

Opinion **Israel-Hamas war**

America is discovering the limits of its leverage on Israel

The politically inconvenient fact is that, in the face of the savagery of Hamas, the US really doesn't have compelling alternatives to offer

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Benjamin Netanyahu greets Joe Biden in Tel Aviv in October. Fighting with an Israeli prime minister can be awkward, distracting and potentially politically costly © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

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Anyone who expected much daylight, let alone serious tension, between the Biden administration and Israel as the current war in the Middle East unfolded would have been well advised to lie down and wait for the feeling to pass. Indeed, it should have come as no surprise that Joe Biden would move in lockstep with Israel in the wake of the brutal attacks by Hamas on October 7.

The administration's approach to the crisis was set in the president's emotionally powerful address three days later in which, for all practical purposes, he made it clear that he was prepared to give Israel the time, space and support to strike back at Hamas as it saw fit.

But should any serious tensions arise as the administration's approach evolves, they would represent a bug rather than a feature of a tight US-Israeli relationship. Biden's model on Israel isn't his former boss, Barack Obama, but former president Bill Clinton. Like Clinton, who wrote in his memoirs that he loved Yitzhak Rabin like no other man, Biden's support for Israel is deeply imprinted on his political DNA. And while there's no love lost for his "friend" Benjamin Netanyahu, his default position is

not to confront the Israeli prime minister but to accommodate where he can.

In response to Netanyahu's government seeking to undermine Israel's democracy and pursue policies on the West Bank that were annexationist in all but name, Biden was loath to impose costs or consequences. The president publicly and privately cautioned the prime minister on both his judicial reforms and the West Bank. But his response might best be characterised as passive aggressive, denying Netanyahu his much desired meeting at the White House.

The administration also clearly understood that while it sought to reprioritise the Middle East in favour of Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the region still had to be managed. And that required a functional relationship with the Netanyahu government to handle the challenge of the Iranian nuclear programme and exploit the potential opportunity of brokering an Israeli-Saudi deal on normalisation.

Fighting with an Israeli prime minister can be awkward, distracting and potentially politically costly. So to ensure there was no doubt where Biden stood, the administration has wielded its veto in the UN Security Council and pushed a \$14bn military assistance package to Congress. The deployment of two carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean may have been designed to deter Iran and Hizbollah, but it was also intended to buoy Israel's confidence in Washington.

There's no doubt, however, that Biden's stance has shifted as the Gaza crisis has unfolded. And, to the administration's credit, it has worked to press the Israelis along several fronts: first, pushing them to give more time and space for Qatari-mediated efforts to free hostages; second, pressing for more humanitarian assistance through Rafah; third, reportedly dissuading Israel from carrying out a pre-emptive strike against Hizbollah; fourth, pressing Israel to adhere to international humanitarian law and the laws of war; and finally, asking tough questions about the objectives of a ground campaign and the day after.

Biden has also begun to talk recently of support for a two-state solution and not returning to the status quo of October 6 — neither of which will have gone down well inside the Netanyahu government. But I am not sure any of this falls into the category of real pressure.

Israel has certainly sought to address some of Washington's concerns. But its view of the US was perhaps best summed up by the defence minister Yoav Gallant who said, while standing next to Netanyahu, that the Israelis would listen to their friends but do what is right for them.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken is now in the region, purportedly with the intention of persuading Israel to agree to humanitarian pauses in its military campaign. The state department spokesman also made it clear that Blinken had “expectations” that Israel would be “in full compliance with international humanitarian law and the laws of war”.

One has to wonder whether these talking points are just virtue signalling for public consumption and whether there is any real desire on the US side to impose any costs or consequences on Israel if they are not heeded. The politically inconvenient fact is that, in the face of the savagery of Hamas and Israel’s war to destroy it, the US really doesn’t have compelling alternatives and policy choices to offer.

The sheer scale of the death toll in Gaza, combined with rising anger in the president’s own party and among America’s allies, would seem likely to push Biden towards the point at which he’ll need to press Israel hard on restraint, even a significant pause or end to its military campaign. But thus far Biden’s persona, the magnitude of the slaughter on October 7 and the dearth of good options have clearly limited the extent of influence and leverage the US is willing and able to bring to bear on Israel. It’s hard to imagine this president calling Netanyahu with a disarmingly simple message: enough.

Indeed, when it comes to preventing the deaths of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, both Biden and Israel are in a bind — and right now there seems to be no way out.

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