

A Reporter at Large

How Biden Enabled Israel's Aggression Toward Gaza—and Iran

Top officials from the previous Administration now express regret over their failure to rein in Netanyahu.

By David D. Kirkpatrick

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Jake Sullivan, Biden's former national-security adviser, told me, "I will say straightforwardly—we should have put more pressure on Israel to take a different approach." Photograph by Saher Alghorra / NYT / Redux



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On March 5, 2024, five months into the war in Gaza, Mirjana Spoljaric, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, sent a confidential letter to President Joe Biden. Under the Geneva Conventions, the Red Cross holds a unique responsibility to counsel states about avoiding war crimes. In the letter, which I obtained from a former United States official, Spoljaric reminded Biden that the organization had condemned the “horrific” October 7th massacre of Israelis by Hamas, and remained “relentless” in pressing the group to release the hostages it had taken. But she was now appealing to Biden “with profound alarm” because Israel, which had been pummeling Gaza with heavy munitions since October, was ignoring the Red Cross as never before. “The way the hostilities are being conducted by Israel is incompatible” with the laws of armed conflict, she wrote, “particularly the obligations to protect civilians and distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian infrastructure, to ensure dignified treatment of detainees and the dead, to protect medical installations and personnel, and to provide and enable access of humanitarian aid.”

Allowing the Red Cross to visit detainees during a war or an occupation is one of the brightest lines established by the Geneva Conventions. Yet, after October 7th, Israel, for perhaps the first time in its history, fully blocked the organization’s access to Palestinian detainees from Gaza and the West Bank, putting it in the company of pariah states such as North Korea and Eritrea; even the warring factions in Yemen allowed Red Cross visits. Spoljaric noted that humanitarian groups and journalists had reported a “massive surge” in the number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. At least a thousand had been released

back into Gaza, and many of them gave accounts of torture, even though the Israeli military had concluded that they were not Hamas fighters. The *Times* reported that one released detainee, a law student named Fadi Bakr, described being beaten so severely that his genitals turned blue and blood still appeared in his urine weeks later. He said that Israeli guards had played music so loudly that one of his ears bled. (An Israeli military spokesman told the *Times* that the captors followed “Israeli and international law” and played music at a “low volume,” to prevent detainees from coordinating.) But the Red Cross couldn’t address such allegations: Spoljaric said that Israel had suspended all “legal-operational dialogue.”

To try to influence Hamas to release hostages, Spoljaric had appealed to Qatar and other patrons of the group; she now implored Biden to “bring about an immediate change” in Israel’s conduct. An appendix to the letter cited U.S. laws and Administration policies that prohibited the transferring of weapons likely to be used in war crimes, and Spoljaric urged Biden to withhold weapons “that should not be used in densely populated areas, in light of their devastating humanitarian impacts.” She warned Biden that failing to “uphold minimum standards of humanity” would be a “moral defeat” that “future generations are unlikely to forgive us for failing to avert.”

Two years after Spoljaric’s letter, President Donald J. Trump ordered the U.S. military to join Israel in attacking Iran. Some former senior officials in the Biden Administration told me that, in certain ways, the war in Iran was an extension of the Gaza conflict. Iran had been central to Biden’s thinking about the Middle East, several top advisers said. He’d feared that any public pressure the U.S. put on Israel—any “daylight” between the allies—could invite attacks by Iran or its Lebanese client, Hezbollah. The U.S. would then be compelled to defend Israel in a regional conflagration. Brett McGurk, Biden’s White House coordinator for the Middle East and probably his most influential adviser, championed this position, arguing that rock-solid support for Israel

would help contain Iran, whose proxies killed three U.S. soldiers in the region during the first months of the Gaza conflict.

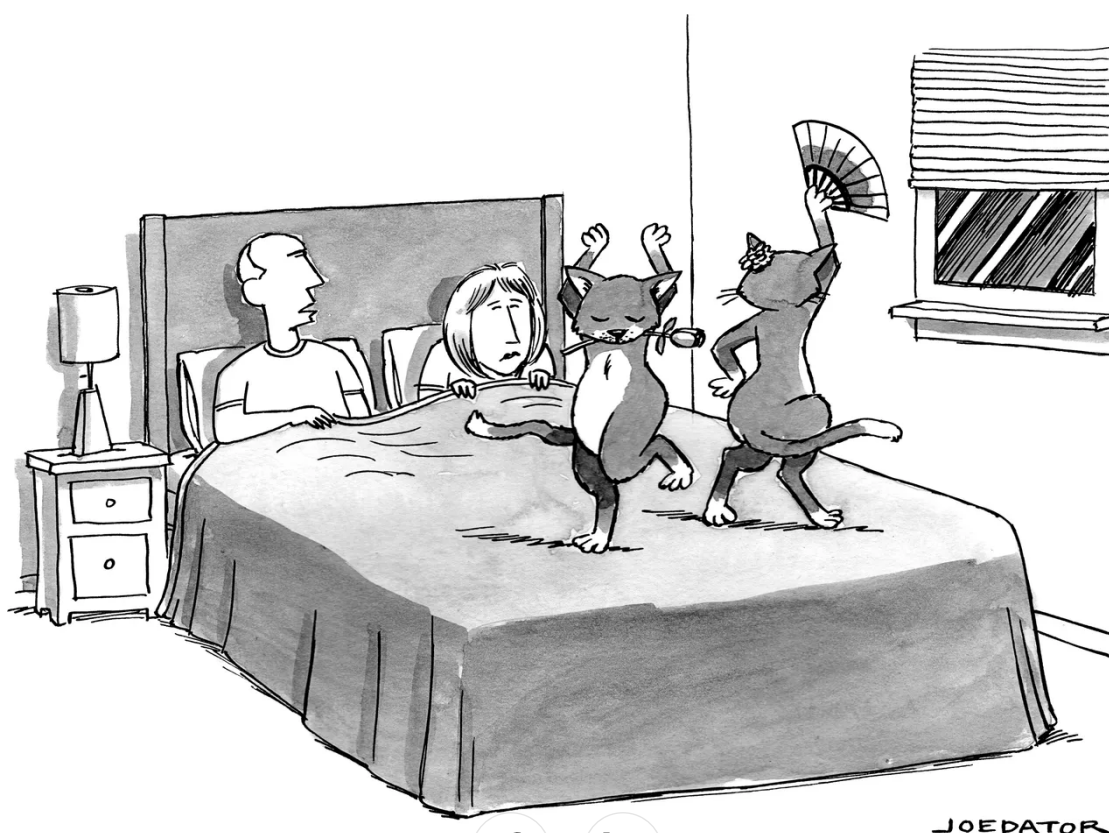
At the same time, the Biden Administration's staunch public backing of Israel during the Gaza war had created what Philip Gordon, the national-security adviser to Vice-President Kamala Harris, described to me as a "moral hazard"—it had invited the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to try to expand the battle into a regional one. Even though Biden and his advisers privately told Netanyahu many times not to provoke Iran, the Israelis repeatedly blindsided the Americans by doing exactly that: a January, 2024, strike on Damascus killed five senior Iranian military advisers; an April, 2024, strike on an Iranian diplomatic mission in Syria killed more than a dozen; a July, 2024, strike in Tehran assassinated a top Hamas political leader; a September, 2024, operation in Lebanon detonated explosives planted in thousands of walkie-talkies and pagers carried by Hezbollah fighters; a subsequent air strike killed Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. The Israelis gave U.S. officials no meaningful warning in advance of these attacks, and, in what a former White House official called a "humiliation" of Biden, Netanyahu ordered the Nasrallah assassination just two days after the U.S., France, and several other allies called for Israel and Hezbollah to observe a three-week ceasefire. Yet the White House never publicly criticized Israel for acting unilaterally—and each time one of these actions triggered a clash the U.S. felt compelled to defend Israel. In April and October of 2024, the U.S. helped fend off Iranian counterstrikes so effectively that Israel suffered little harm. After the second round, Biden sent Israel about a hundred U.S. service members and a missile-defense system.

Some Biden advisers privately lamented the fact that U.S. protection was unintentionally encouraging Netanyahu's brinkmanship. Gordon told me, "We could advise them very firmly—and Biden did that with Bibi repeatedly—'Goddammit, take the win and don't drag us into a further war.' But the

Israelis knew we were going to defend them.” Lloyd Austin, Biden’s Secretary of Defense, reportedly likened Netanyahu to a gambler “playing with house money.”

As part of these clashes, Israel twice launched significant air strikes on Iran—the second time ravaging Iran’s air defenses. Several Biden Administration officials told me that Netanyahu tried to go further. He sought American support for additional attacks on Iranian infrastructure, and he backed down only reluctantly. But Netanyahu had been asking the U.S. to help him attack Iran for more than fifteen years, and Biden’s team felt certain that he’d try again. A former senior Pentagon official told me that, after Trump won the 2024 election, Biden advisers warned their successors that, with Iran the most “vulnerable” it had been in decades, “the Israelis were not going to let this opportunity go.” (A former Trump transition official disputed this account.)

Trump went along with Netanyahu. In June, 2025, the Israelis conducted an extended assault that appeared partly aimed at overturning the Iranian government. After about a week, Trump directed the U.S. military to join in a night of air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, perhaps because he feared missing out on a chance to take credit for the blow. But when Trump and Netanyahu launched a surprise attack eight months later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio explained that, this time, the President had decided to strike Iran “preëmptively,” because “there was going to be an Israeli action” that “would precipitate an attack against American forces.” Trump later claimed, unconvincingly, that he’d taken the lead with the Israelis and might even “have forced their hand”; Rubio’s account more credibly suggested that the Trump Administration had believed it couldn’t stop Israel from launching an attack but would nonetheless shoulder any backlash—a pattern painfully familiar to the Biden White House. Indeed, in retrospect, Biden and his closest advisers seem to have been perversely passive about Israel’s dissembling and defiance, especially when it came to the protection of Palestinian civilians.



“We should never have taught them flamenco.”

Cartoon by Joe Dator

Jake Sullivan, Biden’s former national-security adviser, told me that Biden and his advisers had often privately debated ways to restrain Israel. Inside the Oval Office, Sullivan said, “we repeatedly raised and discussed options for withholding weapons,” but, excluding the suspension of one shipment of bombs, “the President always deferred on that decision, because we kept thinking that we were close to getting a deal” for a hostage release and a ceasefire. Sullivan said, “When you look back at it in the cold light of day, the trap in that kind of thinking is easier to recognize.” He added, “I will say straightforwardly—we should have put more pressure on Israel to take a different approach.”

The Israel Defense Forces say that they always follow the laws of armed conflict and try to minimize civilian harm. But alarms about potential war crimes began ringing inside the Biden Administration soon after Israel began its counterattack on Gaza. By November 1, 2023, the Palestinian death toll was at least eighty-eight hundred, including more than fifty-eight hundred women and children. Israeli jets were conducting as many as eight hundred strikes a day on northern Gaza, and Administration officials who were closely tracking the war told me that Israeli military planners could not possibly have preselected or so quickly identified that many legitimate military targets, such as tunnel entrances, rocket launchers, and Hamas leaders. Nor could the Israelis have carefully weighed whether the risk to civilian lives and infrastructure was proportionate to the military value of each target. Startlingly, the strikes appeared to move in a geographical line from the northeast to the southwest, flattening whole neighborhoods in a way that suggested little differentiation between civilian and military structures. Biden's Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, anxiously asked his staff how Israel could justify this scale of destruction. A senior State Department official told me, "We were all shocked at how aggressive and deadly it was, and asking, 'What the fuck are they doing?' "

The *Times* later reported that, on the day of the Hamas massacre, the Israeli military formally revised its "rules of engagement" so that mid-level officers could authorize strikes that risked killing up to twenty civilians in order to take out a rank-and-file Hamas fighter. Previous rules had allowed strikes that risked up to five civilian deaths, or in certain cases ten. Former U.S. officials pointed me to an article in the Tel Aviv-based news site +972 about the war's first weeks, which they said was consistent with intelligence reports. According to the article, during this period Israeli war planes deliberately targeted civilian structures such as office towers, apartment buildings, government ministries, utility companies, banks, and universities. Israel used phone calls, texts, and

air-dropped flyers to warn civilians to evacuate, but, the article reported, it appeared to be more lax about those precautions than it had been during previous conflicts. These “power targets,” which were attacked in an effort to terrorize Palestinians into pressuring Hamas to capitulate, accounted for about half the strikes in the first five days of Israel’s air campaign. (A spokesman for the I.D.F. denied to me that it had hit civilian targets to pressure the population.)

Blocking humanitarian aid as a method of warfare violates the laws of armed combat, and a decades-old U.S. law bars the provision of weapons to any government that restricts the delivery of American-supported assistance. Before the war, Gaza imported about five hundred truckloads of food and supplies each day, through multiple border crossings. Two days after October 7th, Israel shut all the crossings down. Yoav Gallant, Israel’s Defense Minister, said that he’d ordered a “complete siege”: “No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel—everything will be closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly.”

Blinken flew to Israel a few days later. He met with Netanyahu and Gallant, and, according to people present, told them that letting in food was not only “a moral responsibility” but also “a strategic imperative and a legal imperative.” Yet Netanyahu wouldn’t budge until Blinken threatened to cancel a planned visit by Biden. Even then, Netanyahu agreed to let in only a small amount of supplies, which would have to come through Rafah, on Gaza’s border with Egypt; he also asked that this minor concession remain secret. He feared a domestic backlash for *not* starving Gaza’s women, children, and other civilians. Biden made his visit, and as he left Netanyahu bragged publicly that he’d defied the President. He declared that Israel “will not allow humanitarian assistance” from “our territory into the Gaza Strip.”

The Israeli military was so resistant to allowing in humanitarian aid that,

virtually every day during the conflict, Blinken and Sullivan had to spend part of their limited time with Israeli officials haggling over such details as the number of trucks that could enter Gaza. Israeli inspectors maintained a constantly shifting list of items that were barred for having potential “dual uses” as weapons—fertilizer might be used in explosives, tent poles might become javelins, and so on. Certain medical equipment was sometimes forbidden, including oxygen cylinders, X-ray machines, and even childbirth kits (which held small scissors). And any truck containing a single forbidden item could be turned back, no matter how innocuous the rest of its contents.

In December, 2023, two months into the war, United Nations staff in Gaza reported to the State Department that the I.D.F. had been depositing scores of Palestinian detainees at a Gaza border crossing at night, in the freezing cold. They had been cleared of any military role in Hamas, and many said that they’d experienced horrific abuse. The State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor took steps to invoke the decades-old U.S. statutes known as the Leahy Laws, named for the former senator Patrick Leahy, which block the provision of assistance to any military unit credibly accused of a “gross violation” of human rights. But, under a special procedure negotiated with Israel, this process happened behind closed doors over many months, and it had no effect on Israel’s actions in Gaza.

The scorched-earth tactics of Israel’s assault concerned the Biden Administration for hard-nosed reasons. Biden and his team had entered office determined to restore at least symbolic American support for the formation of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank. Given that roughly equal numbers of Muslims and Jews lived in territory now under Israeli control, the logic went, peaceful coexistence with a Palestinian state was the only way to keep Israel secure, Jewish, and democratic—and was therefore a core American national interest, even if Netanyahu and members of his Cabinet had repeatedly vowed never to allow it. Former officials told me that, during

Biden's first year in office, Blinken had challenged Netanyahu: "No one's going anywhere, no matter what some people on both sides want. So how does this end?"

After winning the 2016 election, Trump, disdainful of international law and untroubled about the fate of the Palestinians, became the only President in fifty years not to support Palestinian self-rule. But Biden's Presidential transition team drew up detailed plans to restore what Trump had undone. The Biden Administration would promptly reinstate a fifty-year-old U.S. policy declaring Jewish settlements in the West Bank to be in violation of international law; reimpose a requirement that imports from the West Bank be labelled as such, rather than as "Made in Israel"; and reopen the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem, which had served as a de-facto diplomatic mission to the Palestinians. A former transition planner described the strategy to me as "rip the Band-Aid off."

By October 7, 2023, Biden still hadn't carried out these plans, which have not previously been disclosed, in part because of anticipated Israeli pushback. But some U.S. officials, led by Blinken, attempted a new gambit to bring about Palestinian statehood. Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, had signalled a willingness to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for access to U.S. nuclear technology. He was happy to accept only lip service from Israel about the future of the Palestinians, but Blinken and other U.S. diplomats pushed the Saudis to demand a more ironclad commitment to a two-state solution. Former officials told me that, inside the White House, Blinken argued that normalization was "the one leverage point we had" to get Israel to reopen "a pathway for the Palestinians."

The apparently indiscriminate Israeli bombing that followed October 7th also undermined other Biden Administration priorities. Austin, Biden's Secretary of Defense, was a retired Army general who had fought in every major U.S. military action since 9/11. He often said he'd learned that causing unnecessary

civilian harm made it harder for a military to achieve its objectives, from capturing territory to defeating an insurgency. “You create more terrorists,” Austin said. Under his influence, Biden had done more than any President since the Second World War to institutionalize the wartime protection of civilians. In his first foreign-policy address, Biden announced that he was cutting off Saudi Arabia’s access to some of the American-made munitions that it had been dropping on Yemen for six years. These air strikes, intended to defeat the Iranian-backed side of the Yemeni civil war, had killed more than eighteen thousand civilians, at an average rate of more than three thousand a year—a number that was considered astronomical before Israel’s campaign in Gaza. Blockades by the Saudis and the Emiratis led to a famine that killed many thousands more. Echoing Austin, Biden called the Yemen war a “humanitarian and strategic catastrophe” that “has to end.” The factions reached a ceasefire the next year.

One of Austin’s signature achievements as Secretary of Defense was the adoption of a formal policy to reduce civilian harm by U.S. forces and their military partners. Biden’s State Department committed to a complementary policy—Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance—mandating an investigation of any report that a foreign military had deliberately, or even negligently, used U.S. weapons to hurt civilians. In early 2023, Biden issued a policy banning a transfer of U.S. weapons if they were “more likely than not” to be used in war crimes—even without proof of a specific atrocity. A State Department press release said that the policy codified “the principles the Administration have been operating under since Day-1.”

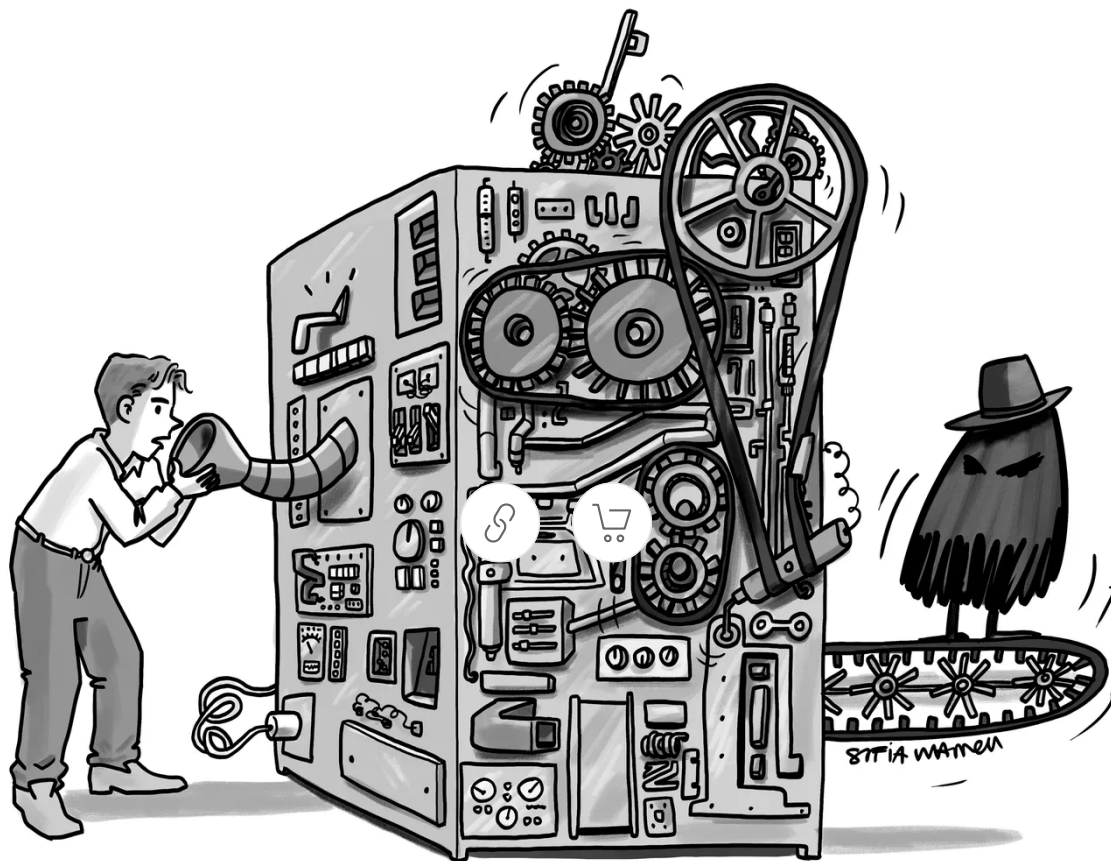
Everyone who spoke to me insisted that Biden—whatever indications later emerged of his cognitive decline—played a vigorous role in Gaza policy. He bragged that his experience in the region extended back to the early seventies, when he’d visited Israel as a senator, and he remained so confident in his expertise that he often patronized even his most senior advisers. Blinken,

who was sixty-one on October 7th, had worked at Biden's side for decades, in the Senate and in the Obama White House. His position at the State Department put at his disposal the insights of the U.S. Foreign Service, which included seasoned diplomats who, unlike the circle around Biden, had spent years living in the Middle East. Sullivan, who was forty-six at the start of the conflict, was a former Rhodes Scholar and Supreme Court clerk who'd been at the center of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment for more than a decade. Yet, White House officials told me, Biden sometimes brusquely dismissed the views of both men, raising his voice as though berating children. (Biden, through a spokesperson, declined to speak with me.)

After the horrors of the October 7th attack, no one in the Administration questioned Israel's right to retaliate. Nor did anyone question the imperative for U.S. military backing. But the White House disagreed with Netanyahu about how best to crush Hamas. Biden, Blinken, and Sullivan all worried privately that the ferocity of Israel's retaliation could put U.S. forces at risk, complicate negotiations to release the hostages, and undermine the region's long-term stability.

Several days after the attack, Netanyahu surprised the White House by ordering preëemptive air strikes against Hezbollah. As Israeli warplanes were preparing to bomb Lebanon, Biden, in a hurried phone call, urged Netanyahu to ground them, stressing that the U.S. wasn't yet ready to defend its forces or Israel from any blowback. One U.S. aircraft-carrier group had just arrived in the region, but a second was still on the way. A newly formed Israeli war cabinet, part of an emergency unity government, was already divided over the wisdom of the attack, and Netanyahu agreed to call it off. But Biden's appeals for restraint were less successful once those U.S. forces were in place.

MACHINE THAT EXTERNALIZES YOUR PROBLEMS



Cartoon by Sofia Warren

The next week, in a speech from Tel Aviv, Biden publicly acknowledged his concerns, advising Israelis to avoid the mistakes that the U.S. had made in its responses to 9/11. “While you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it,” he said, adding, “The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas.” Privately, Biden and his advisers used the visit to Israel to try to persuade Netanyahu’s war cabinet to postpone an invasion of Gaza. The Americans warned—correctly, as it turned out—that Israeli troops would get bogged down in a ground war that would hinder efforts to negotiate the release of the hostages, a dozen of whom held American passports. An invasion would also drive Hamas further underground. The Biden team argued that precision strikes facilitated by U.S.

intelligence could kill the greatest number of culpable leaders faster and more effectively. That had been the lesson of America's wars against the Taliban, the Iraqi insurgency, and ISIS, and the White House dispatched a three-star general and other senior officers to share with the I.D.F. their battlefield experience.

At one meeting, McGurk made this case to Benny Gantz, a former Israeli Defense Minister and a moderate rival of Netanyahu who had joined the war cabinet. According to people familiar with the meeting, Gantz insisted that Israeli troops had to move into Gaza immediately, both to extinguish the Hamas threat and to deter other enemies. On a piece of paper, he sketched a map of how the territory should look after the operation: divided into sections by an Israeli-controlled corridor, and surrounded by a cordon of Israeli military forces, so that "anyone looking into Gaza would see the backs of Israeli soldiers." (Netanyahu and other Israeli officials seldom articulated such specific goals, yet the I.D.F. now occupies these positions, and more, in Gaza.)

Several senior Biden advisers told me that they'd privately pushed to get Netanyahu to clarify Israel's objectives. On October 7th, he vowed to "destroy" Hamas and turn anywhere it operated "into rubble." This sounded to them like a promise to kill every last fighter—an impossible goal that would lead to endless war. Moreover, officials across the Administration agreed that any lasting defeat of Hamas would require a credible alternative Palestinian government to assume control of Gaza.

A paper circulated by the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs argued that Biden should follow the model of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Before Roosevelt sent U.S. troops to defend Britain from Hitler, he'd required Winston Churchill to sign the Atlantic Charter, which clarified that the Allies were fighting to liberate Europe, not to preserve Britain's colonial empire in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. By this logic, the U.S. had the most leverage to get Israel to commit to a realistic goal for the war before

expediting weapons sales and committing to billions of dollars in assistance.

The three-star general and his delegation also attempted to get the I.D.F. to define its operation more concretely. Eventually, on November 1, 2023, during a diplomatic summit in Tokyo, Blinken unveiled a wish list of “key elements” that the U.S. sought in postwar Gaza, including “no forcible displacement of Palestinians,” “no re-occupation of Gaza,” “no reduction of territory in Gaza,” and “Gaza unified with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority”—the Western-backed governing body once envisioned as the nucleus of a future state.

The next day, Christopher Le Mon, the deputy assistant secretary for the State Department’s bureau of human rights and one of the Administration’s most vocal critics of Israel’s conduct, sent Blinken a classified note urging him to warn Netanyahu of the Biden Administration rule banning the transfer of weapons “more likely than not” to be used in war crimes, and of the requirement to investigate specific allegations of harm done to civilians. In public appearances, Le Mon wrote, U.S. officials should avoid “dismissing civilian harm as inevitable.”

Blinken flew to Tel Aviv, and in a television interview he appeared to echo Le Mon by observing that Israel’s failure to protect civilians “plays into the hands of Hamas.” But he said nothing publicly about war crimes or U.S. obligations.

In December, 2023, when the Palestinian death toll surpassed seventeen thousand, Defense Secretary Austin declared in a speech that better protecting civilians was “a strategic imperative”: “If you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.” (In a television interview, the Republican senator Lindsey Graham called Austin “naïve,” claiming that Palestinians were already “radicalized” and taught “to hate the Jews.”) Blinken met with Israel’s war cabinet and argued that no military

operation alone could kill an ideology like Hamas's.

Still, Netanyahu refused to spell out a more feasible objective of the military operation. In fact, he expanded his stated goal to “total victory”—whatever that meant. And Biden and his advisers all but gave up on pinning him down. Amos Hochstein, a senior adviser to the President who was born in Jerusalem to American parents, told me, “We tried, but we had no chance of success, in retrospect, because Netanyahu wasn’t talking to us—he was talking to his own public.” Indeed, senior White House officials described themselves to me as almost powerless in the face of Israel’s emotional response to October 7th. Blinken told me, “This was a societal trauma that, rightly or wrongly, was seen as existential.”

A senior Israeli official involved in conversations with the White House said that there’d been a pervasive “mentality gap.” Whereas the Americans sought detailed advance planning, the Israelis demanded immediate military action, even though each step had to be improvised. Moreover, the official said, Netanyahu feared that declaring specific end goals in Gaza would set off disputes in his Cabinet and fracture his fragile coalition. In any case, the Biden Administration’s grudging acquiescence now looks like the beginning of a pattern of credulous capitulation. Even as Blinken outlined America’s vision for postwar Gaza, Netanyahu was already defying it. Israel had ordered open-ended evacuations from Gaza City that resembled forcible displacement. Netanyahu had rejected any role in Gaza for the Palestinian Authority (without publicly endorsing an alternative). He had also hinted at an occupation, vowing that after the war Israel would assume “over-all military responsibility” for Gaza.

Nevertheless, in December, 2023, Biden went around Congress to authorize the emergency sale of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons to Israel. Soon after, he pushed Congress to pass an additional \$8.7-billion assistance package,

which he signed into law in April, 2024. The Biden Administration ultimately agreed to sell Israel more than twenty billion dollars' worth of weapons during the Gaza campaign, on top of the \$3.8 billion in military aid that the U.S. provided annually. Whatever Administration officials were saying behind the scenes, these commitments of military assistance publicly conveyed full-throated support for Israel's vague goal of "total victory."

Whether and how to use America's military support as leverage to restrain the Israeli operation was debated for months inside the White House. About seventy per cent of Israel's weapons, including nearly all its missiles, aircraft, and bombs, came from the U.S. Finding an alternative supply during a war would have been almost unthinkable.

Jon Finan, Biden's deputy national-security adviser, was a former correspondent for the *Washington Post* who had covered previous Israeli military operations in Gaza. Finan oversaw a small team of National Security Council staffers who presented various ways to restrict Israel's use of U.S. weapons without undermining its security. These included withholding America's largest bombs, which the Red Cross had deemed inappropriate for use in densely populated areas like Gaza; withholding some exclusively offensive weapons; and allowing the use of certain weapons only outside Gaza. Biden had already vowed that the U.S. would severely punish any opportunistic attack on Israel. ("Don't. Don't. Don't," he warned more than once.) Surely, some American officials argued, the threat of superpower retaliation would help deter Iran or its allies, even if the U.S. was simultaneously limiting Israel's assault on Gaza.

During the first months of the war, Biden and his top advisers began debating whether the President should deliver what some called a "tough love" speech, bypassing Netanyahu and addressing Israelis directly. Biden, in the weeks after his empathetic speech in Tel Aviv, was more popular in Israel than its Prime Minister. Capitalizing on that credibility, Biden would argue that an all-out war,

though it might satisfy a hunger for revenge, would needlessly harm innocent civilians, isolate Israel, and doom Israeli Jews to perpetual conflict with a growing Palestinian population under Israeli rule. By contrast, pursuing a narrower fight against the terrorists behind the October 7th attack could free the hostages, bring about normalized relations with Saudi Arabia, and possibly lead to a secure coexistence with a Palestinian state. If this path were pursued, the U.S. would assure Israel's security at every step. There was no guarantee that such a speech would convince Israelis. But it would at least clarify that the Biden Administration would be making its own judgments about U.S. interests—not simply deferring to Netanyahu.

But Biden and his advisers remembered previous diplomatic and political tangles with Israel over Gaza. In 2014, President Barack Obama had responded to a clash between Israel and Hamas by saying that he was “deeply concerned” about the disproportionate killing of Palestinian civilians. After two days of fighting, Obama publicly offered to help mediate a ceasefire; after twelve days, he pressed Israel to declare one unilaterally. Congressional Republicans, and some Democrats, torched him for rewarding “terrorists,” and Netanyahu defiantly waged a seven-week ground invasion anyway. The Israeli death toll was seventy-three; about twenty-two hundred Palestinians died. So when another round of violence broke out in May, 2021, Biden chose to publicly express only support for Israel's response. Israeli air strikes destroyed scores of civilian buildings, including several residential towers, fifty-three schools, seventeen medical facilities, and the bureaus of both Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. At least two hundred and sixty Palestinians were killed; rockets from Gaza killed thirteen Israelis. But Biden didn't join calls for a ceasefire until Israel's military leaders signalled their readiness. White House officials boasted anonymously to journalists that Biden's “hug-Bibi strategy”—“I don't agree with you, but I love you”—had ended the fighting in eleven days, more quickly than Obama's public hectoring had. For Biden, a

senior White House official told me, the episode reinforced the sense that “public daylight between the U.S. and Israel could actually be counterproductive.”



After a meeting with Biden, Netanyahu bragged publicly that he'd defied the President. He declared that Israel “will not allow humanitarian assistance” from “our territory into the Gaza Strip.” Photograph by Samuel Corum / Sipa / Bloomberg / Getty

The “no daylight” approach was especially appealing to the White House in the months after October 7th because Netanyahu and Ron Dermer, his longtime adviser and emissary to Washington, kept insisting that they expected the fighting to be over very soon. “Just two more weeks,” they repeatedly promised. As one White House official told me, “If it is just a few more weeks, why have a huge fight with Israel?” Another official said, “We thought that this could, would, and should be over in December.”

Yet Israeli leaders frequently said that some new revelation—about the extent of Hamas’s tunnel network, for example—had forced an extension of their battle plan. After the death toll from Israel’s assault on Gaza City hit ten thousand, Blinken personally implored Dermer, Netanyahu, and Michael Herzog, the Israeli Ambassador to Washington, “Don’t do in the south what you did in the north!” But, on December 1, 2023, Israel laid siege to Khan Younis, in the middle of the Strip, and by December 20th the total death toll had hit twenty thousand. Sullivan then demanded assurances from Dermer and Herzog that the campaign wouldn’t extend further, according to two officials familiar with the conversations: “After Khan Younis, you are going to want to go to Rafah!” The Israeli officials insisted, “No, no, no, we are not going to go after Rafah!” Yet, by January, 2024, Netanyahu had signalled that Israel would indeed take Rafah, and he soon accused anyone who questioned that plan—implicitly, Biden—of “essentially telling us, ‘Lose the war.’ ” Netanyahu promised, “We won’t capitulate to any pressure.”

In early 2024, Blinken told Dermer, “I don’t want to hear that phrase ‘two more weeks’ ever again!” Dermer responded with a joke: “O.K., I will say ‘fortnight.’ ” Blinken told me, of the Israelis, “Were they being genuine, or were they being disingenuous? I think it’s a combination.” He added, “I would take them at their word, certainly into very early ’24—less so as time went on, and that was a huge frustration.” (A senior Israeli official insisted that Netanyahu and Dermer had, at each moment, accurately relayed what they heard from the Israeli military.)

Other officials told me that, in meetings of White House staff, Finer, the deputy national-security adviser, often asked what civilian death toll would be deemed unacceptable. Where was the line? Finer declined to comment on such internal conversations but said, of the Israelis, “It’s obvious now, and was pretty clear then, that they simply did not tell us the truth about their plans and their timelines, and it made no sense to accept those claims at face value.” Indeed,

several Biden officials told me they came to believe that the Israeli leaders had continued to repeat “two more weeks” in part to buy more time before, as one put it, “the U.S. brought down the hammer.”

By February, 2024, there were hints that the hammer might, in fact, come down. Senator Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat, proposed a controversial amendment to the bill providing Israel military aid. It called for adherence to the rules requiring the U.S. to cut off weapons to any country obstructing American-backed aid or likely using U.S. weapons in war crimes. Although the amendment didn’t mention any specific country, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee opposed it, accusing Van Hollen of “trying to make it harder for Israel to defend its families.” Yet, with the Gaza death toll exceeding twenty-eight thousand, the amendment had enough support among progressives that Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader, asked the White House for help heading off an intraparty feud.

Sullivan, Blinken, and others in the White House saw an opportunity. By publicly recommitting to follow preëxisting rules—and saying, in effect, that U.S. laws might *force* the Administration to cut off weapons—Biden could indirectly pressure the Israelis to better protect Palestinian civilians. On February 8, 2024, Biden signed National Security Memorandum 20, which doubled down on the existing rules about aid and war crimes in essentially the same way as Van Hollen’s amendment. After ninety days, Blinken would be required to send Congress a report attesting to the compliance of each country that received U.S. weapons. Van Hollen, satisfied, withdrew his amendment.

Biden seemed to be losing patience with Netanyahu. The day he issued the memorandum, he walked back to the podium after an unrelated press conference to answer a shouted question and pronounced the Israeli campaign “over the top.” He declared that “innocent people” were “starving” and “dying,” adding, “It’s got to stop.” Three days later, according to a White

House statement, he told Netanyahu in a call that Israel's forces should not move on Rafah without an "executable plan" to protect the million-plus Palestinians who had fled there to shelter in tent camps.

The letter from the Red Cross, which keeps such communications strictly confidential, arrived the next month. The organization had been facilitating hostage releases and providing services in Gaza since the start of the conflict. In the appendix, Mirjana Spoljaric stated that Israel was creating "obstacles to the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid" and issuing "evacuation orders that result in repeated population displacements to areas that are neither safe nor have the infrastructure to cater for the population's most basic needs." The Red Cross, even without visiting prisons, had documented "numerous and credible allegations" of "inhumane conditions" and noted "an unusually high number of deaths in Israeli custody." Spoljaric wrote that Israel appeared to be invoking certain principles of the Geneva Conventions "not to spare civilians from the effects of military operations and avoid or at least minimize civilian harm, as is their object and purpose, but rather to justify death and destruction."

Four days later, Biden impulsively declared in a television interview that Israel could not "have thirty thousand more Palestinians dead" and suggested that any operation in Rafah would cross "a red line." But a moment later he walked that back, saying it didn't mean he would cut Israel off from all American weapons.



“Throw him a fastball so he hits a walk-off home run, they win the World Series, and we don’t have to go to the White House.”

Cartoon by Ken Levine

Then, on April 1st, Israeli drone strikes killed seven aid workers in a convoy organized by World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit whose founder, the celebrity chef José Andrés, was a friend of Biden’s. Israel had killed some two hundred aid workers since October 7th, but nearly all were Palestinians. The World

Central Kitchen fatalities included a dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada, along with citizens of Poland, Australia, and the U.K. Biden, irate, publicly warned for the first time that ongoing U.S. support would be determined by an assessment of Israel's "specific, concrete, and measurable steps" to reduce civilian suffering. A couple of weeks later, Blinken sent a letter, which has not previously been disclosed, to Gallant, the Israeli Defense Minister, warning him of the requirements reinforced in National Security Memorandum 20 and demanding improvements in the delivery of aid.

That month, at least eight State Department bureaus, agencies, or missions sent in assessments that Blinken had requested for his required review of Israel's conduct. At least five argued that Israel had likely used U.S. weapons in violations of the laws of war and had impeded the delivery of U.S. humanitarian aid. (Officials told me that Barbara Leaf, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, agreed.) On the other side, Jacob Lew, the American Ambassador to Jerusalem—and Israel's principal defender within the Biden Administration—argued that Israel was complying with the relevant laws. The Political-Military Bureau, which oversees weapons sales, concluded that Israel had not committed violations with U.S. weapons. Deborah Lipstadt, the special envoy for combatting antisemitism, urged against holding the Jewish state to a higher standard than other countries, but she stopped short of claiming expertise in warfare or aid distribution.

On May 5th, Israeli officials, in an apparent attempt to stir up American supporters on the eve of the report's release to Congress, told *Axios* that the Biden Administration had quietly put a hold on a shipment of what the publication called "ammunition." The withheld ammunition turned out to be thousands of enormous bombs: about half weighed two thousand pounds, the others five hundred pounds. (A two-thousand-pound bomb kills anyone within a radius of twelve hundred feet.) In an interview on CNN three days later, Biden said, of the two-thousand-pound munitions, "Civilians have been killed

in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs.” If Israel attacked Rafah’s “population centers,” he continued, he would not be “supplying the weapons.” Israeli officials said that their military used the two-thousand-pound bombs to destroy fortified tunnels, and although there are less indiscriminate ways to accomplish that objective, Republicans pounced. Senator Tom Cotton, of Arkansas, declared that Biden’s “position is de facto for Hamas victory.” Representative Keith Self, of Texas, called Biden “Benedict Arnold.” Sixteen House Democrats joined Republicans in condemning the decision to withhold the large bombs.

Inside the White House, meanwhile, the debate was turning back to Iran. The day of the World Central Kitchen incident, Israel had struck the Iranian mission in Syria. Iran, for the first time in its history, launched a direct attack on Israel, firing more than three hundred missiles and drones. The U.S. military (and some Arab allies) intercepted almost all of them and, with difficulty, persuaded Netanyahu to limit Israel’s next round to a token demonstration of its power—taking out an Iranian radar installation near Isfahan.

Iran let that attack go unanswered, and intelligence officials and some National Security Council staff argued that this decision showed that the Islamic Republic’s leaders, as a senior U.S. official told me, “were not itching for a bigger conflict.” Perhaps, then, Biden could stop worrying that daylight between the U.S. and Israel would tempt Iran to start a regional war.

But McGurk and other hawks countered that Iran’s aerial attack had nearly succeeded. U.S. Central Command had been unsure whether the U.S. could deflect so many missiles. The military leaders said that Israel had been lucky, and they worried that more barrages would deplete U.S. interceptor stockpiles. What’s more, some of Iran’s weapons had reached Israeli airspace, arguably giving Hamas more reason than ever to hope for a regional war.

McGurk, who was helping lead the talks to release the hostages, had repeatedly urged colleagues to take seriously the long history of Iranian rhetoric about wiping Israel “off the map.” He had been a clerk to Chief Justice William Rehnquist and a legal adviser to the American occupation of Iraq, and he reminded colleagues that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s vows to found a new caliphate had also sounded far-fetched—until he founded what became the Islamic State. Although U.S. intelligence agencies considered Iran’s aging Ayatollah risk-averse and inclined to leave any actual fighting to foreign clients such as Hezbollah and Hamas, intelligence reports generated after October 7th indicated that at least some Iranians were thinking that this was their moment. McGurk and other hostage negotiators, backed up by more concrete intelligence, noted that whenever Biden put public pressure on the Israelis—such as warning them not to rush into Rafah—it revived the hope of Hamas leaders that Iran might come to their rescue, and prompted them to up their demands, including how many Palestinian prisoners needed to be released in exchange for each hostage. McGurk argued that, if the return of the hostages was the only way to end the war, then publicly squeezing Israel to protect civilians could paradoxically prolong the fighting, resulting in more Palestinian deaths.

Several senior U.S. officials told me that virtually everyone involved in Gaza policy—including Secretary Austin—thought that Israel was killing more Palestinians than was necessary to achieve any legitimate objective. Nevertheless, the Administration gradually came to believe that it could not persuade Israel to alter its approach in Gaza. As a senior White House official put it to me, the Israelis “just operate totally differently than we operate as a ground force.” Biden, in this view, faced a stark choice: he could more or less back the Gaza campaign as Israel fought it, or he could force Israel to stop by cutting off its supply of weapons, potentially leaving Hamas both in control of Gaza and still holding hostages.



Cartoon by Matilda Borgström

Biden's bluster toward Israel, it turned out, was less fierce than it seemed. White House officials told me that his comments on CNN about not supplying the weapons if Israel attacked Rafah had been unplanned and hadn't reflected a

formal decision. In fact, other officials told me that, after the suspension of the large-bomb shipment, Finer proposed that the five-hundred-pound bombs be withheld, too, as they were packed alongside the two-thousand-pound ones. But, after Sullivan had him present that question to Biden, the President ordered that the smaller bombs be shipped separately. The five-hundred-pound munitions—the largest that the U.S. dropped on the evacuated Iraqi city of Mosul during the fight against ISIS—will kill anyone within a radius of sixty-five feet and injure anyone within a hundred and fifty.

National Security Memorandum 20, with its apparent pledge to withhold weapons, looked increasingly awkward. Blinken and the White House turned to lawyers at the State Department and the National Security Council, who took a highly technical approach. How many civilian casualties were “proportionate” to an attack’s military advantage? The answer depended on what its planners knew and intended. Although the Israelis seldom, if ever, shared the raw intelligence behind a specific air strike, they provided voluminous information about their sophisticated protocols for selecting targets and warning civilians—even if the soaring death count raised questions about the effectiveness of those precautions. How carefully did the Israelis distinguish between military and civilian targets? That line could be blurry—for example, any three-story building could arguably be a potential military “observation post,” from which Hamas fighters might spot oncoming Israeli ground forces. And Israeli officials invariably insisted that Hamas had operated inside hospitals and other civilian infrastructure that their forces destroyed. A U.S. lawyer involved told me, “Hamas was embedding in the civilian population, so everyone talked about these nuances and complications for months and months.”

The Biden Administration’s ban on the transfer of weapons likely to be used in war crimes appeared to provide a clearer standard. Yet lawyers involved told me that Administration policymakers seemed to want specific proof of a war crime, and since the State Department doesn’t run courts to weigh evidence, the

lawyers couldn't prove anything. The U.S. lawyer explained, "The subtlety of the language—things like 'We don't have definitive proof, but we are very concerned that Israel is committing war crimes'—seemed to be understood by the most senior people to mean, in effect, 'We're all good!'"

The requirement of the Geneva Conventions that a warring party "facilitate" the delivery of humanitarian assistance "by all the means at its disposal" also had loopholes. The Conventions granted belligerents the right "to search the consignments," "to regulate their passage according to prescribed times and routes," and "to be reasonably satisfied" that supplies weren't intended to benefit a military opponent. Moreover, the State Department did not consider Israel's months-long pattern of obstructing aid; the department only assessed the volume of aid flowing when the report was being finalized. And after the World Central Kitchen strike, on April 1st, Israel had briefly increased the number of supply trucks entering Gaza to nearly prewar levels.

A senior White House official paraphrased the lawyers' message as "We're not telling you there's a violation—we're saying it's plausible to conclude that," and said, "The President wanted to continue unless told 'You can't,' and he wasn't told that." Another White House official said that, if the Administration had found Israeli war crimes to be more likely than not, then "the Republicans in Congress would have screamed, 'Show me the evidence!,' and we would have had lawyers on their side saying, 'Bullshit, this is inconclusive!'"

State Department reports to Congress are typically drafted by multiple contributors in an online document, and the Israel portion of the report required by Biden's memorandum quickly devolved into an almost unreadable mishmash of conflicting edits and comments. Then, on April 27th, some of the assessments submitted to Blinken were leaked to Reuters. Furious, he ordered that the draft be shifted to a classified system, where a line-by-line battle ensued over almost every sentence. Two senior advisers to the Secretary of

State took the delicate assignment of squaring the draft with the uncomfortable facts. Working against them were the State Department dissenters, represented by Uzra Zeya, the Under-Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, and, most forcefully, by Christopher Le Mon, who spent days in a secure facility trying to insert damning evidence about the Israeli campaign.

The result, released on May 11th, was schizophrenic. The report noted that Israeli officials had formally stated that they were strengthening “efforts to minimize civilian harm.” It observed, charitably, that a country’s “overall commitment” to international law “is not necessarily disproven” by individual violations if it is “taking appropriate steps to investigate.” It offered the caveat that the U.S. lacked the battlefield awareness necessary “to verify” that American weapons had been used in specific incidents, and praised Israel for implementing “additional measures” to avoid killing aid workers. Yet the report also said it was “reasonable to assess” that Israel had, in fact, used U.S. weapons in ways “inconsistent” with the laws of war or with “established best practices for mitigating civilian harm.” It pointedly noted that some Israeli equipment was both “entirely U.S.-origin (e.g. crewed attack aircraft)” and “likely to have been involved” in war crimes, that the U.S. government was “unaware” of any prosecutions resulting from the Israelis’ own investigations into violations, and that Israel’s pledges to protect aid workers after the World Central Kitchen strike “did not fully prevent” additional deaths. The words “however,” “nevertheless,” and “despite” appear a dozen times on as many pages—a pretzel of logic demonstrating the extent to which the Biden Administration was contorting itself.

Philip Gordon, the Kamala Harris adviser, told me that National Security Memorandum 20 “could have been, and should have been, the tool that we used to get the Israelis to do things differently.” But, after the final report, “they knew that we wouldn’t.” Van Hollen, the author of the shelved amendment, was outraged. He told me that he considered the report to be “a complete

whitewash” and in “bad faith.”

By the time of the report’s release, Biden, encouraged by both Blinken and Sullivan, had decided to deliver the long-discussed “tough love” speech. Some U.S. officials involved in talks to release the hostages had concluded that Netanyahu, for domestic political reasons, preferred to extend the fight rather than make a hostage-release deal, and so Biden planned to try to go around Netanyahu and urge the Israeli public to turn away from all-out war. After multiple revisions, however, Dermer and Netanyahu—perhaps aware of what was in the works—interceded. They told the White House that Israel was seriously considering a phased ceasefire-and-hostage-release plan that the U.S. had put forward and that Hamas appeared to accept. (People involved in the negotiations told me that, throughout the conflict, Hamas generally sought to bargain its hostages for prisoner releases, an end to the war, and a chance to retain control of Gaza; the Netanyahu government considered that outcome unacceptable.)

Biden abandoned the tough-love speech and asked for it to be transformed into a call for Israeli leaders to take the deal on the table. In a May 31st address from the White House, Biden said that the proposed agreement would begin with a six-week ceasefire. If Hamas released female, elderly, and wounded hostages, Israel would withdraw from population centers in Gaza and release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. After that, pending unspecified further negotiations, Israel would fully withdraw from Gaza and commit to “the cessation of hostilities permanently” if Hamas released the remaining hostages. In an effort to get Netanyahu on board, Biden misleadingly credited the Israelis with the blueprint for the deal, even though his repeated pleas for the Israelis to accept the terms raised questions about its true authorship.

A few holdover passages from the “tough love” draft remained. Biden told Israelis that the war had already “devastated Hamas,” and insured that the

group couldn't launch another attack like October 7th. "Indefinite war in pursuit of an unidentified notion of 'total victory' " would trap the Israeli military in a quagmire and alienate other nations, he said. Moreover, such a war could not deliver a return of the hostages or any "enduring defeat of Hamas." Nevertheless, the heart of the speech praised what Biden portrayed as Netanyahu's ceasefire proposal.

Was Netanyahu sincere about such a deal? A senior Israeli official close to him insisted that he had been, and blamed Hamas for pulling back because it still hoped for Hezbollah and Iran to enter the war. But several senior American officials and an Israeli close to the Cabinet's deliberations told me they believed that Netanyahu had only feigned interest. The Israeli said that Netanyahu had done so to mollify internal critics pushing for the release of the hostages. The Americans suggested to me that he'd also hoped to manipulate Biden. Hamas agreed to the terms Biden outlined, even if some details remained in dispute. But, once the milder "take the deal" speech was given, Netanyahu began making new demands that he knew Hamas would reject, such as allowing Israel to retain control of both a central corridor through Gaza and another corridor inside the Egyptian border. Then, a few weeks later, Israel blew up the ongoing talks by assassinating both Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas representative leading peace talks in Qatar, and Mohammed Deif, a top decision-maker inside Gaza. "Bibi was playing games," a former White House official told me.

In September, 2024, a new Labour government in Britain conducted its own review of Israel's compliance with international law. Citing Israel's obstruction of "lifesaving food and medical supplies," its mistreatment of detainees, and the "clear risk" that British weapons might be used in war crimes, Foreign Secretary David Lammy declared, with "regret," that British laws imposed a "legal duty" to suspend arms transfers to Israel for use in Gaza. But Israel relied on Britain for relatively little military equipment—only about thirty

British export licenses were affected—so the decision was largely symbolic.

The next month, Zeya, the Under-Secretary of State, and Lise Grande, a veteran U.N. aid administrator who was Biden's special envoy for Middle Eastern humanitarian issues, led the drafting of a private letter to Gallant and Dermer warning that National Security Memorandum 20 required periodic reevaluation of Israel's conduct. The letter noted that Israel was currently blocking perishable U.S.-funded aid and that the monthly quantity of assistance crossing the border had recently fallen to a new low. "Starting now and within 30 days," the letter said, Israel needed to comply with about twenty demands, including restoring Red Cross visits to detainees. Austin and Blinken both signed the letter on October 13th. Two days later, the document was leaked to *Axios*—presumably in another attempt by the Israelis to get their U.S. supporters to pressure Biden into abandoning threats of a weapons cutoff.

Still, the letter appeared to prompt Israel to once again dramatically increase the amount of aid entering Gaza. Israel also scheduled a bilateral meeting in November to cooperate with the U.S. Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance protocol. The State Department by then had a list of several hundred incidents of civilian harm to discuss.

A few weeks later, though, Trump won the election. The next day, Israel called off the meeting. By April, 2025, Israel had reduced the flow of humanitarian aid more than ever before; by August, there was a full-blown famine. In September, Gaza health officials attributed four hundred and forty deaths to malnutrition, including those of a hundred and forty-seven children.

Today, many former Biden Administration officials argue that their pressure on the Israelis prevented a famine from happening sooner. Over time, the officials contend, Biden's efforts also slowed the killing: about twenty-five thousand Palestinians died in the first three months of the Gaza conflict, and it

took twelve months for the death toll to double. (The Gaza Health Ministry, which tracks fatalities, does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.) In particular, Biden's warnings about Rafah appear to have prompted Israel to do far more to evacuate civilians than it had done before levelling Gaza City and Khan Younis. A senior White House official told me that American pressure had made the destruction of Rafah "less horrific for civilians than it might have been," even if Israel nonetheless "flattened it." Several former officials noted to me with pride that after October 7th the Administration became the first to sanction violent West Bank settlers. Everyone in the Biden Administration blames Trump for allowing the war to continue until last October, for leaving Israeli forces occupying at least sixty per cent of Gaza, and for allowing the war to inflame the Middle East.

McGurk, the most hawkish voice around Biden, declined to be quoted for this article. But people close to him told me he believes that his warning proved true: the limited public pressure that the Biden Administration imposed on Israel to protect civilians actually extended the war. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* last year, he argued that Hamas released the hostages because Israel had decimated its fighters while the "force of arms across the Middle East" by the U.S. and Israel crippled Iran and its proxies, leaving Hamas "isolated and no longer able to count on a multifront conflict." Despite the war's grim toll, he concluded, "there was no shortcut."

Yet, with more than seventy thousand Palestinians dead, most of Gaza's remaining population displaced, and the Israeli military occupying much of the territory, the conflict undermined the long-term U.S. interest that the Biden Administration claimed to have pursued: a democratic Jewish state coexisting peacefully with a Palestinian one. Among Israelis, the protracted ordeal of the hostages hardened opposition to the already fading prospect of Palestinian statehood. Settlement of the West Bank has accelerated steeply. Among Palestinians, the civilian death toll has only increased the appeal of Hamas-

style armed resistance, just as Secretary Austin warned. And Hamas—which ended the war with about twenty thousand fighters, some recruited and trained during the war—controls the remainder of Gaza. Before October 7th, Israel and the U.S. estimated that Hamas had fewer than thirty thousand fighters. The ranks of Hamas decreased by around ten thousand; more than seventy thousand Palestinians were killed in the process. In the U.S., moreover, the death toll has severely damaged the historic American sympathy for the Jewish state. In congressional primaries, an acrimonious debate over continued U.S. support for Israel has riven the Democratic Party to an extent unimaginable just five years ago—and it threatens to divide Republicans as well. Jon Finer told me that the hallmark of the Gaza conflict has been that, for both Hamas and Israel, “civilian harm was not a side effect but part of the strategy.” The U.S., he said, “shouldn’t tolerate wars in which civilian harm is a goal, and shouldn’t allow our weapons to be used for that purpose.”

Blinken and Sullivan told me that they, too, felt remorse. Blinken said, “How can you not have regrets given the toll that this took on innocent men, women and children?” But he repeated a quote from Biden: “Question my judgments. Don’t question my motives.”

Sullivan, whose role as national-security adviser made him the last to leave the room before Biden made a decision, told me that he had lain awake many nights thinking about what the U.S. might have done differently. On humanitarian aid, he said, “we’d get progress and backsliding, progress and backsliding, over and over again,” adding, “We should have found a way to get out of that constant push and pull.”

Yet Sullivan said that Biden and his top advisers had worried that taking action to make Israel better protect civilians “risked both failing to change Israeli policy and leading Hamas to increase its demands.” And, he continued, “when was the moment?” He told me that the Administration had “seriously thought

about making a decisive break with Israel” in the spring of 2024, “in the run-up to Rafah, when Hamas was stalling in negotiations,” and again in July of 2024, “when Hamas was coming back.” But, at each point, there were risks: “What about the hostages? What about Israel under attack from all sides? What effect would it have on the ceasefire talks and bringing this god-awful war to an end?”

Near the end of Biden’s term, the Leahy Laws investigation prompted by the former detainees who’d been dumped back into Gaza focussed on a military base called Sde Teiman. That summer, a Palestinian prisoner from the base had arrived at an Israeli hospital with broken ribs and a torn rectum. Leaked video footage showed Israeli soldiers holding up riot shields to block security cameras as they appeared to beat and abuse him. The Leahy Laws process culminated with a document for Blinken to sign that would cut off U.S. aid to Sde Teiman. Yet Blinken told me that he’d once again believed “we were on the verge of a ceasefire, which I did not want to jeopardize.” (A ceasefire-and-hostage-release deal that McGurk had been working on was announced as Biden left office, but it was fleeting.) Michael Herzog, the Israeli Ambassador, had also pleaded with Blinken not to carry out the sanctions. An Israeli military prosecutor had detained several soldiers for questioning, and Herzog assured Blinken that an indictment was coming; Blinken left office without signing the document.

This past March, the Israeli military dropped charges filed against five of the soldiers, on the basis that the leaked video had compromised a fair trial and that the injured witness had been returned to Gaza. Netanyahu lauded the dismissal and called the case a “blood libel.”

After Biden lost the election, a working group of Administration lawyers disseminated a forceful new set of talking points for U.S. officials to raise with their Israeli counterparts. Many of the points could have been written any time

since the spring of 2024: “In light of the extensive destruction and damage in Gaza, as well as our understanding that Hamas has been devastated as an operational force . . . we in the U.S. Government do not see a clear military imperative for continued operations.” Under the heading “Forced Displacement,” the lawyers noted that “the displacement seems increasingly both clear and purposeful.” Under “Starvation of Civilians,” they wrote that “the facts on the ground” raised “grave concerns” about “intentional starvation of civilians to drive them from the area,” and that aid restrictions by Israel were harming Palestinian civilians “well in excess of any further anticipated military advantage.” Under “Targeting/Conduct of Hostilities,” they observed that the civilian harm looked increasingly “deliberate,” adding, “We are really struggling to understand the military necessity of taking strikes that have resulted in such high levels of civilian casualties and extensive property destruction.” The talking points called for follow-up, within “days not weeks,” about “plans for improvement.” But by then surely nobody was listening. Trump was on his way back to the White House. ♦

An earlier version of this article mischaracterized Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s initial role in the Islamic State, and imprecisely described Hamas’s position on the ceasefire deal proposed by the U.S. in mid-2024.

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