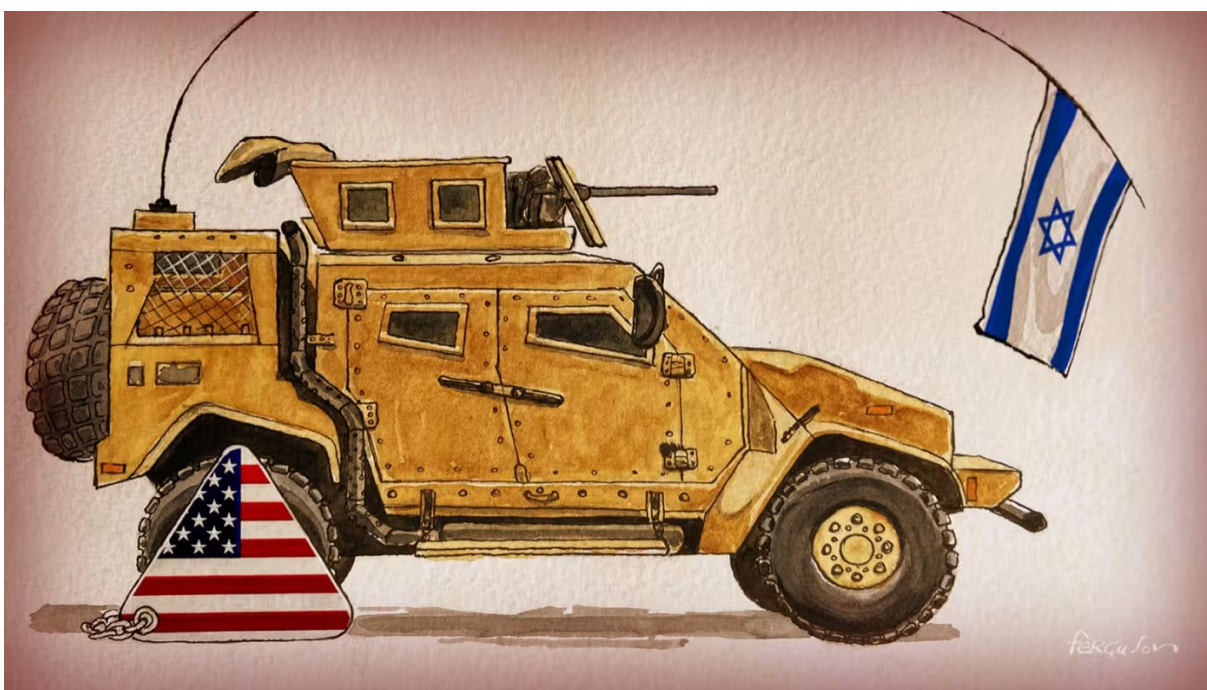


Opinion **Israel-Hamas war**

Israel cannot stand alone and Netanyahu knows it

The American decision to restrict arms sales could be a turning point in the US-Israel relationship

GIDEON RACHMAN



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Gideon Rachman 3 HOURS AGO

Et tu, Joe? For many months, Benjamin Netanyahu has shrugged off international criticism of Israel, secure in the knowledge that the president of America had offered ironclad support. If you have the White House behind you, who cares about South Africa or the students of Columbia University?

But even the Biden administration has its limits. The Netanyahu government's determination to press ahead with a full-scale attack on the Gazan town of Rafah has finally prompted the US to [halt](#) some of its military aid to Israel.

Netanyahu has responded to the US decision with bravado and defiance. Israel looks likely to move forward with its attack on Rafah, using its already formidable arsenal. The Israeli prime minister says that no outside power can prevent his nation from defending itself, as it sees fit. Israel, Netanyahu insists, "will [stand alone](#)" if necessary.

But the reality is that many Israelis are shocked and dismayed by Biden's decision. David Horowitz, the founding editor of the Times of Israel, [called](#) it a "devastating announcement". His description of Israel's situation is stark: "Already abandoned by most of the international community, Israel . . . has now lost the unstinting public support and full protection of its most essential ally."

Even if Israel goes ahead on Rafah, Biden's decision raises serious questions about the

future of the Israel-US relationship and about the Netanyahu government's options. Many in the Israeli security establishment want to open a second front by taking on Hizbollah in Lebanon. But the US has made it clear that it opposes that idea.

Netanyahu might previously have assumed that the US would always swing in behind Israel, and provide the necessary military support. But Biden's actions on Rafah suggest this is no longer a safe assumption. The US will always provide Israel with defensive weapons, such as missile interceptors. But the supply of artillery shells and powerful bombs for offensive operations can no longer be taken for granted.

And then there is the diplomatic front. Netanyahu is clearly very alarmed that he and some colleagues may be indicted by the International Criminal Court. Israel wants the US to work behind the scenes to put pressure on the ICC. And it also needs the US to provide rhetorical support against the widespread accusation that Israel has committed war crimes — or even genocide.

Yet Biden's admission in a recent television interview that American bombs had killed civilians in Gaza moved the US closer to endorsing the idea that Israeli tactics go beyond legitimate war fighting. A US state department report has also [found](#) that Israel may have used American weapons in ways that violate international humanitarian law.

Behind the scenes, Israel's use of heavy bombs has been a point of tension with the US security establishment for months. Late last year, a senior Democrat told me of his horror that Israel, in the pursuit of a single Hamas commander, had [dropped](#) a powerful bomb on a refugee camp — killing dozens of civilians in the process. The prospect of that happening again, repeatedly, in an assault on Hamas in Rafah, prompted the White House to act.

Some of Biden's critics say that the president is motivated by politics rather than humanitarian concerns. There is little doubt that, in a very tight presidential election, he cannot afford to lose the votes of young progressives, who are outraged by the Gaza war. But Netanyahu is also playing politics. To stay in power the Israeli leader needs to keep the far right on his side. And they are the loudest voices calling for an attack on Rafah.

Beyond the politics and the humanitarian issues, there is a fundamental strategic disagreement between the Netanyahu government and the White House. From the beginning, the Biden administration has balanced deep sympathy for Israel and a genuine commitment to its security with profound scepticism about Israeli tactics and

strategy.

The Israeli government seems to take an entirely military view of the Palestinian issue. It argues that Israel must eliminate Hamas and “restore deterrence” — and that force is the only true path to Israel’s safety. The Biden administration, by contrast, has always believed that Israel’s future can only ultimately be achieved by a peace settlement that involves the creation of a Palestinian state.

The US knows from its own bitter experience in Afghanistan that you cannot defeat an organisation like Hamas, or the Taliban, simply by killing its leadership and foot soldiers. Without a sustainable political solution, there will always be new recruits. Indeed, mass killing of civilians is likely to be the most effective recruitment tool for the next generation of Hamas fighters.

But facing up to that reality would require profound shifts in the thinking of Netanyahu and much of the Israeli public. That change became even less likely after the trauma of the savage Hamas attacks of October 7. So it may require another external shock — such as the White House decision on weapons — to force the Israelis away from the brutal and self-defeating strategy they have embraced in Gaza. If Biden’s decision helps to kick-start that process, he may yet salvage something from the current horror.

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