

# Some Big Decisions: What It Will Take to Repair Israel-US Ties

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**The two allies are unlikely to agree on everything, but they need to iron out their differences given how much is at stake.**

**U**S National Security adviser Jake Sullivan’s Mideast visit this weekend is an opportunity for Washington and Jerusalem. Whether they revive their wartime ties or risk further deterioration in relations with the onset of election season in the US, and possibly Israel, remains to be seen.

Israel-US ties soured in recent months in the wake of America’s criticism of Israel’s warfighting conduct, particularly after an Israeli strike killed seven World Central Kitchen relief workers. The tension between the two countries appeared to reach a crescendo when the US refused to ship 2,000-pound bombs to Israel due to fear that they would be used during a major military attack in Rafah, causing high civilian casualties.

While coalition management during wartime is never easy, Biden-Netanyahu ties have become unusually poor, with pronounced disagreements on humanitarian aid and post-war planning, along with a host of other issues.

This dynamic sits in sharp contrast to the immediate aftermath of the October 7th atrocities, when President Biden became the first US president to visit Israel during wartime. Moreover, he won over Israelis by dispatching two aircraft carriers to the region and launching an airlift to provide Israel with all the weaponry it needed to defeat Hamas, whom he called “worse than ISIS.”

Israel and the US need to find a way forward in their troubled relationship, map their differences, and come up with a timetable to make tough decisions on weighty policy issues. If they do not, it is clear that only their shared enemies will rejoice. US-Israel friction is reviving bad perceptions among destabilizing actors like Iran and Hezbollah about the US’s ability to dictate terms to Israel. In a speech this week, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah sounded like the Arab leaders of previous generations when declaring that Biden could end the war in Gaza with a “stroke of a pen.”

Inasmuch as Biden does not control Israel, a determined effort to improve bilateral ties is needed. Otherwise, some of Biden's political advisers are sure to argue for distancing the administration from Israel, in order to woo progressive Democrats in key battleground states that could decide the November election—even if others warn against taking the American Jewish vote for granted.

With the Knesset returning next week after an extended spring recess, Netanyahu's advisers are likely telling him that he must be more attentive to threats from hard-right faction leaders Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, or risk them bringing down the government.

For now, each side seems to be stepping back from the brink. Sullivan gave a briefing on Monday that emphasized that the US supports Israel's goal of removing Hamas from power. He blamed the war squarely on Hamas, which wants to "annihilate Israel and kill as many Jews as possible," and said the US "wants to see Hamas defeated and justice delivered to [Yahya] Sinwar. There can be no equivocation on that." This is a significant departure from the tone of the State Department in recent months.

The administration also clarified to key congressional bodies that it would send a separate \$1 billion arms shipment to Israel, even as it withholds the delivery of 2,000-pound bombs. Another positive sign was a visit to Israel last week by US CENTCOM commander Gen. Michael Kurilla. Israel respects Kurilla as a vital interlocutor on many issues, including the integrated air defense structure critical to thwarting Iran's major missile and drone attack in mid-April.

Israel has also—albeit only recently—taken steps to demonstrate that it hears the US's concerns. It recently opened up four crossing points with Gaza to extend humanitarian assistance and, after months of US requests, is enabling aid to arrive via the nearby Ashdod port. Israel is also cooperating with American efforts to facilitate a new US floating dock off the coast.

All this, however, may not be enough to meaningfully reduce tensions. Rafah remains a central issue because the hostage-ceasefire talks are stalled, with Israel and Hamas at an impasse on a critical question: whether Israel will commit to ending the war for a hostage deal.

US officials suggest that the Sullivan visit will want to focus on Rafah and planning for the day after in Gaza. Israelis see the evacuation of roughly 450,000 people from Rafah within days as a signal that American fears of high-intensity fighting in a packed environment causing high civilian casualties are overblown, but the US remains unconvinced. It is hard to believe that the withheld arms shipment will go through unless the parties are able to agree on a common approach towards Rafah that would minimize casualties.

However, US statements have oscillated between opposing any move in Rafah and wanting to synchronize evacuation plans with Israel. Contrary to media reports, it seems there have been several rounds of inconclusive US-Israel consultations on Rafah evacuation. Yet, Israel will want to know that a debate over safety arrangements in Rafah is not simply camouflaged opposition to any Israeli action in Rafah.

US officials say a second priority of the Sullivan trip is post-war planning, usually called the "day after." Despite the name, this is an immediate issue. Israel wants to know whether the US is committed to an Israeli military victory, and the US wants to know that Israel is equally committed to winning the peace through a clear political strategy. How can Israel be victorious in Gaza if Hamas continues to fill the vacuum in key areas and Israel constantly has to reinvade places it has cleared multiple times, like Jabalia? So far, the US has no confidence that Israel has a strategy to consolidate its military achievements. And if Israel cannot convince the US, how will Israel convince Hamas? If Palestinians are made to choose between Hamas and chaos, Hamas will win by default. Israel often talks about pressuring Hamas, but pressure is achieved in no small measure by presenting a viable alternative leadership.

In other words, Netanyahu insists the “day after” plan is an outgrowth of a victory over Hamas, but it seems like a prerequisite for the terror group’s defeat. It is key on two fronts—both to winning northern Gaza and to giving the US the confidence that a victory in Rafah is part of a political, and not just military, strategy.

Pressure to decide on a post-war approach has regularly come from the Biden administration, but, in the last two weeks, it has also started to come from the Israeli defense establishment. IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevy reportedly informed the war cabinet last week that the IDF has been hurt by the lack of decision-making in this regard. He said: “We are now operating again and again in Jabaliya. As long as there’s no diplomatic process to develop a governing body in the Strip that isn’t Hamas, we’ll have to launch campaigns again and again in other places to dismantle Hamas’s infrastructure.”

On Wednesday, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant went further and called on Israel to make “tough decisions,” saying, “Indecision is, in essence, a decision. This leads to a dangerous course, which promotes the idea of Israeli military and civilian governance in Gaza.” He warned, “This is a negative and dangerous option for the State of Israel, strategically, militarily and from a security point of view.” He said it was critical to defeat Hamas’s military capabilities, but that such a defeat was only possible if there were alternative governing arrangements. Gallant even hinted that Netanyahu is delaying a decision on the makeup of an alternative force to control Gaza for political reasons.

Gallant also called for Palestinians to take responsibility with international backing. His point seems clear: the only way to defeat Hamas is if Israel returns the Palestinian Authority (PA) from the West Bank to Gaza. Yet, Netanyahu seemed to balk, fearful that his government would collapse due to the opposition of Smotrich and Ben Gvir. Netanyahu seems to believe that Gaza can be controlled by hiring private security contractors from abroad.

Moreover, Netanyahu faces another big decision. Sullivan has traveled frequently to Riyadh and will stop there first on this trip. The US still thinks a breakthrough on Saudi-Israeli normalization is possible. There are indications that Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman does not expect a Netanyahu government to have a timetable for a Palestinian state, but would like some indication that Israel is willing to commit to the idea that the Palestinians have a right to a state with details with crucial details to be discussed another time. However, some say even that is impossible for Netanyahu, given the current coalition.

The Biden administration also faces some fraught decisions, given its desire to avoid a regional war. Iran’s decision to directly attack Israel from its soil on April 13-14, breaking a policy in place since 1979, was a strategic earthquake whose implications for future Iranian activity, including its surging nuclear program, are still unclear. The US is likely to say it will be impossible to keep the regional coalition against Iran intact with Gaza as a persistent thorn in its side. For its part, Israel is like to say greater US resolve to confront Iran is needed to deter Tehran and its proxies.

Specifics aside, there is little doubt that when American and Israeli policies are understood to be in sync, there is a ripple effect across the region that bolsters the deterrence factors of both countries. Israel sees this as meaning there should “not be daylight” between Washington and Jerusalem, but that is too much to expect. The US and Israel are not going to accept all of the other’s policy decisions—yet Israel expects a great deal from the US, presumably all the more so now that there are several military fronts in a war that has gone for longer than almost any other in Israel’s history. Whenever expectations go up, so do demands from Washington that its concerns are adequately addressed. The two countries need to iron out major issues; they will emerge the stronger for it. Yet big challenges require big decisions. As Gallant indicated, indecision is itself a decision: one that will hinder positive developments on the ground and harm ties between the two countries.

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## RECOMMENDED

| MAY 1, 2024  |        |             |             |
|--------------|--------|-------------|-------------|
| Children     | 13,430 | 5,906       | 8,422       |
| Women        | 8,900  | 5,885       | 3,813       |
| Men          | 8,259  | 7,235       | 941         |
| Total        | 30,614 | 17,348      | 13,166      |
| MAY 16, 2024 |        |             |             |
| Children     | 14,900 | 5,640       | 8,960       |
| Women        | 9,250  | 5,324       | 4,095       |
| Men          | 8,599  | 7,407       | 1,192       |
| Total        | 31,819 | 17,071      | 14,248      |
| MAY 31, 2024 |        |             |             |
| Children     | 14,330 | 5,891       | 9,239       |
| Women        | 8,860  | 5,148       | 4,291       |
| Men          | 8,013  | 7,470       | 1,343       |
| Total        | 32,423 | 17,790      | 14,893      |
| MAY 31, 2024 |        |             |             |
| Children     | 14,590 | 6,998       | 7,662       |
| Women        | 9,502  | 5,158-5,232 | 4,260-4,424 |
| Men          | 8,544  | 5,269-9,333 | 211-375     |
| Total        | 35,488 | 23,499      | 12,197      |

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May 17, 2024

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Gabriel Epstein

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#### [How Israel's Rafah Campaign Might Shape Hezbollah's Operations](#)

May 16, 2024

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Amir al-Kaabi,  
Hamdi Malik

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