

The Big Read Israel-Hamas war

Biden's troubled Gaza strategy: 'the US looks feckless'

The administration's approach has been to support Israel in public and urge caution in private. But it faces growing disquiet at home and abroad

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James Politi and Felicia Schwartz in Washington 9 HOURS AGO

When Joe Biden broached the conflict in Gaza at a fundraiser in Washington earlier this month, his audience would not have immediately sensed anything out of the ordinary.

The US president made a point of telling the Democratic donors gathered at the luxurious Salamander hotel on December 12 that America's commitment to Israel was "unshakeable".

In the wake of the October 7 attacks, he reassured them, the US would keep providing Israel with the military aid to defend itself and "finish the job" against Hamas, the militant Palestinian group that carried out the assault.

But then Biden's tone changed. He went on to call for the Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu to shift course, remarks he had previously been loath to deliver publicly.

"He's a good friend, but I think he has to change," Biden said of Netanyahu, with thinly disguised frustration. The Israeli government was the "most conservative in Israel's history" and did not want "a two-state solution" or to have "anything to do with the Palestinians".

Finally, Biden warned Israel that it was starting to lose the support of the world because of its "indiscriminate" bombing of civilians in Gaza. According to the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry, more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed since

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the House event — did looming. But it did conduct as its offensive ing. The growing international fronts.

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war in Gaza: it was a jolt out of the blue at a time when the White House believed the

Middle East to be relatively stable.

Suddenly, the 81-year-old president was faced with a series of tricky diplomatic

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delivery of aid to Gaza, and Israel refraining from opening a second front of the war to the north against Hizbollah, the Lebanese militant group. The US says Israel's offensive in the southern part of Gaza, after the temporary truce, has been more restrained compared with its widespread bombing in the northern part of the strip.

In some instances Israeli officials have presented their American counterparts with examples of operations they claimed they had called off because of the high risk to civilians, which US officials say is evidence that US diplomacy is having a meaningful impact. "We think that we have been able to move the needle in significant ways," a senior administration official told the FT. "The president's view is that that has helped us get to a better place."



ipa/Reuters

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“While the Biden administration has made some incremental progress in getting the Netanyahu coalition to take certain actions, I believe we could be making much more effective use of US leverage,” says Chris Van Hollen, a Democratic senator from Maryland and a member of the foreign relations committee.

“There’s a big gap between what the United States says is essential, and what the Netanyahu government is prepared to do,” he adds. “And when you see these big gaps, the United States looks feckless.”

Biden’s response to the crisis has been dictated by his loyalty to America’s decades-old alliance with Israel, as well as a close personal connection to the state that he speaks of frequently.

The president met Israel’s first female prime minister Golda Meir when he was a young senator in the 1970s and, after learning about the Holocaust from his father, has spoken of wanting to educate his own family about the genocide of the Jewish people during the second world war by Nazi Germany.

But most importantly, Biden does not want to be seen as the president that allowed the worst massacre on the Jewish people since the Holocaust to pass without consequence, analysts say. Not only did Biden denounce the Hamas attack as “sheer evil”, but within days he was in Tel Aviv visiting Netanyahu and the Israeli war cabinet.

From a policy perspective, Biden and his top aides have faced a variety of difficult choices from the start — and still do as Israel’s campaign continues.



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Joe Biden met with Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv on October 18. Critics say Netanyahu's failure to more openly respond to US pressure has put Biden in a political bind © Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

They agree with Israel that it must destroy Hamas in such a way that it will be unable to launch attacks on Israel or maintain control over the Gaza Strip. They accept fighting at some level could go on for many months as Israel works to achieve its goal.

But American officials would like to see Israel wind down their most intensive combat operations and shift to a new phase that would hopefully catch fewer civilians in the crossfire — a timeframe that Israel may not necessarily respect.

“Bluntly, there is a lot of concern and frustration that we have not yet seen a shift in tactics on the ground,” says Chris Coons, a Democratic senator from Delaware, and a member of the foreign relations committee.

“It is time to move towards a more targeted counter-terrorism strategy,” he adds. According to Coons, Jake Sullivan, the US national security adviser, and Lloyd Austin, the defence secretary, have delivered that message “pretty clearly” during visits to Israel over the past week.

Over the longer term, the US is absolutely adamant that it does not want Israel to occupy Gaza and would much rather reignite long-dormant talks for a two-state solution with the Palestinian Authority.

But such a prospect was openly mocked recently by Netanyahu. Inside Israel there is little appetite for a two-state solution, with deep resistance across Israel's government and most of its political parties, and it would require a huge shift in the political

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at the UN, officials and analysts say. The US has asked Congress to approve an additional \$14.3bn after the October 7 attacks on top of the \$3.8bn in military aid the US gives Israel every year. The US has often voted with Israel at both the UN General Assembly and Security Council on matters concerning its conflict with the Palestinians, using its veto to shield Israel from resolutions it deems too punishing.



The US says Israel's offensive in the southern part of Gaza, after the temporary truce, has been more restrained compared with its widespread bombing in the northern part of the strip © Israeli Army/AFP/Getty Images

US officials do not believe that a cooler or even a more combative approach to Israel — such as the one that Barack Obama adopted during his years in the White House — would necessarily help trigger a change of heart by Israel and may, in fact, backfire. Biden administration officials say that while they have some sway with Israel, the

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is and the fact that "reputational" damage,

"I don't see any other option that would have been preferable," adds Rosenthal.

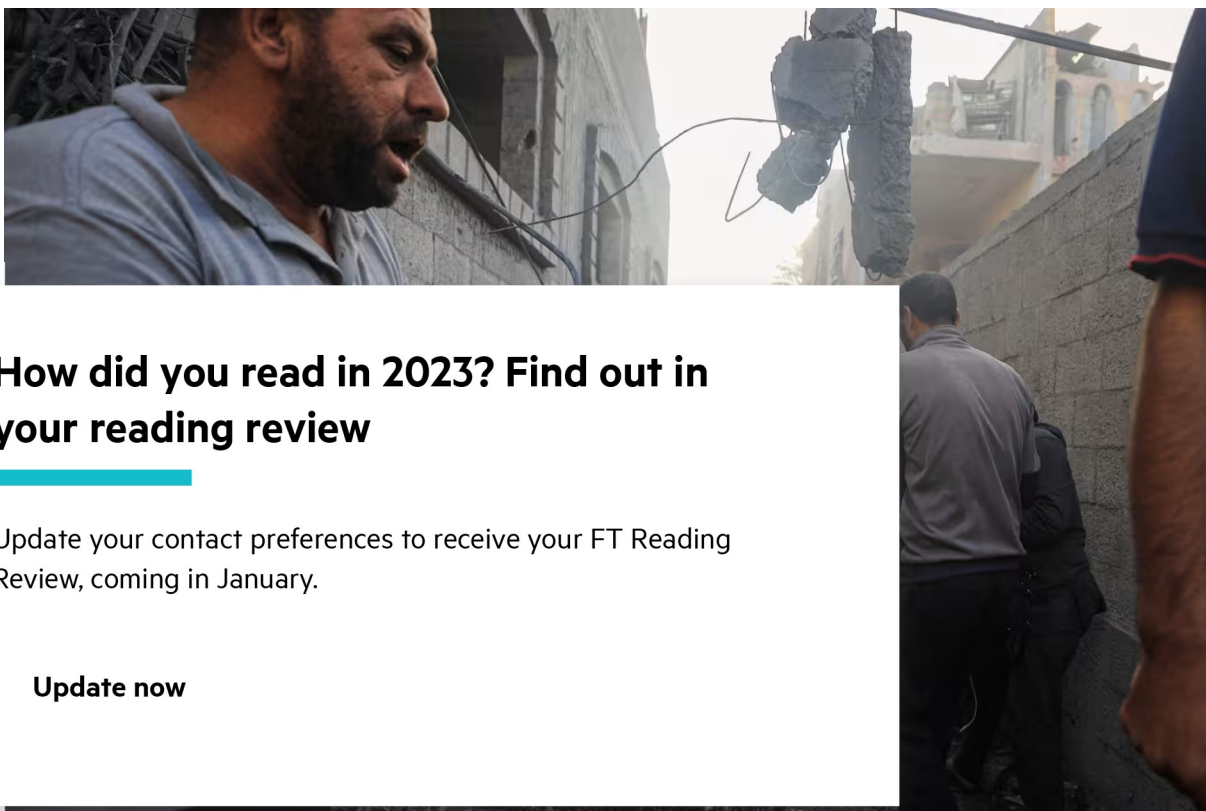
But many Democrats disagree. A group of moderate House Democrats with national security backgrounds, including Elissa Slotkin of Michigan and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, wrote to Biden this week urging a shift in tactics.

Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders, the leftwing senator from Vermont, is calling for conditional aid to Israel. "If asking nicely worked, we wouldn't be in the position we are today," he says. "The blank cheque approach must end."

The conflict in the Middle East broke out at a pivotal moment for Biden's foreign policy, and now threatens to overwhelm it.

The White House had been focused on marshalling support for another round of funding for Ukraine and trying to stabilise relations with China after the high tensions of Biden's first two years in office.

In the Middle East, Biden was engaging on an economic and diplomatic level after the surge in oil prices forced him to reconnect with Saudi Arabia: the White House tried to broker a normalisation deal between the kingdom and Israel, and at the G20 in September launched a big infrastructure project stretching from India to Europe through the Gulf and Israel.



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People flee following Israeli air strikes on a neighbourhood in the al-Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip in November ©

Yasser Qudih/AFP/Getty Images

But the October 7 attacks pulled Biden back into a military and strategic concentration on the region that the president thought he had left behind with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The threat by Houthi rebels in Yemen to disrupt shipping supply chains in the Red Sea, forcing many western companies to stop sailing there, has added a commercial dimension to the conflict that is also preoccupying the White House.

“This war is in a sense his Michael Corleone moment on the Middle East, every US president has one,” says Brian Katulis, senior fellow and vice-president of policy at the Middle East Institute, referencing the iconic scene in the *Godfather III* when the Mafia boss complains of getting pulled back in to a life of crime.

Coons gives credit to Biden for his regional diplomacy since the outset of the war, such as “deterring Iran from getting further engaged”, and with “some success” in preventing a wider war with Hizbollah, as well as militias in Iraq and Syria, though there is an “ongoing challenge” with the Houthis. The administration has touted the launch of a multinational task force to try to protect shipping lanes in the Red Sea as a victory.

“Even with countries that don’t see exactly eye to eye with us on Gaza, we are able to get things done that are significant,” says a senior Biden administration official.



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The US was the sole country to veto a UAE-backed resolution calling for a ceasefire at the UN earlier this month © Fatih Aktas/Anadolu/Getty Images

But the risk of Biden losing precious diplomatic capital because of his stance on the conflict is plain. In recent days, some of the US's closest allies — the UK, Germany and France — joined together to call for a “sustainable” ceasefire, breaking from Washington, which is resolute that this would benefit Hamas.

The US also was the sole country to veto a UAE-backed resolution calling for a ceasefire at the UN earlier this month, finding itself at odds with the emerging and developing economies it has been trying to woo as part of its competition with both China and Russia.

“I do worry about the impact on US relations with our allies, but also with others around the world who are watching closely what we do — countries in the global south who know the US could be doing more to exercise its leverage,” Van Hollen says.

The war in Gaza is a personal test for Biden, not least as he prepares for a re-election campaign in 2024.

His response has fractured the Democratic party, triggering fury from critics who believe the White House has been too tolerant of Israel's conduct. But arguably the most serious cases of dissent have come from within his government.

Groups of staffers at the White House, the State department, and other agencies have expressed their opposition to Biden's Israel policies. Josh Paul, a former civil servant in the political-military affairs bureau at State, resigned in protest in October and says there remains strong disagreement inside the government over Biden's handling of the conflict.

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A recent poll by Bloomberg's Democratic firm found that just 39 per cent of voters

A recent poll by Blueprint, a Democratic firm, found that just 32 per cent of voters consider Biden to be close to their views on foreign policy, with 30 per cent considering him close to their views on Israel-Palestine. Trump, who delighted Netanyahu by moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem during his term and is likely to face Biden at the polls again in 2024, scores higher. A New York Times/Siena College poll [released on Tuesday](#) found that 57 per cent of voters disapprove of Biden's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and 46 per cent trust Trump to do a better job.

"Biden is at a real disadvantage right now to Donald Trump in terms of the share of voters who think he's right on the money with Israel-Palestine," says Evan Roth Smith, Blueprint's top pollster, adding that Biden is struggling to define and defend his approach to national security.

"Voters just see a world in chaos, with conflict after conflict, and America drawn into each of them," Smith adds.

The president's overall approval ratings have kept edging downward since the war began more than two months ago. While Democratic lawmakers have already expressed concerns about how Biden's policies could affect him at the ballot box, just how damaging this crisis will be is not yet clear.

"Most Americans don't vote on foreign policy issues. So how elastic people's votes are as a result of this campaign, I think, remains to be seen," says Jonathan Lord, a senior fellow at CNAS.

Coons says one key step in the near term would be to secure a second pause in the conflict to restore "humanitarian aid, some recovery, some re-establishment of medical services, and the release of more hostages."

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