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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 27 May 2021

# The Biden Administration's Response to the Israeli Assault on the Gaza Strip

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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On 10 May 2021, Israel launched its fourth war on the Gaza Strip, which it has besieged since 2007. The administration of US President Joe Biden consequently found itself forced to deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict after months of avoidance. President Biden made his first phone call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a month after he took office, which is unusual for US-Israeli relations, and is yet to appoint an ambassador to Israel, or a peace envoy in the region as the previous administrations did. The same applies to his Palestinian counterparts, as the first contact between Biden and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas came in the midst of the recent Israeli aggression. But the Israeli war on Gaza forced the Biden administration to intervene and pressure Israel to accept a mutual ceasefire with the Palestinian resistance factions. Large divisions emerged within the ranks of the Democratic Party, with many voices of indignation arising in Congress about the brutal Israeli practices, and public criticism of the Biden administration's bias towards Israel.

## A Position of Biased Principles

Over the course of eleven days of Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, the general framework of the US position was drawn up according to a complete bias in favor of Israel. This was evident in three places:

1. The United States obstructed four attempts in the UN Security Council to discuss the developments of the aggression, under the pretext that this compromised the quiet diplomatic efforts that Washington was undertaking through private channels to reach a truce, and then to a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian resistance.
2. Providing cover for the Israeli aggression against the Strip under the pretext of "Israel's right to defend itself against indiscriminate rocket attacks."<sup>(1)</sup>
3. Giving the Netanyahu government room for maneuver by allowing it sufficient time to launch strong strikes against the Palestinian resistance, and then gradually reduce the size of those strikes under the pretext that it has achieved its goals.<sup>(2)</sup>

## A Change in the Tone of US Rhetoric

The Biden administration's initial approach was to apply behind-the-scenes pressure to end the conflict quickly and reduce civilian casualties.<sup>(3)</sup> The US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, reported that the United States made more than 60 high-level diplomatic calls within two weeks, including six direct conversations between Biden and Netanyahu.<sup>(4)</sup> In the first

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1 "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel," The White House, 17/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/34iA5LE>

2 Anne Gearan & Sean Sullivan, "Biden's Warning to Israel Shakes up Diplomacy — and Politics," *The Washington Post*, 19/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3yHcClm>

3 Kevin Liptak, et al., "Biden Dramatically Scales up The Pressure on Netanyahu as Decades-long Relationship Faces its Most Consequential Moment," *CNN*, 19/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://cnn.it/3wE9IS2>

4 Maggie Gile, "Israel's U.N. Ambassador Blasts 'Demonization' of Country, Accuses Assembly of Supporting Hamas," *News Week*, 20/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3p62hLra>



week of the assault, Biden administration officials believed that any public criticism of Israel would backfire, especially since the US estimates were that the Israeli army would not stop its attacks before destroying the largest possible number of what it described as “military targets” in the Strip. However, this approach buckled as the aggression entered its second week because:

The US military estimated that Israel was running out of fixed targets.<sup>(5)</sup>

4. The number of Palestinian civilian victims rapidly increased, and horrific images circulated revealing suffering from the Gaza Strip, the human cost of the Israeli aggression and the extent of the destruction it caused to residential buildings and civilian infrastructure. These scenes sparked global outrage, including within the United States the Democratic party itself.
5. The Biden administration concluded that the Israeli army is incapable of resolving the battle with the Palestinian resistance and stopping its rockets and missiles in a short period of time, and without a major ground invasion that Israel itself did not want due to its high cost. Perhaps the Biden administration feared a wider Palestinian popular explosion in the West Bank and Jerusalem and among Palestinians within the Green Line.

The Biden administration’s grew wary with the Netanyahu government’s attempts to implicate it in the bombing of Al Jalaa Highrise, on 15 May 2021, which housed the offices of media outlets such as the American Associated Press and Al Jazeera, as well as 60 apartments and offices for lawyers and doctors. The bombing and destruction of the tower led to international outcry in condemnation of Israel, which claimed that it contained electronic equipment belonging to Hamas, which the latter denied. Instead of the Netanyahu government providing evidence to substantiate its claims, as the Biden administration demanded, it made claims that it provided the evidence to Washington, which US officials denied.<sup>(6)</sup> US media indicated that the bombing of the tower represented a turning point in Washington’s position.<sup>(7)</sup>

Growing dissatisfaction appeared within the Democratic Party leadership with the pace of Israeli military operations, including implicit criticism from figures close to Israel, such as Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, leader of the Democratic majority in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Robert Menendez.<sup>(8)</sup> On 16 May 2021, more than twenty Democratic members of the Senate signed a statement calling for a ceasefire.<sup>(9)</sup>

Most of all, however, the progressive movement in the Democratic Party scaled up its criticism of the Biden administration’s bias towards Israel, which heralded a split in the party’s tiny majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate in a way that could disrupt Biden’s other agenda. The

5 Liptak, et al.

6 Gearan & Sullivan.

7 “The New York Times: Senior Israeli Government and Army Officials Regret the Bombing of Al Jalaa Highrise,” *Al Jazeera*, 23/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3i9Jmhl>

8 Gearan & Sullivan.

9 John Haltiwanger, “Biden Expresses Support for Middle East Cease-fire Amid Mounting Pressure from Top Democrats,” *Business Insider*, 18/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/34jkEmt>



Democrats have a majority of only 6 votes in the House of Representatives, while they share the Senate seats equally with the Republican Party (50-50). For nearly a decade and a half, there has been a gradual shift in the Democratic Party away from Israel, as a majority of its ranks now want a more balanced and just position between the Palestinians and Israelis and view the issue from the standpoint of the American Civil Rights and Social Justice Movement. A recent poll revealed that 38.5 percent of Democrats blame Israel for the latest escalation, compared to 15.5 percent who blame Hamas, while 27.4 percent of the general public blame Israel for the escalation, dropping to just 12.5 percent for Republicans.<sup>(10)</sup>

With the Biden administration continuing to support the Israeli position under the pretext of its “right to self-defence”, a split occurred within the Democratic Party representatives in Congress, between a majority that supported Israel and a small but influential and growing minority that opposed it. And after the Biden administration informed Congress of its \$735 million arms deal with Israel, agreed between the two parties before the recent Israeli escalation in Jerusalem and aggression on the Gaza Strip, Democratic Representative from New York, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, announced on 9 May 2021, that she will submit a bill to prevent the deal, funded by the annual \$3.8 billion US aid to Israel. This was followed the next day by Senator Bernie Sanders, who introduced a similar bill in the Senate.<sup>(11)</sup> Although attempts to disrupt this aid have not been successful, this development is unprecedented in the history of US-Israeli relations.

## New Approach

Washington began to gradually escalate its pressure as the Israeli assault entered its second week, beginning with the call that took place between Biden and Netanyahu on 17 May. Although Biden renewed his “firm support for Israel’s right to defend itself,” the White House statement indicated that Washington would like to see a ceasefire soon.<sup>(12)</sup> When it became clear that Netanyahu did not understand the message, Biden gave him another call on 19 May, in which the US president’s tone was more assertive.<sup>(13)</sup> It was noteworthy that the White House statement regarding this call did not refer, as usual, to “Israel’s right to defend itself,” but rather emphasized that “the President conveyed to the Prime Minister that he expected a significant de-escalation today on the path to a ceasefire.”<sup>(14)</sup> US media reported that Biden informed Netanyahu that political dynamics are changing in Congress against Israel, even among its traditional allies.<sup>(15)</sup> This was followed by another call between US

10 Michael Lee, “Democrats Side with Hamas, a Terrorist Origination, over Israel in Latest Conflict,” *Washington Examiner*, 19/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://washex.am/3fNjvnl>

11 Eliza Collins & Siobhan Hughes, “Progressives Pressure Top Democrats on Israel Arms Deal, Policing,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 22/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://on.wsj.com/2QWbVDv>

12 Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel.”

13 Michael Crowley and Annie Karni, “Publicly supportive of Israel, President Joe Biden is said to sharpen his tone with Benjamin Netanyahu in private” *The New York Times*, 19/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021 at: <https://nyti.ms/3oThb7D>

14 “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel,” The White House, 19/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3hWWTIU>

15 Gearan & Sullivan.



Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Israeli counterpart, Gabi Ashkenazi, in which it was asserted that the United States expects Israel to end its military operations soon.<sup>(16)</sup> Although Netanyahu was quick to affirm his intention to continue the fighting, he soon, under the weight of US pressure, accepted entering talks with Hamas and the rest of the other Palestinian factions through Egyptian government mediation. With the two sides accepting the principle of a mutual and simultaneous ceasefire by 2am on Friday morning, officials in the White House were divided over whether Biden should announce it for fear of his failure. However, Biden announced the agreement himself.

At the same time, in addition to its contact with Qatar and Jordan, the Biden administration intensified its communication with Egypt, which was close to Donald Trump and seemed neglected by Biden. Close cooperation with the regime in Cairo does not fit the tone that Biden wants for his administration as a supporter of democracy. It seems that his administration decided to rely on the role of Egypt as the only Arab gateway to Gaza, and because it may be an eager partner in containing the Palestinian resistance movements and Hamas by involving them in the political process and the Palestinian system in exchange for restricting its armed activity. The Egyptian administration is not only in search of a role that brings it closer to the new US administration, but also because of its conviction of the need to contain Hamas, which, after the recent war, has become a significant figure in the equation of solving the conflict.

## Conclusion

Washington's strict stance with Netanyahu contributed to ending the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, but this does not mean that there is a "change in my commitment to the security of Israel," according to Biden, who confirmed that the Democratic Party "continues to support Israel," commenting on the demands of the progressive wing for the party to review the foundations of the US-Israeli alliance. Nevertheless, Washington is expected to become more involved in efforts to reinforce the ceasefire and prevent the resumption of escalation between Israel and the resistance factions in Gaza, as confirmed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken's current tour in the region. Michael Ratney will also be appointed to act as the US ambassador in Jerusalem until an ambassador is selected for the vacancy. It appears that Washington is also preparing to reopen the US consulate in East Jerusalem, which was the channel of communication with the Palestinians before the Trump administration shut it down.<sup>(17)</sup> The Biden administration has also committed to contributing to efforts to rebuild the Gaza Strip, but through the Palestinian Authority and not Hamas, which Washington will not allow to use humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts to "rebuild its military arsenal."<sup>(18)</sup> The Biden administration also calls on Israel to improve the living conditions of Palestinians in occupied

<sup>16</sup> Barak Ravid, "U.S. Backing on Gaza Won't Last much Longer, Blinken Tells Israeli Counterpart," AXIOS, 20/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2RNGsE1>

<sup>17</sup> Crowley & Karni.

<sup>18</sup> "Remarks by President Biden and H.E. Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea at Press Conference," The White House, 21/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3oSd4sr>



Jerusalem and holders of Israeli citizenship and treat them as equals with Jews.<sup>(19)</sup> Although the United States expressed its reservations about the forcible eviction of Sheikh Jarrah residents, it is unlikely that it would make this a cause for tension with Israel. However, the civil rights discourse has become, in any case, part of the rhetoric of the president himself on domestic Israeli issues as in the case of Palestinian citizens of Israel.

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<sup>19</sup> Molly Nagle, "Israel-Hamas Cease-fire Put US in Position 'to Building Something More Positive,'" *ABC News*, 23/5/2021, accessed on 27/5/2021, at: <https://abcn.ws/3wCcEJj>