

The Imminent, Avoidable U.S.-Israel Rift Over Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Alliance management in wartime is never easy, but bilateral disagreements over how to address humanitarian and postwar issues risk becoming an enduring feature of the relationship if left unresolved.

Persistent U.S.-Israel gaps over the conduct of the Gaza war abruptly came to a head this week with three key developments in seventy-two hours. On April 1, a virtual meeting between National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and top Israeli advisors Ron Dermer and Tzachi Hanegbi regarding a possible offensive in Rafah went poorly (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-us-tells-israel-its-rafah-evacuation-plan-not-viable-in-harsh-video-call/>). Hours later, a mistaken Israeli strike (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-02/ty-article/.premium/idf-bombed-wck-aid-convoy-3-times-targeting-armed-amas-member-who-wasnt-there/0000018e-9e75-d764-adff-9eff29360000>) on a World Central Kitchen (WCK) convoy killed seven aid workers, one of them American, drawing international outrage and President Biden's harsh comments (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/02/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-world-central-kitchen-workers-in-gaza/>) about Israel's wartime conduct to date. The president then held a call (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/04/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-3/>) with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu earlier today, conditioning future U.S. policy toward the war on immediate Israeli steps to "address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers." Administration officials quickly confirmed that they expect change within days. Biden also pressed Netanyahu to empower his negotiating team to reach a deal to bring the hostages home while underscoring the need for an immediate ceasefire to protect civilians and improve the humanitarian situation—in essence keeping the two issues linked.

Although Biden did not cave to pressure from his left to immediately condition assistance to Israel after the WCK strike, these events make clear that Washington has lost patience with what it sees as Israel's insufficient response

to humanitarian needs and broader failure to lay out a clear endgame for the war. The administration did not specify the consequences if Israel does not immediately change its wartime policy—the potential repercussions likely range from delaying arms sales to delinking U.S. calls for a ceasefire from the desired hostage deal. In any case, the resounding message of urgent action was clear. Biden remains supportive of Israel’s efforts to topple Hamas from power even as the two allies spar over the conduct of the war. Yet these disagreements are far from trivial and must be addressed to ensure continued U.S. support.

Rafah

U.S. statements on Rafah over the past month have been mixed, from [conditional support](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/03/04/readout-of-vice-president-harriss-meeting-with-member-of-israeli-war-cabinet-gantz/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/03/04/readout-of-vice-president-harriss-meeting-with-member-of-israeli-war-cabinet-gantz/>) to [outright opposition](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/harris-us-ruled-consequences-israel-invades-rafah/story?id=108431225) (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/harris-us-ruled-consequences-israel-invades-rafah/story?id=108431225>) and [back again](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3719161/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-meeting-with-israeli-minist/) (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3719161/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-meeting-with-israeli-minist/>). Washington and Jerusalem also seem to have separate timelines—U.S. officials believe that safely evacuating 1.4 million people from the area and ensuring they have shelter, sanitation, food, and clean water will take “several months,” while Israeli officials close to Netanyahu believe that evacuation would take less time, perhaps three to four weeks.

Whatever the case, any operation will be complicated by the fact that the majority of Gazan civilians are now intermixed in Rafah with four remaining Hamas battalions. As part of the ongoing ceasefire negotiations—which would reportedly see forty hostages freed during a six-week pause in the fighting—Hamas is demanding that Gazans be allowed to return north en masse. Israel is understandably concerned that this would enable Hamas fighters to reconstitute themselves in the north as well, undermining battlefield successes there.

As one U.S. official told the author, the Biden administration wants a “conditions-based” Israeli commitment not to launch an operation without a solution for evacuation and service provision in the north. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant apparently suggested this approach, though Dermer and Hanegbi seemed to offer a different standard in the April 1 virtual meeting, [noting that](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/01/joint-statement-on-meeting-of-the-u-s-israel-strategic-consultative-group-2/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/01/joint-statement-on-meeting-of-the-u-s-israel-strategic-consultative-group-2/>) Israel would take U.S. humanitarian concerns “into account” without making any firm commitments on that front.

A successful ceasefire/hostage deal could delay a Rafah operation to late May or June, providing more time to ensure a successful evacuation. Yet a longer delay could extend the war through the Democratic and Republican national conventions this summer, likely providing a stage for high-profile Gaza war protests and increasing the political pressure on administration officials.

In light of these complications, Washington should press for a compromise that enables women, children, and the elderly to return to northern Gaza as soon as possible. Authorities should also use technological solutions to help civilian men return while filtering out militants seeking to hide among them. At the same time, Washington should publicly temper expectations of full or rapid civilian evacuation to the north given the serious aid provision challenge.

Humanitarian Aid

The humanitarian situation in northern Gaza reached a new crisis point after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) struck the WCK convoy on April 1. WCK quickly [suspended its operations](https://wck.org/news/gaza-team-update) (<https://wck.org/news/gaza-team-update>) in Gaza, as did another key aid NGO, [Anera](https://www.amera.org/press/unprecedented-pause-amera-suspends-gaza-operations-amid-rising-threats/) (<https://www.amera.org/press/unprecedented-pause-amera-suspends-gaza-operations-amid-rising-threats/>). UN agencies [ceased](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/un-suspends-gaza-nighttime-aid-operations-following-wck) (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/un-suspends-gaza-nighttime-aid-operations-following-wck

strike/) nighttime movements, while the United Arab Emirates **paused** (<https://www.axios.com/2024/04/02/uae-gaza-aid-pause-israel-strike-world-central-kitchen>) its involvement in the nascent maritime aid corridor. Washington is adamant that food delivery be expedited to the north, where an estimated 10-15 percent of Gazans remain and may be facing “imminent” famine (<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156872/>). Officials have also **warned** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/officials-warn-killing-of-ngo-workers-imperils-gaza-aid-could-stymie-israels-war-goals/>) that without NGOs and UN agencies distributing aid, the burden will fall on the IDF.

Israel quickly took responsibility for the strike, with IDF chief of staff Herzi Halevi calling it a grave mistake. In addition, Gallant announced that Israel would conduct a high-level investigation and establish various measures to prevent future mistakes, including a joint operations room between the IDF Southern Command, the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), and international organizations. Yet U.S. criticism of the strike has been heavy, and NGOs and foreign governments will likely remain wary of operating in northern Gaza for some time.

Even so, Israelis believe they are not getting enough credit for facilitating the daily entry of aid, which COGAT **has estimated** (<https://govextra.gov.il/cogat/humanitarian-efforts/home/>) at nearly 380,000 tons per day in ground deliveries. They also believe the Biden administration does not sufficiently appreciate the depth of Israeli public discontent regarding aid, which stems from multiple factors: the widespread suspicion that much of the aid is quickly stolen and indirectly bolsters Hamas; the belief that it is unjust to flood Gaza with aid while the hostages held there remain inaccessible to the Red Cross; and frustration over the fact that tens of thousands of southern Israeli residents are still unable to return their homes.

A more forceful approach by Netanyahu could help prevent the type of aid disruptions that have deeply frustrated Washington. In January, for example, far-right cabinet minister Itamar Ben-Gvir **facilitated** (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s1har9m56>) illegal protests inside a closed military zone that shut down the Kerem Shalom aid crossing for a week. Another far-right minister, Bezalel Smotrich, **reportedly delayed** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/transfer-of-us-sent-flour-shipment-to-gaza-begins-after-two-month-delay-caused-by-israel/) a massive U.S. flour shipment at Ashdod port for almost two months over minor bureaucratic issues.

Many Western officials believe that the easiest and most sustainable solution for delivering aid is by trucking it from Ashdod down to Gaza via the northern Erez crossing. Yet a U.S.-built floating pier is set to begin operations off the coast of northern Gaza later this month and **should be able to provide** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unlike-airdrops-maritime-aid-corridors-can-actually-help-gaza>) as many as two million meals per day directly to onshore distributors. Netanyahu could help ensure the success of both aid routes by convincing angry Israelis that this is the best path forward.

Washington has also insisted that Israel avoid using aid as a bargaining chip with Hamas. Besides the ethical problems with that approach, one might reasonably argue that Hamas is indifferent to the welfare of Gazans and therefore will not soften its position on hostages if confronted with a humanitarian crisis.

Going forward, U.S. officials should press Israel to increase the direct flow of aid to the north, in part by augmenting the current crossing point at Kerem Shalom and the small gates in the north, and by allowing aid to be screened and transported through Ashdod to Erez. They should also follow up on Gallant’s pledge of tighter IDF coordination with humanitarian organizations to avoid further tragedies. At the same time, they should remind Netanyahu that if he is seen actively providing humanitarian aid, he will likely get more breathing room to fight the war.

The Day After in Northern Gaza

Another source of U.S. frustration has been Netanyahu's lack of a clear postwar plan. Israeli officials do not want to occupy Gaza or take indefinite responsibility for civilian affairs there. Echoing the views of the wider defense establishment, Gallant has **reportedly told (<https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/geopolitics/article/15424077>)** the war cabinet that the territory can only be run by Hamas or Fatah (meaning the Palestinian Authority in practice). Yet Netanyahu is hamstrung by far-right ministers and other elements who do not want the PA to return to Gaza.

Egyptian and other Arab forces could fill temporary, project-based roles such as securing food supplies and aid distribution, but there is no long-term alternative to the PA/Fatah. Privately, officials close to Netanyahu acknowledge that Fatah members may need to form the backbone of the estimated 20,000-member transitional governing authority in Gaza—however, they do not want these personnel taking direction from or being paid by the PA. Yet U.S. officials have correctly pointed out that without a compelling alternative postwar leadership, Gazans would soon gravitate back to Hamas.

In the end, Israel's heated political environment might not allow the government to publicly support a PA role in Gaza. Yet Washington should still encourage Jerusalem to open private talks on these matters with both the Palestinian security establishment and the new PA cabinet headed by Prime Minister Muhammad Mustafa.

Political Dimensions

Netanyahu fears that either the hard right or centrist elements led by de facto opposition leader Benny Gantz will bring down his government based on various complaints—that he is being too “soft” in fighting the war, that he will not back whatever their favored stance is on drafting ultraorthodox Jews, or any number of other issues. His fear is not unfounded given the growing protests at home and **Gantz's call (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/gantz-pushes-september-election-in-first-such-call-since-joining-govt-after-oct-7/)** for early elections. He also believes President Biden is insufficiently attentive to these political needs.

Yet Biden has repeatedly incurred political risk with progressive Democrats over his staunch support for Israel, so he likely does not understand why Netanyahu is unwilling to take similar risks with the Israeli right. Ultimately, the prime minister needs to realize that U.S. policy decisions crucial to Israeli security—such as approving arms sales **and certifying (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/02/08/national-security-memorandum-on-safeguards-and-accountability-with-respect-to-transferred-defense-articles-and-defense-services/>)** that U.S. weapons are not being used in ways that violate international law—require heavy political lifting in Washington. To ease this burden, Jerusalem needs to do as much as it can on the humanitarian front.

U.S. officials believe that Netanyahu's positions on humanitarian and “day after” issues are driven more by his desire to placate Smotrich and Ben-Gvir than any substantive disagreements with Washington. Yet Israeli officials argue that the Biden administration fails to grasp just how much the enduring trauma of October 7 has affected public sentiment—indeed, Netanyahu believes that his humanitarian policy already goes beyond what the public currently supports.

To defuse this argument, Washington would have to convince Israeli leaders that they must shape public opinion in times of national crisis, not be led by it. In practice, this means taking on hardliners in the cabinet and making tough political decisions.

Conclusion

Alliance management in wartime is never easy, but the considerable gaps between the United States and Israel

risk becoming an enduring feature of the bilateral relationship if left unresolved. Appropriate public messaging, while essential, is not enough to fix all of these problems—there is no substitute for the two governments quietly ironing out their wartime policy differences via the specific measures described above.

In a war that Hamas started and refuses to end by surrendering and releasing hostages, American support has been crucial to Israel's successes. As such, the Biden administration has the standing to insist that Israel do more on ensuring that Gazan civilians are both protected and provided with sufficient humanitarian assistance. The Netanyahu-Biden call makes clear that Washington is no longer willing to maintain its current policy of comprehensive support without rapid changes. Addressing these issues properly and promptly would be a strategic success for both allies.

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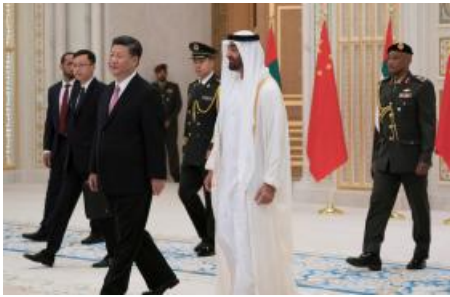
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