



US Foreign Policy on the Gaza War: Objectives and Implications

Ilias Mitrousis*

On October 7, 2023, President Biden declared his administration's "rock-solid and unwavering support" to Israel. More than nine months into the Gaza war, his adherence to his initial promise is unquestionable. This article will examine US foreign policy vis-à-vis the war on Gaza, focusing on its prospective objectives and its implications on domestic, regional, and international levels. It will also argue that American foreign policy on the issue is primarily reactive rather than proactive.

*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

In Biden's own words, October 7 represents an Israeli 9/11. Hence, American support should be principally reflective of the high-profile alliance between the two countries. The attack's timing on the eve of the Presidential election year also made US support an imperative of greater gravity. The pro-Israeli sentiment in the US political arena seems to transcend partisanship, and while being traditionally higher among Republicans, it remains a particularly hot topic among Democratic voters as well. Therefore, the President could not be seen as ill-resolved, especially at a moment when public opinion was highly supportive of Israel. Not supporting Israel could potentially cost him both in terms of voters and of a large part of his pro-Israeli donors.¹ Accordingly, since October 7, the US has vetoed three UNSC resolutions for a ceasefire and has reportedly provided \$6.5 billion worth of "security assistance" in more than 100 separate deliveries. Notably, Congress has been officially notified only for 2 of these deliveries as they surpassed the \$25 million threshold.² Experts have argued that the US has crucially contributed to maintaining Israel's pace in the war. Estimates put the total tons of Israeli bombs dropped on Gaza to more than 70,000, a number which amounts to one-third of the bombs the US dropped on Japan between 1942 and 1945.³ Yet, the administration refuses to definitively acknowledge the use of US armaments in acts deemed as human rights violations. This effectively shields Israel from delivery restrictions and other consequences for violating international and US law. Advocates of Biden's approach have supported that "bear-hugging" Israel constitutes a potent policy. Thus, by publicly demonstrating the utmost support for Israel, the US could effectively influence its decision-making behind closed doors.

However, domestically, the President's handling of unconditional support was quickly associated with Israel's destructive conduct of the war, thus making the administration the receptor of increasing dissent. According to various polls, most Americans supported a ceasefire as early as November 2023. By February, 43% of Democrats opposed the provision of military aid to Israel for the war against Hamas. In March, the positive views of Israeli military action among Democratic voters had dropped from 36% to 18%, and by May, 44% of the registered ones disapproved of Biden's handling of the crisis. The rise of the student peace protest movement is also a symptom of those mentioned above. Notwithstanding the American voter's low prioritization with regard to foreign policy, 13% of 2020 Biden voters who will not vote for him in November named Gaza their primary concern. Dissent has also grown within the administration itself. It has been expressed through several staffers' resignations or through official and unofficial channels, such as internal cables within the State Department.⁴ The growing polarization led to a gradual shift in the US rhetoric, initially expressed through anonymous leaks distancing Biden from Netanyahu before culminating in the President's acknowledgment that Israel's reaction was "over the top".⁴

Being committed to its 'bear hug' policy, the administration was late to grasp that by completely sidelining the Palestinians, it excessively emboldened Israel's uncompromising stance to the detriment of US capacity to exert significant influence. That has been tellingly reflected in Netanyahu's resolve to adhere to an autonomous policy direction. He has acted without consulting his American counterpart on critical issues, as evident with the Israeli bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus last April. Moreover, the Israeli operations in Rafah proceeded as announced, despite Biden's stated disagreement and his designation of the invasion as a "red line." The fact that Israel faced no meaningful pressure whatsoever further empowered the Israeli PM. Consequently, Biden's margin of maneuver diminished and translated into leverage for Netanyahu. The latter has arguably invested in prolonging the war for purposes of clinging to power and avoiding being tried for longstanding corruption charges. Hence, his public criticism of the US administration's decision to pause a shipment of heavy-load bombs in May represented a prime tactical move of pressure. However, the pause did not seem to affect Israel's defense capabilities, as the delivery reportedly represented less than 1% of total US assistance since October 7. It did, though, draw a backlash from Biden's important donors and threatened to undermine his pro-Israeli standing in Trump's favor.⁶

Biden's emphasis on providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians came as a belated reaction to

the realization of the US' limited leverage on Israel and to the impact that the complete sidelining of the Palestinians had on American regional standing. To bypass restricted access to land crossings imposed by Israel, the US began airdropping humanitarian aid into Gaza in cooperation with other countries. In April, the US also constructed an off-coast floating pier to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza by sea. However, both initiatives were deemed insufficient to counterbalance Israel's restrictions on humanitarian aid distribution. The pier had been dismantled several times due to damages from the high seas and is expected to be decommissioned. The sanctioning of certain Jewish settler groups and individuals in the West Bank was also deemed inadequate in delivering a sense of justice, given its limited scope in an area where more than 1.200 people have been displaced due to settler violence.⁷ The introduction of such humanitarian initiatives in conjunction with the administration's solid support of the war highlighted that the US seems locked into a state of reactively trailing the developments of the war.

On a regional level, since the beginning of the crisis, US diplomatic efforts have been concentrated on two main objectives: first, reassuring its regional partners that the crisis will not cross their borders; and, second, averting a regional spill-over of war that would directly involve Iran and "the axis of resistance". The importance of these objectives is tellingly underscored by the numerous successive tours the US Secretary of State has embarked on in the Middle East since October 7. Particularly for Egypt and Jordan, the concomitant forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank constitutes a primary national security concern. Given the historical precedent, both countries estimate that Israel may never allow the repatriation of Palestinian refugees who cross their borders, thus leaving them to deal with profound domestic humanitarian and security implications. In preventing a regional war, the US has, to its credit, effectively managed to control a dangerous escalation at least once. Initially, by orchestrating Israel's defense against the Iranian massive and direct missile retaliation, and followingly, by pressuring Israel to declare success and avoid escalatory counter-retaliation. The same appears to happen also in the Israeli north, where the US attempts to deflect the possibility of an Israeli ground operation against Hizballah in Southern Lebanon.⁸ However, the US diplomatic balancing act is hindered by an inherent contradiction. It reactively seeks the de-escalation of regional tensions generated from a war that it supports but can hardly influence. In other words, the US position remains far from neutral, and, as such fringes its mediation capabilities.

Having rejected the notion of a ceasefire until late March, Biden's initiative to mediate a three-phased ceasefire plan in June reflects that the above-mentioned objectives are hardly attainable without addressing the instability's root cause. The plan proposed Israel's complete withdrawal from Gaza, the negotiated permanent end to hostilities upon the return of hostages, and finally, the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. Although the President presented the plan as a "comprehensive Israeli proposal," Netanyahu promptly vowed to continue the war against Hamas in spite of any potential hostage deal. While the Israeli position contradicted any possibility of a ceasefire, Hamas, on its part, declared openness on condition of written guarantees. In Israel, Netanyahu's intentions aside, a majority of the Jewish Israeli population is still supportive of the war to crush Hamas. Understandably, from the Israeli perspective, the group that killed more than 1.200 Israelis in a single day cannot return to rule Gaza, despite the increasing acknowledgment within the military establishment that it cannot be defeated militarily.⁹ For Hamas, relinquishing its leverage in a hostage deal without demanding serious guarantees makes it vulnerable to a potential second war at a time of Israel's choosing. Conversely, despite being significantly weakened militarily, Hamas will continue to be influential across Palestine. This is highlighted by the increase of the overall support for armed struggle -now roughly at 60%- among Palestinians, regardless of their views of Hamas. In this context, given that Biden has shown no resolve in pressuring Israel and has instead put the blame entirely on Hamas for not signing, the US capacity to lead the mediation is significantly reduced.¹⁰

Consequently, the US has begrudgingly delegated the negotiations with the Palestinian factions to regional players who can be seen as more impartial mediators and are better positioned to use certain leverage on the Palestinians that the US lacks.¹¹ Egypt and Qatar can talk to both sides and have long-

established contacts with Hamas; Egypt is the keeper of Gaza's only border that does not face Israel, and Qatar is the hosting country of Hamas' political leadership. Both have a heavy interest in seeing a cease of hostilities. Hence, they are more willing to commit resources and gather regional support for the US plan. Additionally, their extensive experience in numerous mediations between the group and Israel was demonstrated with the war's only truce in November, which also included an exchange of captives. From an American standpoint, irrespective of the mediation's outcome, including regional stakeholders in Biden's plan provides these countries -and their concerned neighbors- the opportunity. That is, to work towards securing their interests that the unconditional US support to Israel has upended.

Special attention is reserved to the regional and international ramifications of Biden's policy. Regionally, despite the successful containment of the war so far, following its "calibrated" retaliation against Israel, Iran had a vital opportunity to counter the US and Israel's longstanding depiction of it as a dangerously irrational actor. Not only did it gain deterrence, but that may help it to advance its détente with important countries in the region, thus complicating future American efforts to contain its cross-border activities. Additionally, the rising anti-Americanism across the Middle East may have a lasting impact on resistance against US influence and initiatives, as indicated by the putting on hold of the US-led Saudi-Israeli normalization process.¹² Internationally, the contradiction of simultaneous support to the defending Ukrainians and the attacking Israelis has raised heavy accusations of double standards. Critics have contrasted Biden's use of the term "genocide" in regards to Russia's actions in Ukraine with the US persistent rejection of the many well-documented Israeli violations, including the mass starvation that has led to widespread famine in Gaza.¹³ Such an emerging discrepancy threatens to fundamentally undermine the essence of the "rules-based international order" the US claims to champion. The administration's dismissal of the ICJ's view that there is a plausible threat to the Palestinians' right not to be subjected to genocide seems to substantiate that threat. Moreover, it gives US adversaries such as Russia and China the opportunity to argue that the rules-based order is just a façade that serves American imperialism, thus promoting their own view of an emerging multipolar international system. For many less powerful countries whose existence rests on upholding international norms, what happens in Palestine may constitute a watershed moment conducive to broader geopolitical realignments.

To conclude, Biden's "bear hug" of Israel was mainly informed by domestic considerations at a critical juncture for his re-election. However, considering the diminishing US leverage over Israeli actions and the mounting pressure the president faces, it seems that the "bear-hug" has been reversed. The administration's belated and insufficient efforts in introducing humanitarian initiatives to counteract the humanitarian crisis in Gaza argue for Biden's policy's reactive and constrained character. In terms of effectively preventing a regional war, the US achievement is commendable. Nevertheless, if the administration's focus remains on damage control while the surrounding circumstances are prolonged, it is debatable whether the US will maintain its effectiveness in the long term. Biden's introduction of the ceasefire plan illustrates the struggle to balance support for Israel with broader regional stability. However, his reliance on regional mediators points to a sharp decrease in US credibility and may have a lasting effect on its influence. In the International realm, even when the war comes to an end, the perceived double standards in Biden's foreign policy may also weaken the US diplomatic capacity to rally international consensus in future crises. Ultimately, it remains to be seen how the US foreign policy on Gaza will impact the "rules-based international order" and to what extent it may produce or accelerate shifts in an increasingly multipolar world.

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