

Opinion **US foreign policy**

The Biden dilemma on Israel

Protection cannot mean giving the Netanyahu government a blank cheque, cashable in Washington

GIDEON RACHMAN



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Gideon Rachman YESTERDAY

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Ever since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7 last year, America has pursued two key objectives. The first is to provide “ironclad” support for Israel. The second is to prevent a wider regional war that might drag in the US.

But there is a latent tension between those two goals. And that tension is now close to snapping point.

The problem is that ironclad support can be read as a blank cheque to Israel to take whatever military action it sees fit — confident that, when the chips are down, America will have its back. That potentially gives Israel licence to take risks that start the very regional war that the US is trying to prevent.

Israel did not warn America before it launched its deadly attack on the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus. Iran duly responded, with an unprecedented barrage of missiles and drones aimed at the Jewish state.

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Now, the Biden administration is urgently trying to prevent Israel from another round of escalation. As one US official puts it: “The problem is that both sides want to land the last punch.”

President Joe Biden’s insistence that the US would not participate in any counterstrike on Iran helped to persuade the Israeli government not to respond immediately. But Israel has sworn that it will hit back in due course. The Israelis point out that if Iran had fired hundreds of missiles at America, the US would certainly respond. But Israel relies on American military support and an implicit security guarantee from Washington. As one US official said to me earlier in this crisis: “The Israelis are gambling with house money.”

In recent weeks, Biden has become much more open in criticising Israeli actions in Gaza, without specifying how America might condition its support or whether it might restrict weapons supplies to Israel. The question of how to deal with Iran adds another layer of disagreement between Washington and Jerusalem.

For many years, Israeli officials have insisted that Iran and its nuclear programme pose an existential threat to the Jewish state. There has been intermittent talk that Israel or the US will bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities. Iran is now closer to getting nuclear weapons than it has ever been, and Israel’s perceptions of threat have been dramatically heightened by the Hamas attack. The new Israeli orthodoxy is that the country must take pre-emptive action to destroy threats.

In Israel, the Iranian regime is widely portrayed as a fanatical religious cult that would happily risk Armageddon. But the US sees Iran more as a survivor regime, one that is brutal but rational. The Biden administration acknowledges that Iran has indeed crossed a major threshold with its missile barrage. But it believes Tehran is now signalling that it wants to de-escalate.

The fear in Washington is that Israel may still act on its own threat perception and launch a significant attack on Iran — believing that, in the last resort, America will join the war and might even defeat the Iranian regime on Israel’s behalf. But any such calculation would also be fraught with risk for Israel. Initiating a wider war with Iran might indeed pull the US into the fight. But it could also test America’s commitment to Israel to breaking point.

Underlying the tense debates in Washington over just what “ironclad” commitments entail, there is a further often unstated question. Is Israel still a strategic asset to the US, or is it becoming a strategic liability?

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On the liability side, the biggest concern is clearly that Israeli actions will drag America back into another war in the Middle East. US support for Israel in Gaza has also damaged America's image in much of the world, complicating its efforts to rally support against Russia and China.

Biden is also paying a domestic political price, as he loses support among young voters. Since his team genuinely believe that US democracy itself is at stake in the next election, that is not a trivial or ignoble consideration. The fact that Benjamin Netanyahu is close to Donald Trump — and stands accused of undermining Israel's own democracy — increases the White House's reservations about the Israeli government.

And yet, on the other side of the ledger, Israel remains an old ally of the US and the most open society in the Middle East. There is also close co-operation between Israeli and western intelligence services, based on a shared concern about Islamist terrorism.

And while the Biden administration does not share Israel's apocalyptic view of Iran, it does see the country as highly dangerous. In Washington, Iran is portrayed as one of four members of an "axis of adversaries" that includes Russia, China and North Korea. That axis would gain strength and confidence if Iran could claim to have got the upper hand over Israel.

The fact that Jordan reportedly helped to block the Iranian missile barrage indicates that — even in the Middle East — there are countries that share America's determination to thwart Iran's attacks on Israel.

Perhaps there is a master game theorist in the White House who can balance all these competing imperatives. If not, the US will need luck, as well as judgment, to get to the other side of this crisis without being drawn into another war.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

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