiated an unusual joint statement with the leaders of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, which strongly condemned Hamas's actions and expressed their unequivocal support for Israel. The administration vetoed three anti-Israel resolutions in the Security Council (on October 18 and December 8, 2023, and February 20, 2024), and abstained from another resolution (on December 21) that called for increased humanitarian aid, after a call for an immediate ceasefire was removed. Various reports indicated that the administration was considering whether to initiate a resolution that would call for the release of hostages and a temporary ceasefire, and oppose a Rafah operation, but it has yet to materialize. After it was announced that UNRWA employees had been involved in the October 7 attack, the administration froze funding for the organization, despite its strong support for increasing humanitarian aid to Gaza residents.

Continued Military and Strategic Backing to Israel

Military Assistance—As early as October 8, the president and secretary of defense announced the immediate dispatch of special military aid to Israel, which began at \$2 billion and soon reached \$14.3 billion. An airlift and sealift were launched, to expedite delivery of aid, and by the end of December, 240 transport and 20 cargo ships had delivered tens of thousands of tons of weaponry and equipment.¹ The administration further announced a huge new deal to supply fighter jets and helicopters to Israel. Although the deal had been under discussion for years and its conclusion was expected, the timing was not accidental and was intended to express support for Israel and send a deterrent message to its opponents.

The administration has also exercised emergency executive authority to transfer military aid to Israel without having to go through the lengthy congressional authorization process and repeatedly approved aid packages that fall below the dollar amount that triggers the need for this. It also dispatched a “special operations cell” to Israel to assist with military planning and intelligence, as well as special forces, to help find the hostages.²

Strategic Military Backing and Strengthened Deterrence—Throughout the war, unprecedented strategic dialogue and cooperation took place between the countries, to strengthen Israel's security, deter Israel's and the United States' adversaries, prevent escalation, and shape the military campaign. As early as the day after October 7, the administration announced the dispatch of an aircraft

carrier battlegroup to the region and within days sent another such battlegroup, with the aim of deterring Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations from joining the campaign. A special force for rapid intervention, with approximately 2,000 Marines, was also stationed in the region. These moves reflected the administration's fear of the difficulties that a war on two or even more fronts would pose to Israel, as well as concern that an expanded campaign would require direct American intervention.

Regional Force Buildup and Deterrence—In addition to the deployment of the two carrier battle groups above, the United States increased its military presence in the region, along with a number of its allies. In the Persian Gulf, the United States deployed several fighter squadrons and about 20 refueling aircraft. A THAAD battery as well as a number of Patriot batteries were also deployed at an unknown location (likely in Saudi Arabia) to intercept missiles. Dozens of American transport aircraft also landed in Iraq, Qatar, and Bahrain. In Jordan, the United States deployed a fleet of F-15 aircraft and special forces and Germany also deployed fighter jets; in Cyprus and Lebanon—the United States, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Spain, and Italy deployed special forces and equipment, for the possible evacuation of their citizens, or prepared forward bases to do so.

Escalation Prevention—The United States has worked throughout the war to prevent it from escalating and expanding into other theaters, both through military deterrence against Iran and its proxies, and diplomatically, in Lebanon and the Red Sea. To that end, several rounds of talks were held with the aim of promoting a settlement that would keep Hezbollah away from the border with Israel. Throughout the war, the United States made clear its opposition to an escalation in the north instigated by Israel.

Active Defense—American ships intercepted Houthis missiles, which were directed against them and against Israeli targets. The administration also formed an international coalition to protect the Red Sea maritime routes. While this coalition is intended to protect international shipping as a whole, in practice the maritime routes to Israel have taken an important role in its operations. After a prolonged period of retaliatory restraint, US airstrikes were carried out against the Houthis in Yemen and against Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq and Syria. Those strikes were a response to the strikes against international maritime and US forces in the region but were also part of an overall effort to defend Israel. No information is available regarding assistance from American ships in the active defense of Israel against missiles and rockets in the Mediterranean.

Efforts to Shape the Campaign and “The Day After”

Direct Involvement In Israel's Decision-Making Process—From the beginning of the military campaign, the US administration has held ongoing and in-depth deliberations with the government and the heads of the security establishment in Israel. In addition to the customary meetings and discussions with the prime minister and the minister of defense, President Biden and the secretaries of state and defense also attended unprecedented meetings with the security cabinet and cabinet plenums and met separately with its different members. In these meetings, they sought to understand Israeli thinking and plans and to raise dilemmas, while presenting their own positions and reservations. At the same time, senior US officials and officers held professional consultations with their Israeli counterparts, with an emphasis on Israeli political and military strategy and ways to minimize harm to innocents and increase humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip. However, the president, who spoke to the prime minister almost weekly during the initial weeks of the war, twice refrained from speaking with him in late December and again in late January, as an expression of disapproval due to growing disputes.

Setting Boundaries—From the beginning of the campaign, the administration exerted significant pressure to limit the fighting to the Gaza Strip and subsequently to reduce its intensity and to quickly transition to Phase 3 (i.e., targeted raids). In January, against the background of the widespread destruction and death in Gaza, and especially the negotiations for the release of the hostages, the administration started calling for a prolonged cessation of fighting, whose practical import might actually be its end. Later, the administration firmly opposed large-scale Israeli action in Rafah, except following careful preparations aimed at minimizing harm to civilians. The administration also set a number of principles for the post-war situation in the Gaza Strip: It must not again become a terrorist base against Israel, Palestinians should not be expelled from Gaza by force, the Israeli occupation of Gaza should not be resumed, and it should not be besieged or have its territory reduced. In addition, the administration stated that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank should be unified under a single government structure and later under a “reformed” Palestinian Authority.

Soft Levers of Influence—Throughout the war, the US administration stressed the vital need for maximal Israeli effort to minimize civilian casualties, provide humanitarian assistance, and respect international law. These emphases reflected not only a moral position but, perhaps most importantly, an understanding that the administration's ability to continue providing Israel with maximal support was contingent on this. Over time, the administration sharpened its tone, expressing increasing reservations about Israel's moves, while trying to exert pressure on it, both publicly and privately. Among other things, the administration warned

against repeating the mistakes the United States itself made in the wake of the terrorist attack on 9/11 and against turning a tactical victory into a strategic defeat; from fixed thinking that could harm the prospects for progress toward a diplomatic process; and a negative change in Israel's standing in the United States and worldwide. Hard sources of influence, such as delaying and even stopping aid, or acceding to a resolution against Israel in the Security Council, have not been used.

A partial exception to this was the administration's decision to impose sanctions on four West Bank settlers accused of violence against Palestinians, a measure which may turn out to be much harsher than it first appears. The sanctions have potentially severe effects on Israeli municipalities in the West Bank, on government bodies with ongoing ties to them, and on commercial companies, such as Israeli banks, which have already announced the closure of the accounts of the four men and on steps to prevent their own exposure to sanctions. More recently, reports have emerged of the intention to impose sanctions on entire secular outposts. It is not yet clear whether these moves are targeted expressions of disapproval against the increased violence by settlers, or whether they are a sign of the administration's intention to toughen its stance on the settlement enterprise as a whole.

Should the administration support a Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire and for Israel to refrain from a Rafah operation, this would be a significant departure from the line taken so far and an expression of its frustration with Israeli policy.

The "Day After" and the Long-Term Vision—The lack of an Israeli vision for the "day after" (i.e., the post-war conditions) has become a major point of contention between the two countries. The US administration sees the possibility of a historic regional "inflection point," based on a two-state solution, the integration of Israel in the region after normalization with Saudi Arabia and other countries, and the establishment of a pro-American regional front as a response to the Iranian threat. The creation of a Palestinian state has become the be-all and end-all in the administration's statements and plans, and now believes that Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, are willing to change their relations toward Israel and give it "security guarantees, commitments and promises." If this happens, Iran will be isolated and the challenges it poses to Israel and the United States will be given an effective response. To downplay potential disputes with Israel, the president stressed "that there are several types of two-state solutions . . . there are several U.N. member states that don't have militaries."³

Carefully Avoiding Entanglement in Israeli Politics—US administration officials have speculated that the American plans for reshaping the region, which are contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state, will have to be postponed until there is political change in Israel. Frustration over Prime Minister Netanyahu's repeated rejections of the administration's positions has increased as time has passed, and he is now seen as the main obstacle to progress and as someone driven by irrelevant political considerations. However, administration officials have speculated that his term may be limited and have even begun preparing for this by holding separate meetings with cabinet members, the head of the opposition, and heads of civil society. Despite growing frustration with the prime minister, the administration has deliberately avoided a public confrontation with him, believing that a clash would strengthen him domestically and even lead to a hardening of his positions.

Key Insights

American support for Israel during the war has reached unprecedented levels not seen, perhaps, since the Yom Kippur War. Despite significant differences of opinion, this support has been manifested across all levels—military, strategic, and diplomatic—and even has been practically expressed through the unofficial American guarantee for Israel's existence and security. In practice, the United States has acted as if it were a contractual ally, and it is doubtful that Israel could have expected more. This unusually positive response can be attributed, at least in part, to the president's deep personal commitment to Israel but also to the institutionalization of strategic ties between the countries in recent decades, including joint planning by both security establishments.

American conduct in the war has been different from the past in several additional ways. The profound shock stemming from the October massacre created extraordinary agreement regarding the aims of the war, the Americans refrained from imposing time limits on Israel ("political time"), and their direct involvement in the Israeli decision-making process, including cabinet deliberations, was unparalleled. American forces did not fight alongside the IDF, but the United States became a partner to Israel in the design and conduct of the campaign. In practice, there has been an informal division of labor, with Israel focused on Hamas in Gaza, while the United States has deterred Iran and Hezbollah and addressed the Houthi threat in the Red Sea.

Along with its strong backing for Israel since the beginning of the war, the administration has also set clear boundaries for it and consistently sought to formulate a joint approach toward the post-war reality. No actual policy dictates

are known to have been presented, but the administration has endeavored, albeit with partial success, to shape the nature and boundaries of the fighting. In the administration's view, these limitations had a dual purpose: to shape the military campaign and, for tactical purposes, to make it easier for the administration to continue providing Israel with maximum support, despite the mounting domestic and international criticism of the administration's pro-Israel stance.

The war waged by Israel in the Gaza Strip has provoked unprecedented domestic opposition in the United States, particularly among the democratic left and young people. There have been strong reservations about Israel's actions voiced in Congress, with attempts made to condition military aid to Israel on changes to its policy. The opposition within the United States reflects, in part, the rising importance of the Muslim community in the United States, while at the same time the influence of the Jewish community has weakened. While the public outcry began to gain momentum in mid-January, it did not lead to any change in the administration's fundamental positions. However, there was a noticeable shift in the administration's public statements, which became harsher, and Israel became increasingly viewed as the party responsible for prolonging the war and its dire consequences, particularly the lack of prospects for progress after the war. Concern about the upcoming presidential election in November, particularly how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could adversely affect the president's chances of reelection, have also influenced the administration's response.

The administration is aware that it will face difficulties in its efforts to craft a new regional order and acknowledges that long negotiations will be necessary. While it is doubtful whether the administration will deviate from traditional American fundamental positions, such as the need to establish a Palestinian state through negotiations with Israel, it seems determined to move forward, even if it means adopting new courses of action. The administration now views the prime minister as the main obstacle to progress and prefers to avoid a public crisis for the time being. However, recent leaks about the "day after Netanyahu" indicate both a desire to pressure him to demonstrate flexibility and an assessment suggesting an imminent political change in Israel, which could facilitate the administration's strategy and goals in the Middle East.

In the coming weeks, several potential developments could present serious challenges for the administration and strain relations with Israel. Concern is growing within the administration that the prime minister's decisions regarding the conduct of the war in general, as well as the issue of the hostages in particular, may be influenced by political considerations. If developments in the hostage issue, some of whom are American citizens, could justify extending the campaign

or prompt Israel to launch a large-scale operation in Rafah without meeting the administration's preconditions, it could trigger a significant escalation by Hezbollah in the northern arena. The administration is likely to apply significant pressure on Israel to exercise maximum restraint. Above all, the administration fears that it will be compelled to support Israeli measures on these three issues, even they run counter to its own positions.

Israel has increasingly become the "guilty" party in American discourse. Decades of accumulated frustration and outrage in the face of continued Israeli rejection of fundamental American positions—particularly regarding the need to promote a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—are now reaching new heights, especially on the progressive flank of the Democratic Party. This situation is further exacerbated by a growing American perception of ingratitude from Israel, as it continues to repay the United States' long-standing support with ongoing refusal and rejection, and the prime minister even seems to be positioning himself politically in opposition to the United States.

At the same time, American society is undergoing fundamental demographic changes, some of which, although unrelated to Israel, still adversely affect relations with it. The predominantly liberal Jewish community and particularly its younger members are distancing themselves from Israel. Additionally, the Muslim population in the United States is growing along with their political organization and placement of their supporters in influential positions within the administration and the media.

The war has postponed the tensions and collision course that have characterized US-Israeli relations in recent years, particularly regarding the Palestinian issue; in the past year, the judicial reform, which many viewed as an attack led by the Israeli government, also strained relations. Although a real crisis in relations is not likely to occur before the presidential elections in November, tensions are increasing and the crisis may erupt during a second term, whether it be of Joe Biden or Donald Trump, who both hold grievances against Netanyahu in particular and Israel in general. Conditioning military aid to Israel on changes to its policy regarding the Palestinian issue is becoming a more mainstream position in the United States, posing a tangible threat to Israel's security. The IDF's force structure plans are based on the assumption that the current ten-year aid package (ending in 2028) will be fully implemented as planned, with an additional, even larger, ten-year package approved thereafter. However, this assumption can no longer be considered guaranteed, and it would behoove the Israeli government to treat this situation with the utmost seriousness and adjust its policies accordingly.

¹ “240 US cargo planes, 20 ships deliver over 10,000 tons of military equipment to Israel,” *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2023.

² AP, October 15, 2023; Times of Israel, November 23, 2023.

³ Peter Baker, “Biden Presses Netanyahu on Working Toward a Palestinian State,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2024.