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# Will the US Shift Policy on Israel's War on Gaza?

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On April 8, US President Joe Biden threatened, for the first time in six months of Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, to reconsider Washington's position on the war unless Israel changed strategy. He made the threat during a tense phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on April 4, 2024, days after Israel attacked a humanitarian relief convoy in Gaza belonging to the World Central Kitchen (WCK) aid group. The attack had killed six Western aid workers, including an American, and their Palestinian driver.

In a statement, Biden said he was “outraged and heartbroken” over the attack, and stressed that “Israel has not done enough to protect aid workers trying to deliver desperately needed help to civilians ... Israel has also not done enough to protect civilians.”<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that his phone call with Netanyahu took place two days after Biden's Democratic Party held primary elections in Wisconsin, where more than 47,000 Democratic voters voted uncommitted – a protest vote against the president, explicitly linked to Biden's support of Israel in its war on Gaza. This caused consternation among Biden's campaign team, acutely aware that in the 2020 presidential election he had defeated Donald Trump in Wisconsin by a slim margin of just over 20,000 votes.

## American Demands and Israel's Limited Response

According to a White House readout following Biden's call with Netanyahu, the US “emphasized that the strikes on humanitarian workers and the overall humanitarian situation are unacceptable” and called for Israel to “announce and implement a series of specific, concrete, and measurable steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers (in Gaza).” Biden also “underscored that an immediate ceasefire is essential to stabilize and improve the humanitarian situation and protect innocent civilians, [urging Netanyahu] to empower his negotiators to conclude a deal without delay to bring the hostages home.” Crucially, Biden told the Israeli premier that “U.S. policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by our assessment of Israel's immediate action on these steps.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the statement did not specify any repercussions that Israel might face were it to fail to take Biden's ultimatum seriously, various American media outlets described the half-hour call as “tense” and cited sources in the administration as saying that the president now expected “tangible changes” in Israeli policy. Three American officials were cited as saying that Biden had told Netanyahu that unless Israel changes course in the Gaza Strip, “we won't be able to support you.”<sup>3</sup> Secretary of State Antony Blinken underlined this message, saying: “If we do not see changes we need to see, there will be changes in our policy.”<sup>4</sup>

1 “Statement from President Joe Biden on the Death of World Central Kitchen Workers in Gaza,” The White House, 2/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Pw5alFh0>.

2 “Readout of President Joe Biden's Call with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel,” The White House, 4/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Xw5alNoK>.

3 Barak Ravid, “‘We Won't Support You’: Inside Biden's Ultimatum to Bibi,” *Axios*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/5w5al4zj>.

4 Stephen Collinson, “US Awaits Netanyahu's Response after Biden's Ultimatum,” *CNN*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/rw5azoXU>.



All this said, it remains unclear what consequences would stem from Netanyahu failing to respond adequately to Washington's requests. Would they, for example, include halting or placing conditions on arms shipments to Israel, as a number of Democratic lawmakers are demanding?

Biden did not explicitly refer to the possibility of reducing or halting arms supplies during the call, nor did he set a time limit for Israel to respond to his demands.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the US policy repercussions of Israel continuing its aggression against the Gaza Strip remain unclear. On the contrary: since the phone call, Washington appears to have softened its tone with Israel, claiming it has responded to Biden's demands. Indeed, the day after their call and in response to a reporter's question over whether he had threatened to halt military aid, Biden said: "I asked them to do what they're doing."<sup>6</sup>

Adrienne Watson, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, echoed this, saying: "We welcome the steps announced by the Israeli government tonight at the president's request following his call with Prime Minister Netanyahu."<sup>7</sup>

Immediately after the phone call, Netanyahu's office had announced that it had "temporarily" agreed, to allow more humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip through the port of Ashdod and the Erez crossing, as well as allowing more Jordanian aid in via the Kerem Shalom crossing on the border with Egypt. The Israeli statement also said it would establish a new and improved "deconfliction" system to ensure aid deliveries into Gaza, a reference to new procedures to protect humanitarian relief personnel, while stressing that this would be done in a way that allows it to "ensure the continuation of the fighting and to achieve the goals of the war."<sup>8</sup>

In practice, this amounts to a flat Israeli rejection of Biden's request for an "immediate ceasefire."

The Israeli army also announced that it had fired or reprimanded five senior officers over the WCK aid worker killings, explaining that "those who approved the strike were convinced that they were targeting armed Hamas operatives," and that its attack was "a grave mistake stemming from a serious failure due to a mistaken identification."<sup>9</sup>

Despite its admission of responsibility, these disciplinary actions against five officers do not meet Blinken's demands for an "independent, thorough, and fully publicized investigation."<sup>10</sup> It bears pointing out that in this is, in any case, a contradictory demand. How can any investigation by Israel into its own conduct possibly be considered objective or independent?

<sup>5</sup> Peter Baker, "In Threatening Israel, Biden Hopes to Avoid a Rupture," *The New York Times*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Aw5azzlC>.

<sup>6</sup> "Remarks by President Biden Before Marine One Departure," The White House, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Jw5azRfE>.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Fabian & Galit Altstein, "Biden Tells Netanyahu US Support Hinges on Protecting Civilians," *Bloomberg*, 4/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Gw5azSrt>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Picheta, "Israeli Military Fires Two Senior Officers as Report Finds Strike on Aid Workers was in 'Serious Violation of Commands'," *CNN*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/dw5azXMK>.

<sup>10</sup> Collinson.



As for Biden's demand for an immediate ceasefire and hostage release deal, the Biden administration's position "remains that there should be a ceasefire as part of a hostage deal and it should happen immediately. That's why the President urged the Prime Minister to empower his negotiators to conclude a deal without delay," according to a US official quoted by Axios.<sup>11</sup> Biden also demanded that Israel make efforts to reach a settlement with Hamas over the return of displaced Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip, and called on Egypt and Qatar to pressure Hamas to make concessions from its side regarding in order to finalise a prisoner exchange deal.

## The Limits of Change in Washington's approach

Whether or not Israel meets the Biden administration's demands, the chances of a substantial shift in Washington's approach to the war on Gaza appear limited. The White House readout makes clear that any change would be based on its assessment of "Israel's immediate action" on Biden's requests, meaning that American support for Israel in general, including arms deliveries, will continue regardless. It was also noteworthy that the readout emphasised Washington's support for its ally in the face of "public Iranian threats against Israel,"<sup>12</sup> which had just hours earlier attacked a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy in Damascus, killing seven officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard including two senior officials.

Furthermore, while Blinken threatened "changes in our policy" unless Israel changed its own, he did not provide a clear definition of the nature and extent of the change being demanded, despite calls by senior lawmakers in the Democratic Party such as Chris Coons, a Senator close to Biden, and the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, for an explicit set of criteria.<sup>13</sup>

In recent weeks, a growing number of Democratic lawmakers have been demanding that the US place conditions on military aid to Israel, or limit deliveries to defensive weapons.<sup>14</sup> But Biden himself, the day after his call with Netanyahu, mocked a reporter who asked whether his administration might cut off aid to Israel.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, his administration agreed to send yet more weapons and munitions to Israel on the very same day that the WCK employees were killed, including more than 1,000 500-pound bombs and 1,000 smaller bombs.<sup>16</sup> Former State Department weapons expert Josh Paul, who resigned in protest at the administration's policies less than two weeks into the Gaza war, said the bombs used in the strike on the WCK convoy may have been provided to Israel by the US.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ravid.

<sup>12</sup> "Readout."

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Solender, "Nancy Pelosi Joins Call to Halt U.S. Weapons Transfers to Israel," *Axios*, 5/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ow5az3w6>.

<sup>14</sup> Baker.

<sup>15</sup> "Remarks by President Biden Before Marine One Departure."

<sup>16</sup> Michael R. Gordon & Nancy A. Youssef, "Biden Ties Support for Israel to Civilian Protection in Gaza," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/fw5axrfg>.

<sup>17</sup> John Hudson, "U.S. Approved More Bombs to Israel on Day of World Central Kitchen strikes," *The Washington Post*, 4/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/rw5axguB>.



Despite Biden's public opposition to a possible Israeli invasion of the city of Rafah in the absence of a clear plan for dealing with its nearly one and a half million displaced Palestinian residents, his administration in late March secretly approved a new arms package for Israel worth \$2.5 billion, including 25 F-35A fighter jets, more than 1,800 MK84 2,000-pound bombs and 500 MK82 500-pound bombs.<sup>18</sup> These are the same munitions that Israel is using to massacre Palestinian civilians, including children and women, whose deaths the Biden administration claims it is trying to avoid.

The Biden administration also announced in early April that it had initially signed off on an \$18 billion deal to sell Israel 50 F-15 fighter aircraft, in addition to engines, gun systems, radars and navigation systems, as well as air-to-air missiles and advanced offensive munitions, along with logistics infrastructure, training and maintenance services for Israel's air force. When Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Galant visited Washington in late March, he submitted another request to purchase yet more F-35 aircraft.

Although these huge deals, currently under review by the foreign relations committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate, would require years to be implemented—at least five years in the case of F-15 fighters—the Biden administration appears keen to conclude them rapidly. This runs counter to extreme pressure from the Democratic Party rank and file, as well as from some Democratic legislators in Congress, to use arms deliveries as leverage to force Israel to change its approach in Gaza. Blinken however told journalists that continued US transfers of weapons aimed to address Israel's regional security concerns, beyond Gaza, and suggested that slowing down, reducing or placing conditions on those sales could weaken Israel's deterrence and encourage Iran or its regional allies to attack it.<sup>19</sup>

This clearly indicates that the Biden administration is not ready to shift from simply criticising Israel's behaviour in the Gaza Strip to taking practical steps to force it to change course. As a case in point, on March 25, the US abstained from using its veto against a resolution which went on to be adopted by the United Nations Security Council demanding an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza, the release of all detainees, and a green light for more aid to enter the Strip. This angered Netanyahu, who cancelled the visit of an Israeli delegation to Washington to discuss plans to invade Rafah. But Washington responded that the resolution was not binding on Israel, on the basis that it came under Chapter Six of the UN Charter, and that it does not call for a permanent ceasefire.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lara Seligman, Joe Gould & Paul McLeary, "US Weighs Selling New Fighter Jets, Missiles and Guidance Kits to Israel," *Politico*, 1/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Qw5axx8Y>.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Crowley & Edward Wong, "Biden Administration Presses Congress on \$18 Billion Sale of F-15 Jets to Israel," *The New York Times*, 2/4/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/tw5axWwq>.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Aitken & Alba Cuebas-Fantauzzi, "Biden's Shifting Support of Israel in his Own Words: From 'Unwavering' to 'Over the Top' Criticism," *Fox News*, 28/3/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Bw5axDh6>.



In another glaring example, on March 10, after Biden said an Israeli invasion of Rafah would be a “red line”, the White House was quick to deny that the president had implied there would be any consequences against Israel for crossing it.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

In the absence of an American decision to take genuine, effective measures to force Israel to change its strategy in Gaza, Netanyahu will likely try to manoeuvre and circumvent American demands, in order to avoid a direct clash with Israel's closest ally.<sup>22</sup> That said, attention is turning to a vote set to take place in the US House of Representatives in April on a vast, \$95-billion military aid package requested by the White House for Ukraine, Taiwan and Israel.

At the time of writing, it appears that 20 Democratic representatives may vote against the package as lacks any conditions on military aid to Israel,<sup>23</sup> while the Republicans, who hold a narrow majority in the House, are also divided over aid to Ukraine. Together, this could block the package. The possibility remains that Biden, concerned about the division of his Democratic base over the war in Gaza just seven months before the presidential elections, will be forced to take actions to force Israel to respond to his demands, to placate his party's base and try to salvage his electoral chances.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Baker & Alan Yuhas, “White House Denies Biden Has Set ‘Red Lines’ for Israel-Hamas War in Gaza,” *The New York Times*, 12/3/2024, accessed on 8/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/8w5axZ98>.

<sup>22</sup> Baker.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon & Youssef.