

Without explicitly stating the role of the Israel Defense Forces, the plan potentially allows vast Israeli control over Gaza, including the establishment of an Israeli-controlled buffer zone along the border with Egypt, a move that would be seen by Palestinians as more occupation of their territory and could inflame tensions with Cairo.

Speaking from Buenos Aires, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declined to specifically address Netanyahu's plan but underscored a core principle in the administration's vision for post-war Gaza.

"There should be no Israeli reoccupation of Gaza," he said. "The size of Gaza's territory should not be reduced."

The establishment of a buffer zone would in effect require an Israeli invasion of Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, where most Gazans currently seek safety.

"We wouldn't support those kinds of operations unless or until the Israelis had properly accounted for the safety and security of the more than 1 million people that are seeking refuge down there," national security communications adviser John Kirby told VOA during Friday's briefing, reiterating the administration's position on Israel's plans for a ground offensive in Rafah.

'Fundamentally at odds'

What Netanyahu has outlined is "fundamentally at odds with what the Biden administration has been urging," said Thomas Warrick, a non-resident senior

fellow at the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council.

Warrick said Netanyahu's plan "basically locks in the differences" he has had with President Joe Biden. "There needs to be further efforts to try to bridge this gap, perhaps with a different approach," he told VOA.

Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib, an American writer and political analyst from Gaza, said that Netanyahu's plan, if enacted, would amount to a permanent Israeli military occupation and create a series of "rump states" or cantons on remnants of Gaza's shrinking territory.

Even if enough Palestinians in Gaza agree to take part in such administrations, they lack the means to do so without full Israeli support, he told VOA.

"They'll be viewed as collaborators and subcontractors of the Israeli occupation, decimating any credibility or standing among the battered and beaten population and placing their lives and safety at grave risk."

Hamas lambasted the proposal during a press conference in the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

"Netanyahu is presenting ideas which he knows fully well will never succeed," spokesman Osama Hamdan said on Friday.

After holding power for 17 years, Netanyahu faces plummeting popularity amid an angry population that blames him for the security failures that allowed the Hamas attack. His incumbency depends on keeping intact his coalition, the most right-wing

and religiously conservative the country has ever seen.

"The current plan does not necessarily reflect what the long-term Israeli policy will be, but rather showcases what Netanyahu thinks he needs to do in order to advance a primary goal of his — political survival," said Nimrod Goren, senior fellow for Israeli affairs at the Middle East Institute. Given the widespread Israeli desire for new leadership, the eventual post-war plan may well be devised by the next cabinet, he told VOA.

Alkhatib said that the Israeli prime minister could also be bidding his time until the US presidential elections in November, which could fundamentally shift what's happening in Gaza.

The world will see either a second Biden term where the US will apply more pressure on Netanyahu, or a new Trump administration that would give Israel "complete free rein to do as it pleases in the Gaza Strip," Alkhatib predicted.

Biden increasingly impatient

Biden remains staunchly supportive of Israel, providing military and diplomatic aid. Last week, his administration vetoed an Arab-backed United Nations resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire, the third since Israel's military offensive began.

However, the US submitted its own draft resolution, calling for a temporary cease-fire in Gaza after a captive deal between Israel and Hamas is secured and oppos-



A local street market in Rafah is overcrowded with Palestinians displaced by the Israeli onslaught in the Gaza Strip on January 20, 2024.

▲ ABED RAHIM KHATIB/DPA

ing Israel's ground offensive into Rafah without adequate civilian protection.

The US draft shows Biden's increasing impatience with Netanyahu, said Richard Gowan, UN director of the International Crisis Group.

"If I were looking at this from Israel's perspective, I would feel a little nervous because the signaling from the Biden administration is becoming marginally stronger,"

he told VOA. "It will continue to protect Israel at the UN, but its patience is not limitless."

Washington is hoping for a breakthrough in talks underway in Paris between top US, Israeli, Egyptian, and Qatari officials aimed at securing a temporary cease-fire in return for the release of captives held by Hamas.

The US is also working to defuse Israel-Hezbollah tensions along the Lebanese border to prevent

escalation to a full-fledged war in the region. "The success of these efforts is very much needed and could be assisted by some pause in fighting in Gaza," Goren said.

A cease-fire would bring welcome relief to Gaza, where more than 29,000 people have been killed in the bloodiest episode of the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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PERSPECTIVE

Days ago, when the United States cast the only vote in the UN Security Council against a resolution for a cease-fire in Gaza, it was yet another move by President Biden to serve as the main enabler for Israel's ongoing mass murder of Palestinian people. Since early October, nearly 30,000 have been killed by US weaponry and, increasingly, by hunger and disease. The cruelty and magnitude of the slaughter are repugnant to anyone who isn't somehow numb to the human agony.

Such numbing is widespread in the US. Some factors include ethnocentric, racial, and religious biases against Arabs and Muslims. The steep pro-Israel tilt of news media runs parallel to the slant of US government officials, with language that routinely conveys much lower regard for Palestinian lives than Israeli lives.

And while the credibility of the Israeli cabinet has tumbled, the brawny arms of the Israel lobby — notably AIPAC and Democratic Majority for Israel — still exert enormous leverage over the vast majority of Congress. Few legislators are willing to vote against the massive military aid that makes the carnage in Gaza possible.

Joe Biden's moral collapse on Gaza could help Donald Trump win

Why it's so hard to talk about Gaza

A chilling example is Sen. Chris Van Hollen, a Democrat from Maryland. On the night of February 12, he took to the Senate floor and condemned Israel in no uncertain terms. "Kids in Gaza are now dying from the deliberate withholding of food," he said. "In addition to the horror of that news, one other thing is true. That is a war crime. It is a textbook war crime. And that makes those who orchestrate it war criminals."

Watching the video from Van Hollen's impassioned speech, you might assume that he would vote against sending \$14 billion in further military aid to those "war criminals," but hours later, he did just the opposite. As journalist Ryan Grim noted, "The senator's speech pulsed with moral clarity — until it petered out into a stumbling rationale for his forthcoming yes vote." Only three senators in the Democratic caucus — Jeff Merkley of Oregon and Peter Welch and Bernie Sanders, both of Vermont — voted no. Sanders delivered a powerful speech calling for decency instead of further moral collapse from the top of the US government.

While the Senate deliberated, the White House again made clear that it wasn't serious about getting in the way of Israel's planned assault on the city of Rafah. That's where most of Gaza's 2.2 million surviving residents have taken unsafe refuge from the Orwellian-named Israel Defense Forces. An exchange at a White House news conference underscored that Biden is



The screengrab shows US Senator Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, speaking on the floor of the US Senate on January 16, 2024, with photos displayed of children and civilians in Gaza.

▲ US SENATE WEBCAST

determined to keep enabling Israel's continuous war crimes in Gaza. A reporter asked, "Has the president ever threatened to strip military assistance from Israel if they move ahead with a Rafah operation that does not take into consequence what happens with civilians?" National Security Council spokesman John Kirby replied, "We're going to continue to support Israel. They have a right to defend themselves against Hamas and we're going to continue to make sure they have the tools and the capabilities to do that."

Later, Politico summed it up: "The Biden administration is not planning to punish Israel if it launches a military campaign in Rafah without ensuring civilian safety." Citing interviews with three US officials, the article reported that "no reprimand plans are in the works, meaning Israeli forces could enter the city and harm

civilians without facing American consequences."

Biden continues to serve as an accomplice while mouthing platitudes of concern about the lives of civilians in Gaza. Month after month, he has done all he can to supply the Israeli military to the max.

Under an apt headline — "Biden Is Mad at Netanyahu? Spare Me." — Jack Mirkinson of The Nation wrote in mid-February: "In the real world, Biden and his legislative partners have continued to arm Israel; the Democratic leadership in the Senate actually brought people in on Super Bowl Sunday to take a vote on a bill that would, along with rearming Ukraine, send Israel another \$14.1 billion for what is euphemistically dubbed 'security assistance'."

Ever since October, protests and activism in many parts of the country have

challenged US support for Israel's military assault on Gaza. However, boosted by revulsion at Hamas's attack against Israeli civilians on October 7, the usual rationales for supporting Israel's violence against Palestinians have been hard at work.

In this election year, an additional factor looms large. The prospect of Donald Trump returning to power is all too real. And with Biden set to be the Democratic nominee, many individuals and groups are careful to avoid saying anything that might sound overly critical of the president they want to see re-elected.

Instead of candor, the routine choices have been euphemisms and silence. Morally and politically, that's a big mistake.

The electoral base that Biden will need to win this year's election is heavily against his support for Israel's war on Gaza. Polling shows that young people in particular are overwhelmingly opposed. Most have seen through the thin veneer of his weak pleas for Israel to not kill so many civilians.

No amount of evasion, silence, or doubletalk can make Biden's policies morally acceptable. But while the administration combines its PR hand-wringing with an endless flow of arms and military supplies, Biden apologists must resort to evasion and verbal gymnastics to defend the indefensible.

A better course of action would be actual candor about current realities: Biden's moral collapse is enabling the Israeli cabinet to continue, with impunity, its large-scale massacre of Palestinian people. In the process, Biden is increasing the chances that the Republican Party, led by fascist Donald Trump, will gain control of the White House in January.

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