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Have the US and Israel agreed on Gaza's future?

Disagreements persist, but analysts say the US has shown no readiness to draw any red lines for Israel.

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, greets US President Joe Biden upon his arrival at Tel Aviv's airport on October 18, 2023 [Brendan Smialowski/AFP]

By **Lorraine Mallinder**
21 Nov 2023

Over the past couple of weeks, the United States has been setting out its vision for an endgame to Israel's war on Gaza. If President Joe Biden is to be believed, his administration is aiming for the hitherto impossible: a bid to "end the war forever".

Writing in The Washington Post on Saturday, Biden spoke of reuniting the occupied West Bank and Gaza under the Palestinian Authority (PA) while working towards a two-state solution. He set out basic principles for achieving peace, including "no forcible displacement" of Palestinians, "no reoccupation, no siege or blockade, and no reduction in territory", insisting

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the “work must start now”.

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All this seemed quite promising on paper, but the words coming from Tel Aviv were rather different. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had already aired plans for “an overriding and overreaching Israeli military envelope” in post-war Gaza, rejecting the idea of the PA taking over the enclave. With $14.3bn in US aid fast-tracking its way to Israel’s military, it seemed the war was not over just yet.

The US and Israel are no strangers to mixed messaging. Here’s a breakdown of how things work in this bilateral relationship and what it means for Gaza:

Displaced Palestinian Samira al-Khoar, right, speaks at Nasser Medical Complex, where she took shelter after fleeing home and another hospital following Israeli attacks, in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip on November 11, 2023 [Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters]

What has the US said?

Three days after Hamas fighters burst through the Gaza border fence on October 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking more than 240 captives, Biden signalled his staunch support for Israel.

He alluded to the “laws of war” – a reference that would come back to haunt the US administration as Israel’s air and ground counterattack on the strip deepened – killing more than 13,000 people at the time of writing.

“The initial response of the US was unsurprising, given the horrific nature and scale of the Hamas attack,” said Lara Friedman, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace. “What came next, though, was almost like wilful ignorance.”

Shortly after, Biden appeared to go off message. He said he had seen photos of babies beheaded by Hamas, claims later walked back by a White House spokesperson. As the bombs rained down on Gaza, he questioned the Palestinian death toll – figures that UN agencies, based on past evaluations, saw no reason to disbelieve.

Palestinians look at destruction after Israeli attacks on Rafah, Gaza Strip, November 15, 2023 [Hatem Ali/AP Photo]

A month into the war, there was a shift in tone. By that point, more than 25,000 tonnes of explosives had been dropped on Gaza, far exceeding the destructive power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and pressure was mounting from progressives in the divided Democrats and international actors to rein in Israel.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who said he had seen his “own children” in the images of dead Palestinian kids, appeared to push back on Netanyahu’s assertion that Israel would be responsible for security in the enclave for an “indefinite period” after the war. In a speech on the sidelines of a Group of Seven summit in Tokyo, he said Palestinian voices would be “at the centre” of post-crisis governance in Gaza.

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There would, however, be a “transition” and “mechanisms” for security, said Blinken. Would a multinational Arab force step in to control Gaza during a transitional period, paving the way for the PA? Or would that sizeable role be fulfilled by Israel for what could well turn out to be an “indefinite period”? To this day, the question remains moot.

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What about Israel?

After Blinken’s speech, Netanyahu appeared to partly acquiesce to the US game plan, saying his country did not intend to “occupy” the strip after the end of the war. Many pointed out that Israel had never stopped occupying the territory after its withdrawal in 2005, exercising effective control through an ongoing land, air and sea blockade.

But, in an interview with CNN, the Israeli prime minister made it clear he would not be handing over control to the PA. “There has to be a reconstructed civilian authority,” he said of the PA. “There has to be something else.” At a news conference, he took issue with the PA’s school syllabus, which he claimed fuelled hatred of Israel, and its payments to families of imprisoned Palestinians.

As Israel’s forced displacement and repeated attacks on civilian infrastructure – including hospitals – have unfolded in real time on social media, a bigger question is being asked. Does Israel actually want any Palestinians left in the strip at all?

“At this point, that’s very clearly coming across from senior public Israeli figures who’ve been using genocidal and ethnic cleansing language from day one,” Friedman said.

The bar for proving genocidal intent is notoriously high, but Israeli politicians and officials have already provided an extensive catalogue of incendiary rhetoric for investigators.

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Last month, Netanyahu himself invoked the "Amalek", a nation in Judaic scripture that the Israelites were instructed to exterminate in an act of revenge.

Hitting new extremes, Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu was suspended this month for saying that dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza might actually be an option.

So, are the US and Israel on the same page?

"Even before this conflict began, the relationship was increasingly fraught because Israel had the most right-wing extremist government in its history," said Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who served as an analyst and negotiator at the US Department of State between 1978 and 2003.

Earlier this year, Netanyahu had defied Biden's instructions to slow down his controversial emasculation of Israel's judiciary, widely criticised not only as an attempt to shield himself from corruption charges, but also as a tactic for speeding up annexation of the West Bank.

However, the pair go back a long way, their relationship waxing and waning through the crises of the past four decades. Miller believes the "operating system" of the US-Israeli relationship is still intact, partly owing to Biden's deep relationship with Israel, engrained in his political DNA. As he points out, Biden is a self-described Zionist.

Biden holds a bilateral meeting with Netanyahu on the sidelines of the 78th UN General Assembly in New York, US, September 20, 2023 [Kevin Lamarque/Reuters]

Still, on the domestic front, the US president faces pressures on the left and the right of the political spectrum, with Democrats like New York's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez calling on him to take action to stop the war. The Republicans, meanwhile, have emerged as what Miller dubs the "Israel-can-do-no-wrong party". With next year's election on the horizon, Biden is feeling the squeeze.

On the war, Miller believes Israel and the US are "in a pretty serious bind on all of the critical issues", including the prevention of Palestinian deaths, redeeming the hostages (10 of whom are American citizens), addressing the humanitarian crisis "that will not be resolved through short pauses", and, ultimately, constructing a credible political process.

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But they won't be falling out any time soon.

“At what point would the administration impose serious costs and consequences on Israel and make it unmistakably clear that unless it changes its tactics and strategies, it’s going to have an extremely deleterious impact on the US-Israeli relationship?” Miller said.

“I’m not sure it would come to that point.”

Is history just repeating itself?

In his op-ed last weekend, Biden stated he would be resuscitating the moribund two-state solution. While reiterating his staunch support for Israel, he hinted at a more even-handed approach, mentioning visa sanctions for hardliner settlers attacking and displacing Palestinians in the West Bank.

Noura Erakat, associate professor at Rutgers University and author of Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine, is sceptical. “The US presents itself as an honest broker,” she said. “And yet what we’ve seen again and again, especially since 1967, is the US talking out of both sides of its mouth.

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“Out of one side of its mouth, it insists that it wants to see a two-state solution, but on the other side it provides Israel with the unequivocal military, diplomatic and financial support to expand its settler colonial ambitions and to entrench its projects.”

As Israel’s biggest military backer, there are few lengths to which the US will not go to defend its ally. The $14.3bn in military aid that Congress rushed through to replenish Israel’s missile defence systems and military equipment after October 7 top up the $3.8bn in annual military assistance the US provides under a 10-year plan that began in 2016.

It is this iron-clad alliance that has enabled what Erakat calls “a framework of derivative sovereignty whereby Palestinians have some jurisdiction over themselves and some land but not meaningful sovereignty”.

Since at least 1983, the US has systematically protected Israel, vetoing successive United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning its expansion of settlements, which have left Palestinians crowded into isolated fragments of territory reminiscent of the Bantustans of apartheid-era South Africa.

The trend exploded under Netanyahu, whose brazen expansionism was boosted by Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, the former US president megaphoning to the world that this city of shared Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious sites was now the

Israeli capital.

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Friedman argues that Netanyahu, re-elected for a record fifth time in November 2022, has effectively been "trained" by successive US administrations to run through red lines.

"He believes, so far correctly, that he enjoys total impunity," she said.

What does this mean for Gaza?

At the beginning of the war, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant predicted: "Gaza won't return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything."

Nearly seven weeks in, UN agencies report that nearly half the enclave's homes have been damaged or destroyed, 390,000 jobs have been lost, and 1.5 million people have been internally displaced, squeezed into the southern half of the strip.

With much of the north in ruins and Israel almost certain to prolong a blockade that has seen imports of construction materials heavily restricted, Friedman wonders whether displacement in the south will become the new status quo.

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"We'll have a strip in the strip, which will just be a giant Palestinian refugee camp under security control of Israel, with the international community providing food and water. But there will be no chance of anyone developing any kind of life," she said.

"I don't see a quick or easy end to this," Miller said. "And even if the Israelis come to the conclusion that they've done everything they possibly can to weaken and undermine Hamas, they're still not going to leave Gaza unless there is someone or something that it can be left to.

"Right now, the headlines look bad, and the trend lines look even worse."

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