

Was Biden's Speech an Opportunity or an Obstacle for Israel?

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US President Joe Biden's decision to present the "Israeli plan" for a hostage deal and a ceasefire between the IDF and Hamas appears to have been motivated by an assessment that Israel's military campaign had run its course. Despite the administration's view that Hamas is responsible for the delay in reaching a hostage deal, Biden clearly believed that revealing the Israeli proposal would encourage Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make a decision—notwithstanding the bitter domestic arguments in Israel between those who support the deal and those who vehemently oppose it. The US administration itself does not currently have a viable alternative in the likely event that the proposals outlined by Biden do not come to fruition and the fighting continues. Should that happen, the United States would likely cast the blame on Hamas. At the same time, it is feasible that the frustration felt by some administration officials and by Biden himself at Israel's behavior could intensify and could lead to actions that are not in accord with Israel's interests. Therefore, the decisions that Israel takes in the near future, especially after Biden unveiled the details of its proposed ceasefire deal, must be guided by the goal of improving Israel's strategic position. The prime minister would be well advised to use his upcoming address to the US Congress to present a clear vision for a political strategy, which would allow the Israeli–Saudi normalization process to move forward under US auspices, while forging a broad front with moderate Arab states against Iran and the so-called "axis of resistance."

US President Joe Biden's [decision to reveal](#) the "Israeli plan" for a "roadmap to a lasting ceasefire and the release of all the hostages" was, first and foremost, a reflection of his assessment that the Israeli military campaign as currently constituted had run its course. The damage to US and Israeli interests, should the war continue, would outweigh the benefits and Israel would certainly be unable to fulfill its stated war objective, as Biden put it in his speech, of "total victory." Since Biden's speech, the US administration has been working with the international community, regional players, and Israel to garner support and advance the three-stage plan. The administration has strongly urged Qatar, Egypt, Turkey and others to exert pressure on Hamas to accept the deal, emphasizing Israel's readiness to do so. In phone conversations with Israeli ministers Yoav Gallant and Benny Gantz, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken made it clear that the ball is now in Hamas's court, but also pointed out that "the proposal would advance Israel's long-term security interests, including by enabling the possibility of further integration in the region." In furtherance of the American diplomatic effort, the leaders of the G-7 countries issued [a statement](#) expressing

support for the efforts to advance the hostage deal and called on Hamas to accept it, and the United States submitted a draft resolution in the UN Security Council calling for the implementation of the president's plan.

The possibility that Biden would make a speech outlining the American vision for the end of the war in Gaza had been discussed within the administration for several weeks. The decision to proceed with the speech appears to have been based on the assessment that only if the president himself revealed the details of the negotiations and proposal in public, which had been closely guarded, might the sides be encouraged to move from negotiating tactics and make strategic decisions. Biden's speech was designed to reach several audiences at the same time: the intermediaries, especially Qatar and Egypt; Hamas; Israel, particularly its government and prime minister; the international community; and the American public.

Most of the burden of proof is now on Hamas, which is due to respond to the proposal, beyond its initial reactions that the offer was "positive." The administration is also making a special effort to persuade Qatar and Egypt to exert heavy pressure on Hamas to accept the proposal and conduct discussions on the details with a positive attitude. To this end, Qatar, Egypt, and the United States issued a joint statement in which they stressed that Israel and Hamas must reach final agreements on the basis of the principles laid out by the president. The statement emphasized that these principles "will bring immediate relief both to the long-suffering people of Gaza as well as the long-suffering hostages and their families. This deal offers a roadmap for a permanent ceasefire and ending of the crisis."

Even though the administration views Hamas as bearing primary responsibility for the delay thus far in advancing a deal for the release of the hostages—and has even gone as far as to repeatedly say so in public—it is far from happy with the Israeli government's behavior. The fact that Biden repeatedly stated that the proposal was an Israeli one, indicates that he believed that doing so would force Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hand and require that he make a decision despite fierce domestic controversy over the proposed deal. Threats by Benny Gantz's National Unity Party to quit the Netanyahu-led coalition further exacerbate the situation. It further appears that administration officials—including Biden himself—are increasingly concerned that Israel's hesitancy and behavior throughout the negotiations have been a function of political considerations, more than the strategic considerations pertaining to the remainder of the campaign and the day after. Moreover, there is also real concern over an escalation of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah on the northern border.

The United States also faces a complex situation on the international front. While Washington's support of Israel during the first few months of the war enjoyed the broad backing of its allies, it is now increasingly isolated. The critical positions of most European states, the rulings issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague regarding Israel's military operation in Rafah and the decision by the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to seek arrest warrants against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant all forced the US administration to show its determination to hasten the end of the war. Moreover, the administration's need to maintain a united diplomatic front in the face of other challenges on the international front, especially regarding the war in Ukraine, competition with China, and possible deterioration between China and Taiwan, still very much exists and, to some degree, has even worsened of late.

Finally, the Biden administration must also find answers to challenges on the domestic front, especially as the 2024 presidential election campaign enters the last stretch. Biden's campaign faces considerable criticism from both sides of the divide: those who oppose his policies toward Israel and those who favor it. While it is still too early to predict the impact of events in the Middle East on the outcome of the elections in November, polls indicate a close race between Biden and Donald Trump, forcing the administration to try to address both sides' concerns: by drawing red lines for Israel and, at the same time, reiterating that it does not intend to abandon its commitment to Israel's security. Biden's speech walked on eggshells in the effort to satisfy both camps on the American domestic front.

Looking forward, the administration will continue, as it has been doing over the past few months, to focus on a deal for the release of the Israeli hostages, leading in turn to a weeks-long ceasefire, during which the sides will try to reach a broader agreement, which is a precondition for the United States' vision for the "day after." Washington has been working on this for several months, centering on a "mega-deal" with Saudi Arabia. The recent visit to Saudi Arabia by Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Advisor, during which he met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, reportedly achieved considerable progress on the bilateral components of this deal—including a mutual defense pact and a Saudi civil nuclear program . It is clear to the administration that the approaching elections leave only a limited window for agreement, and it is thus focusing primarily on measures that can be achieved during the coming month. It is further clear to the administration that it will be impossible to move forward on Saudi-Israeli normalization without a cessation of hostilities and presentation of a plan for post-war Gaza, leading to a collapse of the American game plan. As the administration sees it, a trilateral agreement between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel would provide the best possible means of containing Iran, as

well as ending the war in Gaza. The administration believes that the joint response by Israel, the United States and certain Middle Eastern countries, to the Iranian drone and missile attack against Israel on April 14 is exactly the kind of strategy needed.

The Biden administration does not appear to have an alternative in the event that the president's plan does not come to fruition and the war in Gaza continues, or even escalates, especially when the conflict with Hezbollah on Israel's northern border is raging on and even worsening. It is reasonable to assume that, while the administration will continue to place the blame firmly on Hamas's shoulders, the president's frustration with Israel, and that of senior members of his administration, will grow deeper and lead to actions that are not in line with Israel's interests—such as the decision to delay a shipment of weapons to Israel out of concern that the IDF would use them in the assault on Rafah. At the same time, the Biden administration is likely to face a dilemma regarding its policy in international forums, especially a possible decision by the ICC to issue arrest warrants, as well as the likely demand that the Security Council adopt a resolution imposing a ceasefire. The tight presidential elections will undoubtedly influence the administration's behavior and Israel cannot take for granted that the president will be influenced solely by concerns that he will lose support if he makes decisions that are not to its liking.

Israel's decisions in the coming period, especially after President Biden's decision to reveal the Israeli proposal for the release of the hostages and end of the Gaza war, must be designed to improve its overall strategic standing. To this end, it is imperative that it refrain from public clashes with the United States, without regard to the outcome of the presidential elections in November. Netanyahu's planned speech to a joint session of both houses of the US Congress is an opportunity, but it could also become a crisis between Jerusalem and Washington. Netanyahu should take advantage of the bipartisan invitation that he received to address Congress—an invitation that may have been approved by the president—to present a clear strategic vision that paves the way for normalization with Saudi Arabia, under American auspices, while also forging a broad coalition with moderate Arab states against Iran and the "axis of resistance" that it leads.

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