

# 'Disastrous': Israel-Iran tensions test limits of US policy amid Gaza war



By Ali Harb  
Reporter

## PERSPECTIVE

United States President Joe Biden had a brief but stern warning for Iran as it promised to retaliate against Israel for a deadly air raid on its consulate in Damascus: "Don't." But analysts say that Iran likely will launch its own attack, raising fears of a regional war and showing the limits of US deterrence efforts in the Middle East. The brinkmanship and resulting tensions have put further strain on Washington's foreign policy. Already, the US is caught between two seemingly conflicting priorities: offering unconditional support for Israel and preventing the conflict in Gaza from expanding.

"Biden is doubling down on a formula that so far has been absolutely disastrous," said Trita Parsi, executive vice president at the Quincy Institute, a think tank that promotes diplomacy. Parsi said Biden should have rebuked Israel for attacking the Iranian embassy on April 1, violating international law, and endangering US troops in the region. But, he explained, the Biden administration is rewarding the Israeli cabinet by promising to support it instead. The US — unlike some of its Arab and Western allies — has not condemned the Israeli strike on the Iranian diplomatic facility in Syria, which killed seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including two generals. The White House, however, was quick to distance itself from the strike, stressing that the US was not involved in it.

### US 'devoted' to Israel's defence

US diplomats have reportedly been working the phones this week, speaking with their counterparts across the world to urge restraint from Iran. While calling for de-escalation, US officials have also reaffirmed their country's "ironclad" support for Israel, raising fears of a direct confrontation between Washington and Tehran. "We are devoted to the defence of Israel. We will support Israel. We will help defend Israel, and Iran will not



Smoke rises after an Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, on April 1, 2024. REUTERS

succeed," Biden said on Friday. The Pentagon and State Department have also expressed similar positions. "This completely deprives Israel of any incentives to de-escalate," Parsi said. He added that Biden's backing of Israel mirrors his "bear hug" approach to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the outset of the war on Gaza, which gave a green light to the mass killings and rights violations in the Palestinian territory. "That helped shape Israel's strategy that knew no limits, that did not care about international law — because they had come to understand that Biden will support them no matter what," Parsi told Al Jazeera. Sina Toossi, a senior fellow at the Center for Inter-

national Policy think tank, called the US approach to the crisis "hypocritical and contradictory". "They're calling on all the other parties in the region to be restrained, constantly telling the Iranians 'don't escalate', whereas they encourage Israelis to act with total impunity," Toossi told Al Jazeera.

### Iran says Israel 'must be punished'

He added that the Iranian pledge to retaliate is partly driven by the perception that the US and Israel believe they can cause harm without triggering a strong reaction from Tehran, which does not want a regional war. But now, Iran wants to draw a firm line, Toossi told Al Jazeera. "It can very objectively be stated that US poli-

cy has gotten us into this situation." The Israeli military has been targeting Iran-linked sites in Syria for years, as Tehran bolsters its military presence in the war-torn country, but experts say Tehran saw bombing a diplomatic facility as a particularly brazen act that should not go unanswered. "The consulate and embassy offices in any country are considered to be the territory of that country. When they attack our consulate, it means they have attacked our territory," Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said on Wednesday. "The Zionist regime made a mistake and must be punished and will be punished." It remains to be seen where and how that promised punishment will come, but if it happens, it could be a

## Biden should not follow Netanyahu into war with Iran



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## OPINION

The US and Israel have been raising the alarm of a possible Iranian retaliatory strike in response to last week's Israeli attack on an Iranian diplomatic facility in Damascus. The president once again pledged "ironclad" US support for Israel in the event of an Iranian response, and the head of Central Command, Gen. Erik Kurilla, was reportedly headed to Israel Thursday to coordinate with Israeli leaders ahead of the expected strike. The administration is moving in the wrong direction. The US ought to be distancing itself from Israel's illegal attack, but instead, the Biden administration is moving to shield Israel from the consequences of its own actions.

Israeli forces have routinely struck Iranian and other targets in Syria for more than a decade, but the attack on the consulate in Damascus was a major escalation both in terms of the location and the rank of the Iranian officers that were killed. The Israeli cabinet appears to want to goad Iran into a military response to divert attention from the slaughter and famine in Gaza and to trap the US into joining the fight. The president has made it that much easier for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by volunteering to walk into the trap. The US is at considerable risk of becoming involved in a direct conflict with Iran thanks to the reckless actions of the Netanyahu cabinet and the president's lockstep support. This does not serve legitimate US security interests. The US cannot afford another conflict in the Middle East, and siding with Israel exposes US forces to significant unnecessary dangers. The US is under no obligation to come to Israel's defense if Iran retaliates against an Israeli strike, and the president has no authority to commit the US to fight a war for another entity, especially when that entity is not a treaty ally. President Biden said this week that the US would do "all we can to protect Israel's security," but this knee-jerk response is the wrong one under the circumstances. Why is the US putting itself on the hook to protect Israel, which is more than capable of fending for itself? It is an unnecessary commitment, and it is unwise. It risks fueling a regional war that the administration has said it wants to avoid, and it rewards Netanyahu for his rogue behavior. American troops have already come under attack

because of our government's support for the war in Gaza. The administration's response to the war over the last six months has already been detrimental to US interests and harmful to America's reputation. This latest commitment to protect Israel while the war in Gaza continues compounds these earlier errors and does even more damage to our country's global image. US intelligence has reportedly warned that an Iranian response is "imminent". It remains unclear exactly what form Iranian retaliation might take, but it seems very unlikely that the Iranian government will choose not to answer a direct attack as brazen as this one was. The response could involve missile launches from Iranian territory, as we saw in the response to the US assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020, or it could be some combination of missile and drone attacks from various Iranian-backed groups. Whatever shape the response takes, the US should steer clear of the ensuing conflict. The US should not lift a finger to assist an Israeli cabinet that went out of its way to provoke this fight. The war in Gaza has been a wake-up call for the United States that its "ironclad" relationship with Israel is a serious liability for American interests. Jon Hoffman of the Cato Institute recently laid out the case against continuing the "special relationship" with Israel: "A special relationship with Israel does virtually nothing for the United States while actively undermining US strategic interests and often doing violence to the values that Washington claims to stand for." Given how little the US benefits from this relationship, the automatic and "ironclad" commit-

ment to Israel's security that Biden endorses makes no sense. Perhaps there was a time when extensive US support for Israel made some sort of strategic sense, but that time is long gone. Today, this support makes the US complicit in Israeli violations of international law, exposes the US to intense regional hostility, and puts US forces at greater risk in exchange for very little. When the Israeli cabinet isn't actively undermining US diplomacy with states in the region, it is openly ignoring Washington's preferences and defying Washington's requests. The US gets all the headaches and costs that come with foreign entanglement without gaining a reliable, constructive partner. US officials have often called the relationship with Israel "unshakeable" and several presidents have taken pride in ensuring that there is no "daylight" between the US and Israel in public, and that is why the relationship has become such a bad, dysfunctional one. In practice, preventing any "daylight" between our cabinets has meant catering to the Israeli cabinet's preferences at the expense of our own position. The "unshakeable" relationship has remained that way largely because the US keeps indulging its client regardless of the consequences. It isn't possible to have a balanced, respectful relationship with any entity when the other cabinet expects and receives such extraordinary deference. Instead, it creates a toxic relationship in which one cabinet always takes advantage of the other. Reflexive US backing for Israel has not only enabled the catastrophe unfolding in Gaza and implicated the US in war crimes, but it has also encouraged dan-