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Don't believe the Netanyahu bashing. The U.S. largely agrees with him

di Perry Bacon Jr.

The Biden administration's policies toward the Middle East over the past year are generally cast by the media as well-meaning but ineffective. The president and his team, [according to what his aides](#) tell reporters, are pushing hard for a resolution that ends the violence. The president [reportedly scolds](#) Benjamin Netanyahu when the two speak privately but [can't get the Israeli prime minister on board with](#) a strategy that would minimize Palestinian casualties.

There is probably some truth to all of that. But a year into a conflict that has now expanded beyond Gaza to the [West Bank](#), [Iran](#), [Lebanon](#), [Syria](#) and [Yemen](#), I'm increasingly convinced the Biden administration largely agrees with Netanyahu's strategy, despite sometimes implying otherwise. In many ways, Netanyahu's policies are America's policies — and acknowledging that dynamic is a first step to changing it.

America is not all-powerful abroad. But the idea that the United States has little influence with a close ally to whom it's [providing billions of dollars of weapons](#) is hard to believe. After all, foreign governments often bend to the United States' will. [At the Biden administration's urging](#), Mexico has made it much harder for migrants traveling from Latin America to enter the United States. Ukrainian leaders [have sometimes complained](#) about how many conditions are attached to the U.S. military aid that they get to fight Russia.

And when the United States doesn't get its way, it's often quite aggressive in response. Last month, the Justice Department announced it had [seized a plane](#) that [had been used by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro](#), who has angered American officials by not relinquishing power despite clear evidence he lost a recent election.

But over the past year, despite constant reports of tensions between the two nations, the American government has taken few actions to rein in Israel, such as conditioning military aid on reducing civilian casualties. Biden and his top aides have gone out of their way to ignore or downplay Israeli moves that human rights groups, other nations and even career officials within the U.S. government have sharply criticized. Those include Israel [blocking humanitarian aid from reaching Palestinian civilians](#), killing a [Hamas leader who was a leading figure in U.S.-led cease-fire talks](#), and mass detonating pagers used by Hezbollah.

I'm not suggesting that Israel would stop trying to destroy Hamas and Hezbollah simply because the United States asked. Israel views the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack that killed more than 1,200 people as a defining event in its history that must be avenged and prevented from ever happening again.

But if the United States pushed hard, in my view, it could have forced Israel to reduce the suffering of Palestinian civilians who played no role in Oct. 7. And the Israelis have been emboldened to take overly aggressive actions because U.S. support seems unconditional.

Why hasn't the United States constrained Israel in any real way? Because it doesn't really want to. I'm sure Biden is saddened by the deaths of Palestinian children and women. But both [his public comments](#) and those from other administration officials suggest the U.S. government broadly agrees with Netanyahu's perspective on the Middle East. Leaders in Israel and the United States cast Israel as a [morally good democratic nation](#) surrounded by countries hostile to its existence. They are [very wary of Iran gaining power and influence](#). They imply that almost [any Israeli military action is justified](#) both because of the depravity of Oct. 7 and because of the continued threat to Israel from Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran in particular.

So even if the United States would prefer Israel to do fewer bombings in densely populated areas of Gaza, the two nations are aligned on the fundamental issues.

But what's happened over the past year — Israel killing civilians en masse, creating roadblocks to cease-fire agreements and escalating the conflict beyond Gaza — can't go on. The United States needs a new policy toward Israel. But that won't come just by lecturing Netanyahu or Biden about how many children are dying or starving.

Instead, we have to push them to rethink the core ideas behind this alliance. The United States shouldn't be getting into long-term cold (and hot) wars with China, Iran or Russia or any other nation but instead condemning specific actions, such as Russia invading Ukraine. Allies, whether Britain or Israel, should be criticized when they act unjustly.

And most important, we must prioritize everyday people, not nations, whose leaders often don't represent their citizens. Nothing Hamas's, Hezbollah's or Iran's leaders do justifies high numbers of civilian deaths. What Biden and his aides should have been constantly saying the past year is, "Israeli and Palestinian lives matter," not, "Israel has a right to defend itself."

The Biden administration and critics of what Israel is doing need to stop whining about Netanyahu. He alone is not the problem. The United States should either admit it basically agrees with the prime minister's strategy — or take real steps to push him in a less destructive direction.