

PRESIDENT BIDEN'S VISIT TO ISRAEL

By
Mahrukh Khan
Research Fellow

Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Neelum Nigar

November 6, 2023

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



President Biden's latest visit to Israel on October 18, 2023, represented an exceptional demonstration of solidarity during a period of conflict, drawing parallels to his brief trip to Ukraine in February 2023. The visit placed him in a region where there is increasing sorrow and anger not only toward Israel but also toward the United States, which has expressed unwavering support for its primary Middle East ally.

President Biden made a differentiation between the Palestinian civilian population and the extremist Hamas leadership, accusing Hamas of using civilians as shields for concealing weapons and tunnels while expressing sorrow over the loss of innocent lives in Gaza following several days of Israeli airstrikes.¹ While the U.S. government appears to have softened its statements in recent days, emphasizing that Palestinian civilians should not suffer due to Hamas the damage to America's image in the Middle East is palpable. The U.S. is perceived as a country that lacks moral standing in the region.

Many Arabs argue that the U.S. government is not only indifferent to the suffering of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation but also complicit in it. American commitments of "iron-clad" support for Israel and unconditional security assistance have exacerbated these sentiments and evidently reinforced Israel's intentions of a ground invasion of Gaza. As Israel increases and expands its ground

¹ Stephen Collinson, "What Biden Did and Didn't Achieve During His Trip to Israel," *CNN*, October 18, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/middle-east-conflict-biden-israel/index.html>

invasion in Gaza, the American military has reportedly sent a three-star Marine Corps General to counsel the IDF on planning its tactical assault² along with sharing lessons and intel with their Israeli counterparts leading to more frustration with the United States across the region. Moreover, the all-out support by the Biden Administration to Israel has come under criticism at home as many in the US including officials fear that the current war could spill over into a wider regional conflagration.³

U.S. Support for Israel

Israel is the U.S.'s strongest ally in the Middle East and this has led to the closest bilateral relations in the strategic, diplomatic, military, and economic domains. America's support for a Jewish State did not emerge due to the demands of its local or international Jewish population but instead was seen as a Cold War strategy and preserving American interests in the Middle East in the long run. The military investment in Israel by the U.S. began once Israel aligned itself with anti-communism when many Arab states in the Middle East adopted arms cooperation with the Soviet Union in the 1950s.⁴

The U.S. has also been strategic in its approach when providing aid to Israel, to maintain relations with the Arab world. During the Suez Canal Crisis, the U.S. chose to support Arabs in their fight against colonial powers in the Middle East, going against Israel, France, and Britain. In the 1950s, the amount of aid flowing into Israel was reduced under the Eisenhower Doctrine.

However, in the following years since, Israel has received nearly \$120 billion in assistance.⁵ At the same time, the U.S. remains the largest contributor of aid to the Palestinians through the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In 1998, Israel received \$1.2 billion in aid to fund its troops and military installations in the occupied territories of the Palestinians set out in the UN resolution.

The U.S. has also been engaged in facilitating peaceful settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians for decades. Some of the major initiatives led by the U.S. include:

² Natasha Bertrand, Oren Liebermann, MJ Lee and Katie Bo Lillis, "US Military Advisers Invoke Lessons of Iraq in Urging Israelis to Avoid All-Out Ground Assault in Gaza," *CNN*, October 24, 2023 <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/24/politics/us-military-advisers-iraq-israel-ground-assault-gaza/index.html>

³ "Israel-Hamas War: Gaza Ground Raid 'Biggest Incursion' of Conflict So Far, as IDF 'Prepares Battlefield'," *Sky News*, October 26, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/israel-hamas-war-gaza-ground-raid-biggest-incursion-of-conflict-so-far-as-idf-prepares-battlefield-12992876>

⁴ Ariel Gomberg, "The Roots of the U.S.-Israel Relationship: How the Cold War Tensions Played a Role in U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Honors Theses, Union College*, June, 2013, <https://digitalworks.union.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1698&context=theses>

⁵ "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel: History & Overview," *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2023, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-u-s-foreign-aid-to-israel#:~:text=Since%201973%2C%20Israel%20has%20received,the%20Negev%20cost%20%245%20billion>

1. *Camp David Accords*: In 1978 President Carter assisted Egypt and Israel in signing a peace treaty. Although this was not directly related to the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, it was seen as an effort to bring some stability into the region.
2. *Madrid Conference*: In 1991 the first attempt to bring Arab and Israelis on a negotiation table. It was co-chaired by U.S. President Bush and Soviet President Gorbachev.⁶ The talks eventually failed to bring tangible results but the attempts at dialogue continued.
3. *Oslo Accords*: In 1993 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yasser Arafat representing the Palestine Liberation Organisation (which consisted of prominent politicians representing the Palestinians) signed the Declaration of Principles which aimed to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict by officially recognising one another. The Palestinian Authority was created, and the West Bank was divided into Areas A, B, and C. Years later it is seen as Israel's way of using the agreement to carry on the expansion of illegal settlements in its occupied Palestinian territories.⁷
4. *Camp David Summit*: President Clinton attempted to broker a final status agreement between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat at the Camp David Summit in 2000. The summit did not end in an agreement on any of the key issues regarding territory, the refugee situation, settlements made by the Israelis and the status of Jerusalem.
5. *Road Map for Peace*: In 2003 the Road Map for Peace, developed by the (Quartet) -- U.S., the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia -- outlined a series of steps for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The final document was released in 2003 but the initiative reached a stalemate very quickly and the plan was never adopted.
6. *Annapolis Conference*: The U.S. hosted the Annapolis Conference in 2007, another attempt to revive the peace process. It brought together Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The talks again could not bring an agreement between the two parties, particularly over Jerusalem. The conference was boycotted by Hamas, an organisation governing the Gaza Strip.

⁶ "The Madrid Conference, 1991," *Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/madrid-conference>

⁷ "What Were the Oslo Accords Between Israel and the Palestinians?" *Al Jazeera*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/what-were-oslo-accords-israel-palestinians>

7. *John Kerry's Initiative (2013-2014)*: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry led an extensive effort to revive peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. While the initiative was praised for its commitment, it ultimately did not lead to a final resolution as Hamas rejected the talks and stated that Mahmoud Abbas held no ground or support to represent the interests of the Palestinians.⁸
8. *Abraham Accords (2020)*: Under the Trump administration, the U.S. played a role in brokering the Abraham Accords, which led to the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco.⁹ It was hoped that other Arab countries would follow and negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Israel had begun but the recent escalation has put them at a pause, and once again reminded the international community of how complicated it will be to resolve this seven decades-long conflict.

Recent Developments:

President Biden's 31-hour visit to Israel, while holding significant symbolic value, also yielded some tangible outcomes. The notable achievements included the announcement of \$100 million in assistance to the Palestinian territories. Additionally, the U.S. President succeeded in securing Israel's commitment to facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and he persuaded Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sissi to authorize the reopening of a crucial land crossing into southern Gaza.

While the Biden administration expressed support for the removal of Hamas from power, it also stressed to the Israeli government that actions destroying buildings and Palestinian casualties could significantly shift global public opinion taking the focus away from the October 7 Hamas attack to the severity of the response.¹⁰

The devastating explosion at a hospital in Gaza, which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives, gave rise to widespread protests in multiple Arab nations. President Biden aligned with the Israeli assertion that the explosion was a consequence of a misfired rocket from Islamic Jihad aimed at Israel inciting outrage throughout the Arab world.

⁸ "Hamas Rejects Kerry's Announcement: Abbas Has no Authority to Negotiate," *Ynetnews*, July 20, 2013, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4407236,00.html>

⁹ "Two Years on, What is the State of the Abraham Accords?," *Middle East Institute*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/two-years-what-state-abraham-accords>

¹⁰ David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, "Biden Faces Risks in Wartime Visit to Israel," *New York Times*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/us/politics/biden-israel-trip.html>

As a result of the tragedy, Jordan cancelled a pivotal leg of President Biden's itinerary wherein he had scheduled meetings with Jordan's King Abdullah II, the Egyptian President, and the leader of the Palestinian Authority in Amman.¹¹ The Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said that the meeting would be held at a time when the parties could agree to end the “war and the massacres against Palestinians,” blaming Israel with its military campaign for pushing the region to “the brink of the abyss.”¹²

Biden's Visit to Israel -- Key Points:

- President Biden visited Israel amid the ongoing conflict. At the end of his trip, he stated that he “got it done.” He expressed unqualified support and solidarity with the Israelis and also pledged to help the Palestinians.
- He secured an agreement with Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi to open the border with Gaza to get around twenty trucks carrying humanitarian aid distributed by international officials, so it does not reach Hamas through the Rafah border crossing in Egypt.
- He advised Israel to not act in haste against Hamas in the face of the events taking hold in Israel. He cautioned the country against making similar mistakes as the U.S. did post 9/11 in its struggle to get justice.
- Biden urged Israel to not escalate the conflict and spread it to its bordering nations.
- Palestinian officials have stated that Israel is behind the bombing of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, which killed 500 people. The Israeli officials claimed it to be a misfire by Islamic Jihad, another group which is dominant in the West Bank. The attack caused an uproar which led to Jordan cancelling Biden's visit and meeting with Arab leaders after his stop in Israel. Jordan signed a peace deal with Israel in 1994 but their relations have been seen as strained over the Palestinian issue, with the Jordanian King stating in 2019 that relations with Israel were at its lowest.¹³

¹¹ Stephen Collinson, “What Biden Did and Didn't Achieve During His Trip to Israel,” *CNN*, October 18, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/18/politics/middle-east-conflict-biden-israel/index.html>

¹² “Jordan Cancels Biden Summit After Hundreds Killed in Gaza Hospital Blast,” *Al Jazeera*, October 17, 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/17/jordan-cancels-biden-summit-after-hundreds-killed-in-gaza-hospital-blast>

¹³ “Why has Jordan Cancelled Biden Visit after Bombing of Gaza hospital?” *Al Jazeera*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/18/why-has-jordan-cancelled-biden-visit-after-israel-bombing-of-gaza-hospital>

- Biden supported Israel's narrative on the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident and stated, "Based on the information we have seen today, it appears the result of an errant rocket fired by a terrorist group in Gaza."¹⁴ The White House National Security Council repeated the President's stance by adding that according to their assessment based on overhead imagery, intercepts, and open source information, it was a rocket fired by a terrorist group. However, the attack has derailed the U.S. plans of reaching an agreement on preventing the war from spreading.
- Biden promised more aid to Israel and \$100 million in funding for Palestinians. He added that Israel needs to remember that the vast majority of Palestinians were not associated with Hamas and its 'terrorist' activities.
- By the end of Biden's visit, the Israeli PM's office stated that food, water, and medicines would be allowed to reach southern Gaza through Egypt, but no aid would enter through Israel until the Israeli citizens (more than 200) taken hostage by Hamas were released.
- Biden intended to ask the U.S. Congress for more than \$2 billion in aid for Israel and Ukraine.¹⁵

US Vetoes UN Security Council Resolution

Separately, the United States exercised its veto power at the UN Security Council to reject a draft resolution that called for a humanitarian ceasefire in the besieged Gaza Strip. This action generated further criticism of the perceived political impasse within the global organization. The draft resolution, originally proposed by Brazil, denounced the October 7 'terrorist' attacks in Israel carried out by the Palestinian group Hamas, which resulted in the death of more than 1,400 individuals. It also urged the release of hostages and called upon all parties involved to adhere to international law while safeguarding the lives of civilians in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, which was experiencing a forceful response from Israeli airstrikes. The draft resolution advocated for the international community to facilitate "humanitarian pauses" in the hostilities to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid.

¹⁴ "Biden Vows Aid for Gaza, Israel as Protests Rock Middle East," *Reuters*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-heads-middle-east-inflamed-by-gaza-hospital-blast-2023-10-18/>

¹⁵ "President Biden Wraps Up His Visit to Wartime Israel With a Warning Against Being 'Consumed' By Rage," *Associated Press*, October 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-israel-hamas-gaza-palestinians-a85cb682fdc61b80285cf4ab354354ce>

The U.S. decision to veto has faced harsh criticism, especially in light of the recent events in Gaza where the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital was attacked. The U.S. Ambassador to UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield explained her country's veto in the Council chamber saying: "This resolution did not mention Israel's right of self-defence."¹⁶ The U.S. Ambassador further defended the decision by stating that they were doing serious work on the ground through direct diplomacy. This is not the first time Israel has been protected by the U.S. from a Security Council action.¹⁷

The Russian ambassador called out the U.S. for its 'hypocrisy and double standards.'¹⁸ Russia had also drafted a resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza which failed to pass on 16 October, 2023. It was rejected by France, Japan, the UK, and the U.S. The UN aid chief Martin Griffiths stated in the Security Council that there needs to be a decision made as soon as possible by all relevant parties to provide access to humanitarian aid in all parts of Gaza. The draft resolution (proposed by Russia) called for a humanitarian ceasefire, release of hostages, aid access and safe evacuation of civilians. If adopted, the resolution would have condemned all violence and hostilities against civilians and all acts of terrorism; unequivocally rejected and condemned the terrorist attacks by Hamas that took place in Israel starting on 7 October; called for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages; evacuation of civilians and UN staff to and relocation in southern Gaza; continuous, sufficient and unhindered provision of essential goods and services to civilians, including electricity, water, fuel, food and medical supplies, under international humanitarian law and protection of all medical personnel and humanitarian personnel, as well as hospitals and medical facilities, consistent with international humanitarian law.¹⁹

Subsequently, the UNGA adopted a resolution calling for an "immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce" between Israeli forces and Hamas in Gaza; demanding "continuous, sufficient and unhindered" provision of lifesaving supplies and services for civilians trapped inside the enclave, as news reports suggest Israel has expanded ground operations and intensified its bombing campaign.²⁰ The non-binding Jordanian resolution was adopted with **120 votes in favor, 14 against and 45 abstentions**. The draft expressed grave concern at the escalation of violence and the

¹⁶ "Israel-Gaza Crisis: US Vetoes Security Council Resolution," *United Nations*, 18 October, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142507>

¹⁷ "US Vetoes UN Security Council Action on Israel, Gaza," *Reuters*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-vetoes-un-security-council-action-israel-gaza-2023-10-18/>

¹⁸ "Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Calling for Humanitarian Pauses in Israel-Gaza Crisis on Account of Veto by United States," *United Nations*, October 18, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15450.doc.htm>

¹⁹ "Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Calling for Humanitarian Pauses in Israel-Gaza Crisis on Account of Veto by United States," *United Nations*, October 18, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15450.doc.htm>

²⁰ "UN General Assembly Adopts Gaza Resolution Calling for Immediate and Sustained 'Humanitarian Truce'," *United Nations*, October 26, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142847>

deterioration of the situation in the region, resulting in civilian casualties. It emphasized the protection of civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law in Israel including the occupied Palestinian territory, and East Jerusalem as the humanitarian crisis before the Gaza Strip led to a threat to peace and security in the region. It further expressed deep concern at the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and at its grave impact on the civilian population, especially children, and underlined the need for full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access.

Conclusion

The roles of the U.S. and the UN in the Israel-Palestine conflict are complex and have evolved. The U.S. is viewed as a key ally of Israel, providing diplomatic, financial, and military support. President Biden and his administration are adhering to a well-established protocol in Washington, wherein they express unwavering support for Israel and its 'legitimate right to self-defence' against rocket attacks by Hamas while ignoring the genocidal trajectory of the conflict. U.S. unequivocal support to Israel has led Tel Aviv on an apocalyptic military and humanitarian siege in Gaza. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution affirming their support for Israel, its right to self-defence and condemning Hamas's attacks on civilians the Senate Foreign Relations Committee listed ninety-nine of the 100 senators co-sponsored the resolution.²¹

The UN, on the other hand, has sought to address the potential of broader regional conflict and the rights of Palestinian refugees while also striving for peace and a two-state solution. The deliberations within the United Nations Security Council are marked by divisions and ongoing challenges in reaching a consensus regarding the imposition of either a ceasefire or a humanitarian pause that would facilitate the provision of essential aid to the beleaguered population residing in the Gaza Strip. These difficulties primarily stem from inherent political disparities and disagreements among the Council's member states.

²¹ Morgan Rimmer, "Senate Passes Bipartisan Resolution Affirming Support For Israel," *CNN*, October 19, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/19/politics/senate-passes-israel-bipartisan-resolution/index.html>