

After \$130 Billion in U.S. Aid, Why Israel Can ‘Stand Alone’



An Israeli Air Force F-35 fighter aircraft flies during an air show in Tel Aviv on April 26, 2023, as Israel marks Independence Day. (Photo by JACK GUEZ/AFP via Getty Images)

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SUBSCRIBER+EXCLUSIVE REPORTING — “If we need to stand alone, we will stand alone,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week, in response to President Joe Biden’s warning that [the U.S. would not provide arms](#) for a major military operation in Rafah. “I have said that if necessary, we will fight with our fingernails,” Netanyahu said. “But we have much more than fingernails.”

So much more than fingernails.

Israel has one of the world's best-equipped militaries – thanks to a long-running and generous flow of weapons from the United States. Israel is the top recipient of U.S. security assistance under the Foreign Military Financing program, according to the [U.S. State Department](#). (The FMF program provides U.S. aid as grants that Israel must use to purchase U.S. military equipment and services.) Since Israel's founding in 1948, U.S. military aid to Israel has topped \$130 billion, and since 2019, when the two countries formalized their most recent security agreement, Israel has received \$3.3 billion in annual arms aid, plus another \$500 million for its Iron Dome missile defense. Put another way, 69 percent of the weapons Israel imported annually between 2019 and 2023 came from the U.S., according to the [Stockholm International Peace Institute](#). Nearly all the rest comes from Germany.

Israel has used its U.S. aid to acquire a vast arsenal of advanced equipment. The most expensive and highly publicized is Lockheed's state-of-the-art F-35 Lightning stealth fighter jet, customized for Israel under the name Adir, Hebrew for "Mighty One." Each of these warplanes costs between [\\$110-125 million](#). The U.S. Congress authorized the Israeli Air Force to buy them in 2008; since then, Israel has ordered 50 F-35s and taken delivery of 39 of them. The planes are based at the [Nevatim](#) airfield, which [Iran's missile and drone attack took aim at –and missed – on April 19](#). In mid-March, the [Washington Post reported](#), the State Department quietly authorized the transfer of another 25 Adirs, at a cost of \$2.5 billion.

The Israel arms pipeline

No comprehensive inventory of all the American arms sold or transferred to Israel over the years is publicly available. Under a complicated system, only arms sales of a certain dollar value must be reported to Congress, with different thresholds for different categories, and the U.S. government isn't required to announce accelerated sales and transfers that were already approved.

Congress has been notified of only two foreign military sales to Israel since the October 7 attacks; both were deemed emergencies and thus exempted from congressional review.

Still, a partial picture of the U.S. support of Israel's military can be pieced together from various open-source documents.

As of October 2023, according to the [State Department](#), the U.S. had 599 active Foreign Military Sales in the pipeline to Israel, with an aggregate value of \$23.8 billion. Besides the F-35s, State's fact sheet under the heading [U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel](#) says the highest priority weapons shipments to Israel were CH-53K heavy lift helicopters, KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, and various precision-guided munitions. Between 2018 and 2022, the U.S. authorized direct sales to Israel of \$12.2 billion in arms-related items, including gas turbine engines, launch vehicles, guided and ballistic missiles, rockets, torpedoes, bombs, mines and aircraft.

Another source of military aid to Israel, even harder to quantify, is a store of weapons maintained by the U.S. European Command in Israel, known as the [U.S. War Reserve Stockpile](#). This Pentagon stockpile has been [positioned in Israel since 1984](#), so that arms can be transferred quickly to Israel in the event of a “significant military emergency.” That’s a description that certainly fits the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, and the uptick that followed in strikes by other Iran-backed groups, including Hezbollah and the Houthis.

Controversial bombs

According to a [Congressional Research Service report published](#) on December 13, 2023, since October 7 the Biden administration had “expedited” shipments to Israel of 15,000 bombs and 57,000 artillery shells. (This set of transactions was first reported by the [Wall Street Journal](#) on Dec. 1, 2023.) The CRS said the 15,000 bombs included 5,400 2,000-pound bombs; 5,000 500-pound bombs; 3,000 joint direct attack munitions to upgrade unguided “dumb” bombs into precision-guided munitions; 1,000 250-pound [small-diameter bombs](#); and 100 [2,000-pound bunker buster bombs](#).

The bunker busters are potentially the most devastating. According to a [Pentagon website](#), they are designed to destroy hardened bunkers and tunnels deep underground, ideal for destroying the [350 to 450 miles of tunnels](#) Hamas has reportedly dug underneath Gaza.

The pipeline of U.S. bomb deliveries came under scrutiny in early May, when [President Joe Biden ordered a “pause”](#) on one shipment consisting of 3,500 bombs – 1,800 2,000-pound bombs and 1,700 500-pound bombs. Biden was reportedly frustrated that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had failed to articulate a credible plan for protecting civilians during the Israeli military’s planned assault on Rafah. Biden said he didn’t want U.S.-made bombs involved.

“Civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs and other ways in which they go after population centers,” [Biden told CNN](#), referring to the so-called “high payload” 2,000-pound bombs. “I made it clear that if they go into Rafah – they haven’t gone in Rafah yet – if they go into Rafah, I’m not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities – that deal with that problem.” Biden said the U.S. would continue to supply Israel with defensive weapons, but bombs and other offensive weapons would go under “review.”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken echoed Biden’s comments when he appeared on CBS’s [Face the Nation](#) Sunday – but the CBS interview also suggested the U.S. red line was fuzzy.

“What we’ve been clear about is that if Israel launches this major military operation into Rafah, then there are certain systems that we’re not going to be supporting and supplying for that

operation,” Blinken said. “But at present, the only thing that we’ve delayed and are holding back are these high-payload bombs because we’re in an ongoing conversation with Israel, given the impact that those weapons can have when they’re used in densely populated areas, including an area like Rafah.”

“So you still might deliver them?” the CBS anchor Margaret Brennan asked.

“So we’re in an active conversation with Israel about that,” Blinken said. “We have real concerns about the way they’re used.”

Criticism from all sides

Biden and Blinken were already under fire for a [State Department report](#) released Friday that said it was “reasonable to assess” that Israeli forces might have used U.S. weapons in violation of international laws and humanitarian standards — but that the evidence was insufficient to deny Israel more U.S. lethal aid. That conclusion drew fire from across the U.S. political spectrum – from progressives who accused the administration of failing to hold Israel accountable, and conservatives who charged that Biden and his aides were undercutting Israel at a pivotal moment in the war.

“It’s precisely the kind of delicate line-walking that has annoyed and alienated voices on all sides of the Gaza conflict recently,” [Politico’s Playbook](#) wrote Saturday under the headline, “Biden’s murky Israel policy in a nutshell.”

Biden’s bomb “pause” has won faint praise, at best – and criticism from both sides of the divide about American support for Israel.

“Israel has gone into Rafah. Where’s the ‘red line’?” said [Politico](#). [NBC’s website](#) said, “Biden’s arms threat to Israel ‘better than nothing’ but too late.”

Others argue that there should be no U.S. pause at all.

“There is little prospect of any hostage deal if [Hamas leader Yahya] Sinwar feels less pressure,” Dennis Ross, a former U.S. ambassador who handled Middle East negotiations for Presidents Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Barack Obama, told *The Cipher Brief*. “Ideally he should feel the noose is tightening, and he sees the benefit of a reprieve. If he thinks we can stop Israel, that reduces the pressure and does not add to it. Similarly, if he thinks there is a breach between the U.S. and Israel, he may think he and Hamas are gaining, not losing. Does that mean we cannot express opposition to Israeli moves we think are wrong-headed? Of course not, but how we do it and the timing of it matters.”

This much is clear: A few bombs, more or less, won't dent Israel's military capability. The [emergency national security supplemental funding bill](#) approved by the U.S. Congress on April 23 contains \$13 billion in aid to Israel. It includes \$4 billion for Israel's Iron Dome and David's Sling defense systems and \$1.2 billion for its Iron Beam defense system. Some \$800 million is earmarked for procurement of ammunition. The biggest slice – \$4.4 billion – is slated “to respond to the situation in Israel,” and another \$2.4 billion is for “U.S. operations, force protection, deterrence, and the replacement of combat expenditures” in the Middle East.”

With such broad, vague guidelines, experts say, Israeli procurement specialists should have no trouble getting more of just about anything the Israeli military needs. When news broke of Biden's pause on that single shipment of bombs, Israeli Defense Forces spokesman [Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari](#) said the Israeli military “has the necessary weapons for its planned maneuvers, including in Rafah.” No one in the U.S. administration has said he's wrong.

Related story:

House bill aims to force shipments of heavy bombs to Israel over Biden's objections. House Republicans plan to vote this week on a bill that would override President Biden's decision to delay delivery of 3,500 heavy bombs to Israel. The [Israel Security Assistance Support Act](#), introduced by Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Calif., chairman of the House appropriations defense subcommittee, urges the “expeditious delivery” of defense articles and services to Israel, and condemns the Biden administration's decision to delay indefinitely the shipment of bombs. President Biden ordered the shipment paused as a warning to Israel that future military aid shipments would depend on protection of civilians and humanitarian safeguards. His move drew praise from progressives and Democratic Party centrists but condemnation from many Republican lawmakers. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters Monday the White House opposed the GOP bill. “We strongly, strongly oppose attempts to constrain the president's ability to deploy U.S. security assistance consistent with U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives.” She defended Biden's decision to deny Israel “2,000-pound bombs which can be very destructive in densely populated urban environments such as Rafah.”

[Politico The Hill](#)

Israel has one of the world's best-equipped militaries – thanks to a long-running and generous flow of weapons from the United States.

Will the Biden administration's bomb shipment pause dent Israel's military capability?

*Read [After \\$130 Billion in U.S. Aid, Why Israel Can 'Stand Alone'](#) exclusively in *The Cipher Brief**