

Biden Pressure on Israel Raises Chances of Full-Scale War

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.02.2024

Instead of pressuring Israel to stand down, President Biden should show determination toward his enemies. Only firmness will prevent escalation.

Clarifying US relations with Israel

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 15.02.2024

The United States explained the purpose of Kamala Harris' trip this week to Dubai. Among the points were that the US will have conversations with Israel to "shape the next phase of the war" in Gaza. While this is clearly further pressure on Israel to avoid greater civilian casualties - a reasonable but unnecessary request since Israel has already gone to impossible lengths to protect Palestinian civilians — it also suggests how the US expects to leverage the course of this war to affect post-war outcome.

There has been confusion regarding the nature of American support for Israel. It was the consensus in Israel in the first weeks that the United States under the Biden team had two common goals: remove Hamas and help Israel focus on the south and avoid a two-front war immediately. True enough. But Israelis of all stripes projected their hopes further and welcomed the impression that the US now "gets it" the same way as has been seared into Israel's soul through the horror of October 7. Not only that Washington "switched its diskette" on Hamas, but on Palestinians, Hizballah and Iran. As such, American actions — including moving carrier battle groups and reinforcing US bases region-wide — were assumed first to be support on helping Israel survive initial attack and second to adopt a muscular, if not even threatening policy on Iran. In essence, Israelis believed that Israel and the US were traveling along the same line, or at least two closely tracking parallel lines.

The problem is they are not.

The United States and Israel travel on intersecting and not parallel lines. The distinction is important. Parallel lines never touch, but they always run together. Intersecting lines on the other hand, converge at one point but eternally diverge afterwards. The point of convergence between the United States and Israel has now yielded to the inevitable divergence, and the strategic implications could not be graver. Moreover, the vast chasm emerging is both on the issue of Palestinians and the larger threat of Iran.

The divergence is most evident through the increasing tone of statements coming from Washington about how to “shape” this war. There is a tension — strategic and moral — between a war narrowly focused on defeating Hamas and extending the Palestinian Authority, and a broader strategic war to change Israeli security on every border let alone advance a regional defeat of Iran and its proxies, which remain the ultimate source of the problem.

Israel’s population has undergone a traumatic paradigm shift. It fights this war informed by a broader and grounded understanding of the region and its dynamics that unfortunately indicts policy on the region that both Jerusalem and Washington had indulged for the last thirty years. Washington, however, proceeds as if nothing has changed. It remains in paradigmatic stasis. It still labors under the delusion that the exit to all this is a combination of some sort of Oslo 2.0 and JCPOA 2.0 (Iran deal). Hence its engagement with Abu Mazen and its cultivated restraint and lack of meaningful responses to nearly 80 attacks on US bases across the region and regional attacks by Iran’s proxies from Yemen to Iraq.

Because the US now focuses on “the day after” plans for Gaza, and because Secretary Blinken reportedly demanded that Israel not expand the geographic parameters of the war, it has essentially made support for Israel conditional — specifically as long as the goal of the war remains laser-focused on the removal of Hamas to facilitate restoring Palestinian Authority (PA) control over Gaza.

Stripped of all the noise, essentially this is less support for Israel than support for the Palestinian Authority via Israel, while ignoring Hizballah and Iran. The US is using this war — and all Israel’s sacrifice — to revive Oslo by making Palestine safe for Abu Mazen.

For the US, this is a war to save a paradigm in Washington. For Israel, it is a war

for survival against a vast Iranian threat and Palestinian irridentism. As long as the United States fails to appreciate the war in this context, then it bodes ill about the future of Israeli American relations.

Or does it?

In my many years as a senior US official dealing with Israeli officials, it always struck me that they regard State Department corridor messages as the definitive word on US policy for Israel. Yet, Americans strongly support Israel. Congressional support is strong and growing. No President can afford to abandon Israel as long as the American people view it as a close ally fighting darkness. The belief Israel is acting fiercely to defend its independence and freedom — alone if necessary - taps into classic American imagination in popular culture as the epic hero. The irony missed often by Israelis is that the more they act in deference to the State Department, the more they damage their brand in the American public's psyche, and the more they surrender popular support now and affinity in the long run.

The President does have a problem with progressives' pressure to confront Israel. As long as Israel defers to American demands, it yields the field to progressives to dominate cost-free. If however, this president is forced to choose, the Democratic leadership understands that the party will lose swing districts in the 2024 Congressional elections as well as possibly the White House. Progressives cannot deliver the floating center of American politics. They have nowhere else to go; centrist liberals do.

As such, Israeli deference is self-defeating. Israel suffers self-deterrence.

The stakes could not be higher. Israel must decisively win this war, secure its citizenry country-wide, strategically devastate Iran's regional reputation, and establish Israel as a powerful regional actor. The viability of the state depends on it.

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Honoring Henry Kissinger at 100

written by David M. Weinberg | 15.02.2024

His record regarding Jews and Israel remains controversial, but I think that on balance Kissinger deserves respect.

Israel should decline the offer of an American defense treaty

written by Dr. Yitzhak Klein | 15.02.2024

A defense treaty with the US will lead to the infringement of Israeli sovereignty and the disappearance of our tradition of defending ourselves

Israel and the US must focus on core mutual interests

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.02.2024

Former IDF Gen. Amos Yadlin has argued that Israeli must align with U.S. policies. He's wrong.

Beware another US sellout to Tehran

written by David M. Weinberg | 15.02.2024

Believe it or not, the Biden administration apparently is once again offering the mullahs of Tehran a sweetheart deal: the release of \$10 billion or more in frozen Iranian assets and clemency for Iran's near-breakout nuclear advances of recent years, in exchange for Iranian release of American hostages and warmed-over pious Iranian pledges to freeze the Shiite atomic bomb program.

This, even though Washington would be freezing the Iranian nuclear program with 16 cascades spinning to enrich uranium to 60% purity, which is just shy of weapons-grade. In February, Iran was caught with some uranium enriched to 84% purity and was called-out for manufacturing uranium metal, a material used in nuclear weapon cores.

This month, intelligence photos showed Iran again digging tunnels at its Natanz nuclear site - supposedly deep enough to withstand an American or Israeli military strike. This tells us that Iran has what to hide, a clear sign that it has not given up on its quest for a nuclear bomb.

Nevertheless, US President Joe Biden may grant Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi an end to all past and current International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigations into Iran's nuclear violations alongside the suck-up deal above.

Biden also seems happy to ignore Iran's other regional muckraking and hegemonic advances, including its harassment of internationally flagged merchant ships in the Straits of Hormuz, and its placement of "floating terror bases" (civilian ships converted into mini-aircraft and commando carriers) in the strategic waterway. The situation there is so bad that in protest the UAE last month pulled-out of a US naval alliance group meant to protect shipping in the Arabian Gulf.

John Hannah and Richard Goldberg of the Washington-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies warned this week in a special alert publication that the above contours would be "a bad, even a desperate, deal made from a position of American weakness."

“It looks like the administration is reviving an idea out of the old Obama playbook because it’s not willing to do what’s necessary to stop Iran’s program by restoring deterrence through coercive diplomacy. Biden is scared to death that if Iran keeps advancing its nuclear program, either the United States or Israel will be forced to make good on their promise to stop Iran militarily.”

“From the administration’s perspective, paying Iran off is the easiest way to hold at bay the worst-case outcomes of a nuclear Iran, on the one hand, or another major military conflict, on the other. And suspending sanctions to get there is a lot easier and less risky in their minds than doing the hard work and committing the resources needed to establish a credible US military option to destroy the Iranian program.”

“But the price for America will be stabilizing and strengthening a terror-supporting Iranian regime now under pressure not only from sanctions but from profound domestic discontent and turmoil among its own population,” they added.

Equally distressing, they warned, is that “Biden risks undermining American support for the war in Ukraine by asking Congress to approve billions of taxpayer dollars to support Kyiv while offering Iran billions of dollars to help resupply Moscow.” (It has been well documented that Iran is supplying Russia with military attack drones and other critical technologies with which to clobber Ukraine.)

Given that Washington appears unwilling, even now, to place hard limits on the crucial elements of Iran’s illicit nuclear weapons program (fissile material production, weaponization, and means of delivery/missile development), and is unwilling to apply maximum economic pressure (as President Trump did) or to present a credible military threat to Iran – it is no surprise that Israel is ramping-up its preparations for confrontation.

At the Herzliya Conference last week, IDF Chief-of-Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi said plainly, in a rare speech focused directly on Iran, that Israel may “take action” against Iran’s nuclear facilities because of “possible negative developments on the horizon. We have the ability to hit Iran, and we are not indifferent to what Iran is trying to build around us.” National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi added that “there is no place that can’t be reached” (referring to the new Natanz tunnels).

THIS IS WHERE broader regional diplomacy comes into the picture and

complicates Israel's calculations.

Washington expects Israeli acquiescence in the emerging US surrender to Iran in exchange for a series of other things important to Israel. These include US backing for Israel against escalated Palestinian assaults expected this fall in UN forums, toning down US criticism regarding settlement and security matters (at a time when the IDF is going to have to intensify its anti-terrorist operations in Judea and Samaria), an easing of US pressures on Israel in connection with domestic matters (like judicial reform), a warm Washington visit for Prime Minister Netanyahu (which is not just a political concession but rather is critical to Israel's overall deterrent posture), and most of all, significant American moves towards reconciliation with Saudi Arabia (which is critical to driving a breakthrough in Israeli-Saudi ties).

It is worth dwelling on the latter point because renewed close cooperation between Washington and Riyadh is central to the stability of the region and is the cornerstone of what should and can be Saudi entry to the Abraham Accords. In other words, the road to Israel-Saudi normalization runs through Washington.

It will take serious intent and deft maneuvering from America to get there, and there is good reason to doubt that Biden is prepared or capable of paying the mostly justified Saudi price for renewed close Saudi-US partnership. (This may include a defense treaty, high-quality arms supply, a comprehensive economic agreement, and most controversially, US agreement to a Saudi civilian nuclear program. Israel may have a problem with parts of this package too.)

The further problem is that even an expensive package of US "concessions" to Saudi Arabia will not truly compensate for US capitulation to Iran (something we know from experience will only embolden the hegemonic ambitions of the mullahs). And this capitulation will make it more difficult for the Saudis to publicly embrace Israel (although the quiet security coordination between the two countries assuredly will continue to grow).

In the end, Israel must prioritize its most naked, existential security interests - which clearly are stopping Iran's nuclear bomb effort and scuttling Iran's attempts to encircle Israel with well-armed proxy armies. Accepting another ruinous US nuclear deal with Iran is not in accordance with these interests.

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