Outlining post-war Gaza principles, Netanyahu continues to defy Biden

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) walks alongside his extremist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich before a cabinet meeting in Al-Quds (Jerusalem) on February 23, 2023.
● ALEX KOLOMOISKY/POOL

By Patsy Widakuswara
VOA's White House Bureau Chief

PERSPECTIVE

Post-war principles for Gaza outlined in a document Friday by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stand in stark contrast to Washington's vision for the war-torn territory, a sign of the deepening divide between his cabinet and the administration of US President Joe Biden.

The document, The Day After Hamas Principles, is the first official summary of Netanyahu's public positions on the war that Israel has waged in Gaza in response to Hamas' October 7 attack that killed 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 200 people captives.

It calls for civil governance by Israeli-appointed individuals in Gaza, bypassing any involvement from the Palestinian Authority and absent provisions for a pathway to Palestinian statehood.

Biden's tough love deficit

By Robert Wright
Author

OPINION

As of this weekend, it's been exactly two years since Russia attacked Ukraine and exactly 20 weeks since Hamas attacked Israel. There are lots of differences between those two events and between the wars they've brought, but there's one important commonality: how President Biden has reacted. In both cases he has come to the aid of a friend in need and done so in a way that wasn't ultimately good for the friend. Biden is good at showing love and catastrophically bad at showing tough love.

With both Ukraine and Israel, the US has massive leverage — by virtue of being a critical weapons supplier and also in other ways. And in both cases, Biden has refused to use the leverage to try to end wars that are now, at best, pointless exercises in carnage creation.

In the case of Israel, that refusal is so well known as to require no elaboration. (Even the European Union's foreign minister has subjected Biden to borderline ridicule for calling Israel's conduct in Gaza "over the top" while keeping the weapons flowing.) What may require elaboration — given that Gazans are dying en masse and Israelis aren't — is my claim that Biden's blank check to Israel is bad for Israel.

It's hard to see how the slaughter being visited on Gaza won't come back to haunt Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Gazans — out of a total population of 2.1 million — now have close relatives who have been killed or maimed by Israel. That's enough hatred to fuel violence against Israelis for decades. Israel says all the killing is necessary so it can "eliminate" Hamas — as if (assuming such elimination is even possible) the specific brand under which hatred is converted into violence is the big issue.

Of course, there's a chance that Israel will insulate itself from much of this hatred — that the war will end with the ethnic cleansing of Gaza or with an Israeli occupation of Gaza so brutal as to suppress all resistance. And maybe Bibi Netanyahu would call both of these things a win.

And, actually, by the political calculus that has governed his career, they might be. After all, in one case, Israel would face something close to global ostracism and in the other case, intense and sustained international criticism, and in neither case would the Palestinian conflict be resolved. So, Israeli politicians who thrive on the country's sense of insecurity and of persecution — political assets Bibi has carefully cultivated for the past two

decades — would be sitting pretty, but Israel itself wouldn't be.

In the case of Ukraine, Biden's failure to use his leverage to push an American friend toward peace hasn't been a topic of much discussion. After all, only in the last few weeks, as battlefield momentum has clearly shifted toward Russia, has it occurred to many Americans that ending the war is in Ukraine's interest even if Russia continues to claim Ukrainian territory. And even now, a widespread assumption is that if only Congress will cough up the money for another round of weapons, all will be fine.

But all won't be fine. Ukraine will run out of soldiers long before Russia does, and Russia's industrial capacity means that its ongoing supply of weapons, unlike Ukraine's, is enduringly insulated from the unpredictable politics of other nations.

Such basic asymmetries have been ob-

vious for a long time to the handful of American foreign policy elites who are capable of soberly assessing Russia-related phenomena. Fifteen months ago, Gen. Mark Milley, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Biden White House that Ukraine's battlefield position was unlikely to significantly improve and could deteriorate, so it was time to talk peace. Today, 15 months after Milley's warning, Ukraine's battlefield position is much more precarious and its negotiating position accordingly weaker. And there are now tens of thousands more dead Ukrainian soldiers, and tens of thousands more Ukrainian amputees, than there were when Milley tried to stop the bloodshed.

Milley's effort to inject reason into US foreign policy discourse was overcome by the usual suspects — the Michael McFauls and Anne Applebaums of the

world, zealous hawks who, notwithstanding their track records, have open invitations to America's dominant media platforms. Biden sided with them against Milley, agreeing that we had no right to question the judgment of Ukrainians — our friends, after all — who wanted to expel Russian troops from all Ukrainian territory at all costs. So, 15 months later, the Ukrainian "agency" is alive and well, even if many fewer Ukrainians are.

For better or worse (mostly worse), America's foreign policy is organized largely around the goal not just of keeping America a superpower, but of keeping it the world's dominant superpower. But what's the point of being a superpower if you don't use your power when it's really needed?

The full article first appeared on Nonzero Newsletter.

US President Joe Biden embraces Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (L) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (R) on different occasions in a show of solidarity.
● NONZERO