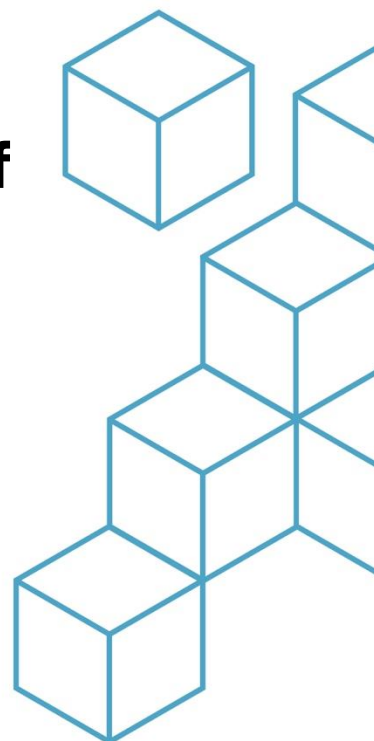


ANALYSES

The (Im)Balancing Act: The Gaza War and the Reinvention of American Interests



* **Ramzy Baroud**

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Successive US public opinion polls demonstrated the continued rise of pro-Palestinian sentiments among Democrats and growing animosity towards Israel. [Reuters]

On 25 March 2024, the unthinkable happened, when the United States abstained from a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

UNSC Resolution 2728 (2024) demanded “an immediate ceasefire for the remainder of Ramadan, respected by all parties and leading to a lasting sustainable ceasefire”.

The right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu fumed. “This withdrawal (the US abstention) hurts both the war effort and the effort to release the hostages, because it gives (the Palestinian Resistance movement) Hamas hope that international pressure will allow them to accept a cease-fire without the release of our hostages,” Netanyahu’s office said. His far-right extremist ministers were even angrier.

Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir went as far as saying that “The decision of the UN Security Council proves what has been known since time immemorial: This is an anti-Semitic institution, with an anti-Semitic Secretary General, who encourages Hamas towards total victory.” [\(1\)](#)

Though such accusations are often the go-to language used by Israeli officials and media to explain the rejection by the international community of Israel's military occupation and apartheid in Palestine, this time around things are different. By abstaining from a vote that is considered ‘anti-Semitic’ from

the viewpoint of an important segment of Israel's political elites, the United States then becomes tolerant of this supposedly rooted international 'anti-Semitism'.

While Netanyahu's office did not go that far, the prime minister, in response to the US position, immediately cancelled an official visit by an Israeli delegation to Washington. The delegation was meant to be dispatched with the declared objectives of discussing US concerns related to Netanyahu's plans to invade the southern city of Rafah, where over 1.7 million Palestinians have sought refuge.

But how did we get here? And why would the country that has practically financed, defended and, in some instances, directly participated in the plausible Israeli genocide in Gaza, shift its position on the 171st day of war?

The Other Abstention

To answer these questions, we must go back a few years, particularly to 23 December 2016, when President Barack Obama had only three weeks left of his mandate in the White House.

Despite his occasional statements regarding Palestinians' "right to be a free people in their land", [\(2\)](#) Obama proved to be the most generous US president in history in terms of directly funding the Israeli military.

Yet, another 'unthinkable' happened back then. On the 23rd of December, Washington had also abstained from UNSC resolution 2334 (2016), which reaffirmed that "Israel's settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law." [\(3\)](#)

The Israeli response to Obama's supposed intransigence was extreme, described by Netanyahu as a "shameful ambush". [\(4\)](#)

Despite the \$3.8 billion of direct military aid to Israel, which includes \$500 million allocated to Israel's missile defence systems, Israel and its supporters, per the words of Matt Margolis and Mark Noonan, considered Obama "The Worst President in History". [\(5\)](#)

That single vote, or, rather, lack of veto, has influenced the relationship between American political classes and Israel until this day. Donald Trump's first Ambassador at the United Nations, Nikki Hailey, went as far as promising Tel Aviv that, under her watch, there would be no repeat of the perceived betrayal of Obama and the Democrats. The US doesn't "have a greater friend than Israel", she declared in March 2017, in front of a pro-Israel campaign at the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Then, she made a vow to Israel's supporters: "There's a new sheriff in town. I wear heels. It's not for a fashion statement. It's because if I see something wrong, we're going to kick 'em every single time."

In fact, the entire Republican political establishment seemed to use the Democrats' 'betrayal' of Israel as a cornerstone of a new political contract with Tel Aviv, according to which Israel would receive unconditional support from Washington, even if the support contradicts its decades-long foreign policy positions.

Indeed, Republicans remained true to their word. Starting on 14 May 2018, the United States began a systematic reversal of its traditional policy positions regarding Palestine and Israel – in fact, the entire Middle East. This change began taking shape when the United States moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to occupied East Jerusalem, not only defying international law but its own established political traditions. [\(6\)](#)

That, however, was only the beginning, for it was followed by a series of American actions, which were meant to fundamentally alter the relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv, on the one hand, and Washington and the Palestinians, on the other.

Israel has hoped that these moves, culminating in unconditional normalisation between Israel and some Arab countries, would be followed by the full normalisation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. However, only five countries followed the American move to Jerusalem. Even worse, Israel's status as an apartheid regime became even more accentuated through international human rights organisations. [\(7\)](#)

Back in the United States, however, things continued to move according to the very trajectory created by Netanyahu and his allies in Washington, lead amongst them Trump's son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner. The latter had such little regard for Palestinians that he repeatedly insulted them on multiple occasions, going as far as saying in an interview with Vanity Fair in January 2020, that Palestinians have "never done anything right in their sad, pathetic lives." [\(8\)](#)

Biden: Staying the Course

When Joe Biden claimed his position at the helm of US politics, it seemed that he had fully prepared himself for the task ahead, as far as his relationship with Israel and the Palestinians is concerned.

The new American president did not dare reverse any of the decisions enacted by his predecessors, aside from renewing Washington's funding of the Palestinian Authority, [\(9\)](#) but only based on the logic that the "US government assistance seeks to build professional and accountable security and criminal justice institutions that maintain security and stability in the West Bank." This "stability" is for the Israeli occupation, of course, as the Palestinian Authority (PA) has played a central role in maintaining Israel's "security" in the occupied West Bank, thanks to the decades-long 'security coordination' between PA police and the Israeli army. In fact, the American embassy in Jerusalem has only grown,

in terms of size and staff, and a US consulate in East Jerusalem, exclusively serving Palestinian needs, is yet to be re-opened.

Not only did the United States fail to condition any further normalisation between Arabs and Israel on a comprehensive peace plan that meets the minimum expectations of the Palestinians, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken went as far as dedicating much of his time and energy to push for normalisation, at any cost, between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Biden's pro-Israel position is often explained against the backdrop of his oft-repeated line that one does not have to be "a Jew to be a Zionist", and that he is the very manifestation of this maxim, for, in his own words, "I'm a Zionist." But there is more to the story. (10)

Biden was the American vice president during the two terms of the Obama administration, between 2009 and 2017. He is fully aware of the intricacies of US foreign policy regarding Israel and the burgeoning power of the Israeli lobby in Washington. This power cannot be confined to the likes of AIPAC, but extends far beyond to reach one of the most powerful constituencies within the Republican Party, and thus within American society as a whole: the pro-Israel evangelical groups.

Biden has also watched as his own president, Obama, despite his popularity, was turned into a pariah when Netanyahu was invited to deliver a speech to the two chambers of Congress on 3 March 2015. (11)

That was a truly defining moment, where the US president was relegated to the Oval Office in the White House while a leader of a foreign country was openly attacking his policies regarding Iran's nuclear program, among other issues.

At the time, Biden was one of the 58 congressmen who did not attend Netanyahu's triumphant speech. (12) However, the vice president did not take the risk of defying Israel and its powerful lobbies in the United States by declaring his rejection of Netanyahu's antics. He simply "hurriedly arranged (a) trip to South America", according to The Guardian. (13)

Since then, Israel's influence in America's halls of power has grown exponentially, particularly due to the continued rise of evangelical influence in the United States, or more accurately, in Washington itself.

Democratic Revolution

If the task of re-orienting US foreign policy to meet Israeli expectations only, at the expense of US interests, was fairly straightforward for Republicans - due to the strong support of Israel among the Party's rank and file, as well as the top political institutions - it was not as easy for the Democrats.

Successive US public opinion polls demonstrated the continued rise of pro-Palestinian sentiments among Democrats and growing animosity towards Israel. Three different polls demonstrate this claim.

In March 2023, months before the start of the war, a poll conducted by Gallup revealed that "after a decade in which Democrats have shown increasing affinity toward the Palestinians, their sympathies in the Middle East now lie more with the Palestinians than the Israelis, 49% versus 38%." [\(14\)](#)

In November 2023, a Quinnipiac University poll revealed that "69% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning younger than 35 disapprove of how Biden is responding to the war." [\(15\)](#)

Finally, in February 2024, a poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research revealed that 62% of Democrats thought that "Israel's military response has gone too far." [\(16\)](#)

These are only a few examples. They do, however, reflect the changing dynamics in American society as part of a larger shift in the political discourse - more apparent among Democrats, and more accentuated among younger voters.

This clear and growing shift ultimately paid dividends. The seismic change within grassroots Democratic constituencies eventually reverberated to reach the very top, leading to the election of an unprecedented number of progressive, pro-Palestine Congress members to the House of Representatives.

The new reality was crystallised in a memorable scene on 18 May 2021, at Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, when Palestinian-American Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib ambushed President Biden on his way to a visit to Ford's Rouge Electric Vehicle Center, demanding protection for Palestinians amid Israel's aggression on Gaza. That exchange served as a reminder that the budding pro-Palestinian constituency could, if nurtured, grow to have direct influence on American foreign policy. [\(17\)](#)

The litmus test, however, was the Gaza war itself, which quickly descended from the typical Israeli onslaught to an outright plausible genocide and, subsequently, a famine.

Unequalled Dilemma

The war put all the parties involved in shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly Israel and Palestine, to a historic test: the pro-Israel lobby, now deeply embedded in US Congress, government and media; the evangelicals and their massive sway on the Republicans and their political institutions; the US administration itself, with its own self-centred calculations and regional and global interests; and, finally, the growing pro-Palestinian constituency, which was able to assert itself through massive protests and rallies across the country.

It was very clear, from the start, that the pro-Israel influence in Washington was still very powerful. Indeed, just five days after Tufan Al-Aqsa, Blinken took his seat within Israel's war council, acting as if he was another Israeli minister, equally hell-bent on destroying Hamas and the Palestinian Resistance. [\(18\)](#)

For a while, there seemed to be total unity between the Democratic and Republican establishments in their strong backing for Israel. If any diversion has taken place, it was largely in how both sides tried to outdo each other in the degree of solidarity with Israel and their dislike - if not outright hatred - for Palestinians. Initially, Biden won Israel and its backers to his side, simply because he had access to the US arsenal, funds and executive orders.

According to The Washington Post, in the period between October 2023 and March 2024, the US has provided Israel with 100 "separate foreign military sales to Israel ... amounting to thousands of precision-guided munitions, small-diameter bombs, bunker busters, small arms and other lethal aid". [\(19\)](#)

In a separate report, The Washington Post said that the Biden Administration knew that "Israel was regularly bombing buildings without solid intelligence that they were legitimate military targets." [\(20\)](#)

However, there was a caveat.

As it became clear to the Biden Administration that Israel would not be able to defeat Hamas in Gaza, and that a 'military solution' to the war, especially one that is not followed with a clear political plan, would ultimately backfire, Washington gradually, carefully, but clearly began defying Tel Aviv on some issues.

In a recent visit to Tel Aviv, Blinken had reportedly told the Israelis that it is impossible to completely defeat Hamas in Gaza, another American admission that Netanyahu's lofty goals of destroying the Palestinian group and managing Gaza security are simply unachievable. [\(21\)](#)

Instead, the Biden administration wanted to create a plan that would allow Israel to "advance politically", while saving it from the burden of fighting a prolonged, costly war which will ultimately fail to achieve any military or strategic victory.

But even that was too much for Biden to ask, creating an unequalled dilemma, rarely faced by a US administration in its dealing with the Middle East since the creation of Israel.

The (Im)balancing Act

Historically, US foreign policy in the Middle East was shaped through a balancing act, involving US interests, pro-Israeli agendas in Washington and, by extension, Israel and its much-guarded security.

Even though the power of the Israeli lobby has grown by leaps and bounds over the years, the balance remained mostly unchanged. If a change occurred, it was rarely regarding the substance of the relationship or the balancing act, but only in terms of priorities. At times – in fact, quite often – Israel’s interests trumped those of Washington’s, but only because those interests seemed to be aligned with the interests of the pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC, and others.

The 7 October war, however, has done more than shift the balance in favour of one group or another; it changed the dynamics altogether. US interests in the Middle East – for example, political stability within a pro-American paradigm – ceased to matter. In the words of 20 administration officials and outside advisers who spoke to The Washington Post in an article published on 18 March 2024, Washington found itself embroiled in a war that it did not want. [\(22\)](#)

Even more important is the early sign of a schism between the pro-Israel camp in Washington DC. On 14 March 2024, Senator Chuck Schumer, a major bulwark of Israel’s support in Washington, did the unexpected when he called for a replacement for Netanyahu through a “new election” in Israel. [\(23\)](#)

Schumer is the highest-ranking Jewish official in the United States, and the man who, along with former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, represented the leadership of Democratic ‘resistance’ to the Trump Administration. His credibility does not only stem from his position as majority leader of the US Senate but also as an important link between the administration and the most powerful pro-Israel lobby groups in Washington DC.

His comments, praised by Biden a day later, represented a watershed moment not only in the history of the US administration with Israel, but also in the relationship between the pro-Israel Jewish political constituency and Tel Aviv as well. The consequences of this event shall prove significant in the coming months and years. [\(24\)](#)

‘Israel Alone’?

In what will become an iconic cover for The Economist on 23 March 2024, a tattered Israeli flag fastened to a pole made of a frail stick, and planted in an arid, dusty ground, was headlined ‘Israel Alone’. [\(25\)](#) The cover was meant to be an illustration of Israel’s isolation within the international community that has grown tired, if not angry, at the genocide in Gaza. However, it is equally relevant to Israel’s growing isolation in the United States as well.

On 27 February 2024, an American public opinion poll showed that around two thirds (67 percent) of US citizens want an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. [\(26\)](#)

Indeed, millions of Americans have made their voices heard regarding this matter, thousands of them going as far as blocking the presidential convoy on its way to Capitol Hill on 8 March 2024 where Biden was scheduled to deliver his State of the Union address.

It was against all of these backdrops that Washington decided to abstain from voting on UNSC Resolution 2728 (2024) on 25 March. The abstention was not an act of charity for Palestinians as, indeed, the plausible genocide in Gaza would have not been possible without Washington's generosity and political support. Instead, it was a declaration that the United States could no longer serve its political interests while maintaining its full support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The Biden administration's decision should not be expected to turn into a permanent policy shift, as Israel's power in Washington remains too strong to overlook or undermine. However, it does speak of growing interest among Democrats to reclaim the balancing act of old, where America's own interests mattered, even if just a little.

***Ramzy Baroud**, is a journalist and the editor of *The Palestine Chronicle* and non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA). He also is the author of six books. His latest book, co-edited with Ilan Pappé, is "Our Vision for Liberation: Engaged Palestinian Leaders and Intellectuals Speak out".

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