

How Joe Biden became America's top Israel hawk

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PERSPECTIVE

Last month, a reporter asked US President Joe Biden about the chances for a cease-fire in Gaza. More than 10,000 people had already been killed there, most of them women and children. Food, water, and medical supplies were scarce. Still, the president did not hesitate in assessing the odds of a cease-fire that he had more power than almost anyone in the world to help bring about. "None," Biden replied. "No possibility." Biden's unconditional support for Israel as it waged one of the most devastating bombing campaigns in modern history was already at odds with most of the world and significant parts of his own political base. The president showed no sign of backing down. It would take another month and nearly 8,000 more Palestinian deaths for Biden to criticize Israel in any meaningful way. At a closed-door fundraiser last week, he warned that Israel's "indiscriminate bombing" was costing the country international support. But Biden's own support for the cabinet of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remained largely intact. After saying he favored the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, he reiterated his unwavering backing for the Jewish nation. "We're not going to do a damn thing other than protect Israel," Biden said. "Not a single thing."



In this file photo from March 20, 2016, Joe Biden places his hand over his heart after addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference in Washington.

CLIFF OWEN/AP



In this screen grab, then-Senator Joe Biden makes a heated speech addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference on April 6, 1992.

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This article is based on conversations with former members of the Obama and Biden administrations, interviews with leading experts on Israel and Palestine, and a review of hundreds of mostly forgotten congressional hearings, speeches, and articles in which the president has explained how he sees the conflict. Together, they reveal instinctive sympathy for Israel contrasted by incuriosity about Palestinians; an increasingly outdated view of the domestic politics on the issue; and a deep commitment to a repeatedly disproven belief that peace will only come from there being "no daylight" between Israel and the United States. (The National Security Council did not make any officials available for an interview for this story.)

The result is that Biden has prioritized providing Israel largely unconditional support and the space to continue fighting in the face of intense international opposition. This approach is predictable in some respects. Israel has gotten almost whatever it wants from the United States for decades, and any American president would have supported Israel in the wake of a Hamas attack that took the lives of 1,200 people.

But Biden has long gone further than many of his fellow Democrats in defense of Israel. As a senator, he backed moving the American Embassy to Al-Quds (Jerusalem) decades before Donald Trump made that a reality, boasted about attending more fundraisers for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) than any other senator, and savaged an effort by George H.W. Bush to push Israel toward negotiating with Palestinians. As vice president, he undercut Barack Obama's efforts to push Israel toward peace. As president prior to October 7, he continued policies implemented by Trump that sidelined Palestinians.

"The President does not seem to acknowledge the humanity of all parties affected by this conflict," a former Biden administration official said. "He has described Israeli suffering in great detail, while Palestinian suffering is left vague, if mentioned at all."

Biden administration officials are now reportedly trying to get Israel to reduce the intensity of the war in the coming weeks, but they have not said whether the US will impose consequences if it fails to do so. Nor have they been heavily critical in public. Instead, they've relied on the private pressure long favored by Biden, as they've tried — and largely failed — to restrain a far-right cabinet that opposes Palestinian statehood and includes outright bigots in top positions. Despite Israel ignoring many of its recommendations, the Biden administration continues to push Congress to provide \$14 billion in mostly military aid with no strings attached. This comes after the United States has already supplied Israel with thousands of bombs as it has leveled much of Gaza, displaced more than 80 percent of the population, and committed the war crime of using the starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, according to a report from Human Rights Watch.

In the early days of the war, Biden underscored the scale of the Hamas attack by saying it was equivalent to 15 9/11s for a nation of Israel's size. The equivalent figure for Gaza, where more than 20,000 people have been killed, has surpassed 900. Just how much Biden might have been able to restrain Israel in the wake of October 7 will never be known, but a close examination of his record makes it clear why he was not prepared to try.

A lifetime of zealotry

Biden has often traced his unyielding support for Israel to dinner-table conversations with his father about the horrors of the Holocaust and to a 1973 meeting in Israel with Prime Minister Golda Meir during his first year as a senator. Even so, it took "a long, long discussion" with Henry "Scoop" Jackson, a famously hawkish Democratic senator from Washington state, for Biden to adopt a more hardline position. As Biden explained in a 1983 eulogy of Jackson, he had not felt "nearly as strongly" about backing Israel before his senior colleague encouraged him to make multiple visits to Israel and Nazi

concentration camps. As a result, Biden said, Jackson "changed a major part of my political life and my attitude about a whole segment of society that I did not understand before."

Jackson was once seen as Israel's strongest defender in the Senate. As a Saudi ambassador put it, he appeared "more Zionist than the Zionists," despite being the Protestant son of Norwegian immigrants. That was reflected in extreme rhetoric that alienated some liberal American Jews and fellow Democrats. But many American Jews saw Jackson as their champion — in part because of his advocacy for Jews persecuted in the Soviet Union. (Jackson would later be called a "patron saint of neoconservatism"; his former aides Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and Paul Wolfowitz were architects of George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq.)

Under Jackson's influence, Biden could similarly come across as a pro-Israel zealot. In 1982, the year Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu first met, Israel launched an invasion of Lebanon that caused massive civilian casualties. Israel's tactics in Lebanon as it tried to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization and empower the country's Christian minority outraged people in the Arab world and were opposed by key American officials.

In the initial weeks of the war, Prime Minister Menachem Begin came to Washington to consolidate support. Begin, a right-wing leader — who Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, and other prominent Jews once denounced for running a "Fascist" political party — arrived in Washington facing intense public criticism. Ronald Reagan's Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger argued publicly that Israel was employing "military force of a kind that we always have deployed". (Two months later, Reagan privately warned the Israeli prime minister that the Lebanon war threatened the "entire" US-Israeli relationship, calling it a "holocaust" whose symbol was "becoming a picture of a 7-month-old baby with its arms blown off.") Begin received a warmer welcome from Biden. The New York Times reported at the time that Biden told Begin that he

was not critical of the Lebanon invasion. After returning to Israel, Begin provided more detail to the Israeli press by describing how a young senator had given an "impassioned speech" during a private meeting with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Begin said this senator argued that Americans "wouldn't pay attention as to whether men, women, or children were killed" if they had to retaliate against a comparable attack from Canada. The prime minister claimed that he'd criticized the senator for devaluing civilian life. Subsequent reporting confirmed he was referring to Biden. (A National Security Council spokesperson told me he was looking into this but did not respond after that.)

During a 1992 speech to AIPAC, Biden again voiced support for Israel that made some of its strongest backers uncomfortable. Biden started out by saying that he didn't think any senator had "ever done more fundraisers for AIPAC," a group whose supporters were key backers of his 1988 presidential campaign. He then worked himself up to the point where he was shouting and beating his chest for emotional effect as he lambasted an unprecedented public campaign by George H.W. Bush to push Israel toward engaging with Palestinians' demands for sovereignty and an end to the Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and other territory seized in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

At the time, Bush was demanding that Israel stop building settlements in occupied territory in violation of international law if it wanted to receive billions of dollars in loan guarantees from the United States to support the arrival of Soviet Jews. He knew that groups like AIPAC considered this to be an affront, but he believed his actions were necessary to advance peace talks. Biden was far from the only member of Congress who opposed Bush, but he did so with uncommon fervor.

Articles in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs noted that some listeners "squirmed with embarrassment" as Biden ranted about how the

issue of American aid for Israel had become "susceptible to demagoguery." "You know, no one should take Biden seriously here. He is a cheerleader," one attendee said. "He helps us, of course, but does opposing the peace talks or ignoring them or disparaging them really make sense? I don't think so."

The most revealing part of the AIPAC speech was Biden's explanation of what remain the two pillars of his approach to Israel and Palestine. First, he told the audience that he kept his criticism of things like settlements, which he opposed, between him and Israel. Second, he made sure the two nations maintained a united front so that "the Arabs" would bend. These beliefs explained his disgust with what he considered to be a destined-to-fail effort by Bush to exert leverage over Israel and its right-wing prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir.

Shamir was not a credible partner for peace. (He had been a leader of the Stern Gang, a Jewish terrorist group that tried to form an alliance with the Nazis early in World War II to oust the British from Palestine.) His failure to secure the loan guarantees and maintain positive relations with the United States quickly became political liabilities. Two months after Biden's speech, Israelis voted him, Netanyahu, and their Likud party out of power. They replaced them with Yitzhak Rabin and the most dovish cabinet in the country's history. Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat signed the historic Oslo Accord, which, in spite of its flaws, is the closest the two sides have come to peace. The breakthrough was made possible in part because Bush had been willing to do what Biden said the United States should avoid at all costs: publicly pressure Israel.

A more reflective leader might have changed course, but Biden remained committed to his approach. As he explained in an interview while running for president more than a decade later, "In my 34-year career, I have never wavered from the notion that the only time progress has ever been made in the Middle East is when the Arab nations have known that there is no daylight between