

Biden Sought Peace but Facilitated War

di Nicholas Kristof

When Israel defied America's appeals for restraint by invading Lebanon a few days ago, a reporter asked President Biden if he was comfortable with what had unfolded. "I'm comfortable with them stopping," Biden [replied](#) plaintively. "We should have a cease-fire now." He walked away from the podium, grouchy, frustrated and impotent, a self-diminishing president.

It was the latest sign of how Biden keeps getting rolled by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. As the political scientist Ian Bremmer [said](#) of Biden's words on the invasion: "Impact: zero."

Instead of midwifing the landmark Middle East peace that he hoped for, Biden became the arms supplier for the leveling of Gaza — a war that killed [more women and children](#) in a single year than any other war in the last two decades, according to Oxfam.

Biden has been calling for restraint for a year, but he marginalized himself by continuously providing the weapons that allowed his appeals to be ignored. He appealed to the better angels of Netanyahu's nature, but it's not clear that they exist.

Biden restricted and conditioned U.S. arms transfers to Ukraine but worried that doing the same to Israel might tempt Hezbollah to attack it. So Biden kept [the arms flowing](#) (with the exception of at least one shipment of 2,000-pound bombs) and never imposed serious restrictions on their use. This impunity emboldened Netanyahu to ignore Biden, and the upshot is that Biden has nurtured not a regional peace but, it seems, a regional war — with America at risk of being sucked in.

"In the Middle East, we clearly see a failure of policy," Senator Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat from Maryland who admires Biden's foreign policy in other respects, told me. "And I think it's ultimately rooted in the Biden administration's unwillingness to effectively use American influence to achieve the president's stated goals."

“The problem we have here is the pattern,” Van Hollen added. “The pattern is that Prime Minister Netanyahu ignores the United States and he gets rewarded for it.”

Jan Eliasson, a former Swedish foreign minister and senior U.N. official, [lamented](#), “It is painful to witness the continuous humiliation of the U.S. president and government by Netanyahu.”

As someone who knows and admires Biden, who has seen his empathy, who greatly respects his foreign policy team, who regards his diplomacy in East Asia as masterful, I am pained to write this column. But a year after the Oct. 7 terror attacks, Biden’s Middle East policy appears to be a practical and moral failure. It could be a political failure as well, potentially hurting Vice President Kamala Harris in Michigan — and everywhere if a war with Iran lifts gas prices at the pump.

So what went wrong? How could a leader so intent on peace have presided over expanding war?

It wasn’t a failure of vision or of hard work. Biden concocted a grand plan for a multipart deal that would deliver a cease-fire in Gaza, normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations, a path to a Palestinian state and a stronger Saudi-American relationship that would freeze China out of the region. But Biden was unwilling to forcefully use his leverage to get there, so Netanyahu ran rings around the president.

In the process, Netanyahu miraculously rehabilitated himself in Israeli politics, with a [new poll](#) suggesting that he is on track to be re-elected.

“We are winning,” Netanyahu [said](#) in an address to the United Nations last month. He now has Iran in his sights, [declaring](#) a few days later, “When Iran is finally free, and that moment will come a lot sooner than people think, everything will be different.”

It’s true, as [I’ve found](#) on my visits [to Iran](#) over the last 20 years, that the Iranian regime is both brutally repressive and widely unpopular at home, as well as a malign force in the region. But I worry that Netanyahu is leading Israel toward a war with Iran and aiming to bring the United States to the fight as well.

“In my view, Prime Minister Netanyahu has wanted to drag the United States into a conflict with Iran for a very long time,” Van Hollen said.

I’ve [previously argued](#) that Gaza has become the albatross around Biden’s neck, staining his legacy, but it keeps getting worse. Among American hawks, there is

dreamy talk about building a new Lebanon and [reshaping](#) the Middle East. It's indeed possible that the devastation of Hezbollah will buy Israel safety for a time. But all that grandiosity reminds me of lofty talk a year ago about how Israel was going to destroy Hamas in a few months. It likewise reminds me of the ebullient predictions 21 years ago that invading Iraq and ousting Saddam Hussein would usher in a new age of democracy and tranquillity.

“If you take out Saddam, Saddam’s regime, I guarantee you that it will have enormous positive reverberations on the region,” Netanyahu [testified](#) to Congress in 2002. “I think that people sitting right next door in Iran, young people and many others, will say the time of such regimes, of such despots, is gone.”

Go back even further, and one of my first reporting trips (as a law student writing freelance articles) involved hitchhiking through Lebanon during Israel’s [1982 invasion](#). That was called Operation Peace for Galilee and the aim was to establish a buffer zone in southern Lebanon and a friendly government in Beirut.

That invasion produced a quagmire that was sometimes called Israel’s Vietnam, and it gave birth to Hezbollah.

Israel then assassinated the Hezbollah leader, Abbas al-Musawi, in 1992. Cue a brief sense of triumph. But al-Musawi was replaced by Hassan Nasrallah, who proved a far more effective enemy of Israel.

In short, I’ve learned to roll my eyes when hawks promise that a fine little war will deliver peace.

As Biden surely understands, there are more productive ways to reshape the Middle East. A cease-fire in Gaza would probably have ended the rocket fire from Lebanon and allowed Israelis to return to their homes in the north. The nuclear deal with Iran dismantled much of that country’s program until Donald Trump withdrew from it. And ultimately the way to make Israel secure is to negotiate the birth of a Palestinian state. Biden kept up the arms transfers to Israel even as he acknowledged that the result was sometimes “over the top” and “indiscriminate bombing” and even as his administration [found](#) that Israel’s use of American arms most likely violated international humanitarian law.

The Biden administration may also have broken United States law, which requires a halt to weapons shipments to countries that block American humanitarian

aid. [ProPublica](#) and [Devex](#) obtained a memo written by the U.S. Agency for International Development concluding that Israel was obstructing aid, but Biden brushed those concerns aside.

Biden did not intend to be where he is now. On his first visit to a shattered Israel after the horror of the Oct. 7 terror attacks, he expressed all the right empathy but also warned Israelis not to repeat mistakes that a bellicose America made after 9/11. He seems to have expected that Israel would show more restraint in Gaza than it did, that it would not starve Gazans and that the war would end by about year-end. He thought a bear hug of Netanyahu was the best way to get him to listen. Repeatedly, he suggested Israel and Hamas were close to a cease-fire deal.

The metaphor that always arises in diplomatic conversations is of Joe Biden as Charlie Brown trying to kick the football, and each time Netanyahu pulls it away (sometimes, Hamas pulls it away as well).

“How many times do you have the football snatched out before you cotton on to the game?” asked Josh Paul, a former State Department diplomat who resigned in protest over Biden’s Middle East policy.

Before Biden, other U.S. presidents were more willing to use the leverage of weapons transfers to Israel. Since Lyndon Johnson, nearly all presidents have withheld arms from Israel or threatened to do so to gain leverage, Andrew P. Miller, a former senior State Department official, [noted](#) in Foreign Affairs. While this didn’t work perfectly, it often moved Israel grudgingly in the direction of American interests.

In fairness, Biden was boxed in by domestic politics. It sometimes seems that half of Americans complain that he hasn’t done enough to restrain Israel, and the other half protest that he hasn’t been supportive enough. And Biden had legitimate concerns that public squabbles between America and Israel could embolden Hezbollah and Iran.

Would a traumatized Israel this past year have responded to such pressure? Or would it have been defiant, with Netanyahu presenting himself as the protector of Israel from American bullying?

It’s difficult to know, but experts say that the Israel Defense Forces would have been very sensitive to any slowdown in transfers of arms or spare parts and would have put pressure on Israeli politicians to heal the rift with Washington. Biden also has unusual latitude to apply this leverage because he is admired within Israel as a true friend: [Two-](#)

[thirds](#) of Israeli Jews said in a spring poll that they have confidence in Biden to do the right thing in world affairs.

Biden's failure to apply enough leverage — or perhaps even [uphold American law](#) — has damaged other interests the White House cares about, including support for Ukraine. Hypocrisy alerts go off in foreign capitals when American diplomats hail the “rules-based international order” and simultaneously provide the bombs that destroy Gazan civilian infrastructure and induce starvation.

One of Biden's tremendous successes has been to build alliances in Asia to fence in China, but this is undermined by his Middle East policy. People in Southeast Asian countries said in [a poll](#) that the Gaza war is their No. 1 geopolitical concern, and that if forced to choose between the U.S. and China, their countries should side with China.

“America's stature has been greatly diminished among its friends and allies,” Nabil Fahmy, a former Egyptian foreign minister, told me, noting that other countries have been struck that “Israel has consistently and blatantly disregarded U.S. requests.”

“This will have long-term consequences as allies and friends look elsewhere,” Fahmy added.

We should acknowledge that we don't know where events will take us, in the Middle East or elsewhere. We all have reason for humility: Many doves were wrong to doubt the 1991 Persian Gulf war, and many hawks were wrong to embrace the 2003 Iraq war. For my part, I was right to [oppose the Iraq war](#), but wrong [to oppose the Iraq surge](#) four years later. Still, a year after the Oct. 7 terror attacks, we do know a few things.

Israeli and American hostages remain captive in Gaza. Hamas has been substantially weakened in Gaza but not destroyed. Hamas may have gained support in the West Bank, which feels increasingly explosive.

“We feel that the U.S.'s blind support for Netanyahu is encouraging Israeli extremists and feeding their appetite to annex the West Bank to Israel,” said [Issa Amro](#), an activist who has been described as a Palestinian Gandhi. “Palestinians in the West Bank are losing hope in the prospects for peace and losing faith in the two-state solution.”

In Gaza, more than 10,000 children have been killed and about 2,000 have had limbs amputated, according to a forthcoming report by [Theirworld](#), a British charity that works on children's issues. It adds that 40 percent of Gaza families are now taking care

of a child who is not their own, and that 85 percent of Gazan children have gone a full day without food.

“Every day is a struggle living in tents surrounded by blood, muck, mud and rubble,” said Dr. Sam Attar, an American physician who has volunteered on four surgical missions to Gaza hospitals during the war. “Every day is a breaking point for food and water.”

[Mohammed Alshannat](#), a linguistics scholar in Gaza who admires democracies and believes that Muslims and Jews can live in harmony, has spent the last year struggling to keep his family alive. “There is no place safe and no food, clean water or medicines,” he emailed. “It is like sheep in a slaughterhouse.”

And to what end?

I see genuine tactical victories for Israel in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and Iran, but it’s not obvious that these lead anywhere, except perhaps to political victories for Netanyahu.

“It’s a tactical success, but what is the strategy?” asked Randa Slim of the Middle East Institute. “What is the day-after strategy?” That’s the question that Netanyahu still hasn’t answered.

Israelis aren’t manifestly more secure than a year ago, and Lebanese and Palestinians are manifestly less secure. American troops are vulnerable on Middle East bases, and shipping is at risk off Yemen. There is no peace in sight, no offramp in Gaza, Lebanon or the West Bank. It’s as if Biden and Netanyahu are stuck on the set of the existentialist Sartre play “No Exit.”

“We have no plans and no benchmarks but death,” [despaired](#) the Israeli scholar Ori Goldberg.

Meanwhile, Biden has ensured that American weapons continue to shatter lives without clearly advancing American, Israeli or Arab interests. Ettie Higgins of UNICEF in Lebanon told me about a 7-year-old Lebanese girl who lost 15 members of her family in an Israeli strike a few days ago. The girl lost her parents and all her siblings and suffered cuts and bruises herself.

I imagine her meeting Biden and asking: *Why did you provide bombs that kill families like mine?* And I wonder how Biden, a good man who never wanted this war to happen and yet enabled it, would respond.