

Symposium: Will US-Israel relations survive the last year?

ANALYSIS

The US-Israel relationship has been largely marked by Washington's consistent commitment to Israel's security, beginning with the formal recognition of Israel in 1948 by President Harry S. Truman. While the United States did not become Israel's dominant arms supplier until after the 1967 war, it has been clear to all in the region since at least the Kennedy era that Washington

was in Israel's corner — despite strong Arab opposition, Israel's wars on and with its neighbors, and its ongoing and often brutal struggle to deny the national aspirations of the Palestinian people in the name of ensuring its own security.

No matter the circumstances, from Tel Aviv's secret nuclear weapons program in the early 1960s to the building of illegal settlements on the Golan Heights, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Washing-

ton has responded with more weapons, and more money for Israel — well over \$300 billion in all, the most US aid provided to a single foreign country by far. It has ensured Israel a Qualitative Military Edge, requiring Washington to maintain Tel Aviv's ability "to defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors."

Despite this largesse, Israeli

leaders have often defied US presidents and policy, raising questions about the balance in the relationship, or, as President Bill Clinton once indelicately put it after meeting with Israel's longest-serving and current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, "Who's the f..... Superpower here?"

More recently, Netanyahu's cabinet has repeatedly rejected President Biden's appeals to agree to ceasefire terms in Gaza. Netanyahu himself has

boasted of his ability to resist or manipulate Washington in ways that further his aims, once asserting, "I know what America is. America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction. They won't get in our way."

After a full year of war, Israel has used a steady flow of American weapons to wreak revenge for the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas in which 1,138 Israelis were killed and about 200 more taken captive. To date,

more than 41,000 Gazans, mostly civilians, have been killed, while at least 90 percent of Gaza's 2.2 million population has been displaced, and the vast majority of its buildings and infrastructure destroyed.

With Israel now invading southern Lebanon and Washington's nightmare scenario of a regional war breaking out, it would seem US-Israeli relations have reached a critical juncture.

Responsible Statecraft asked this group of scholars, journalists, and former diplomats if, for the first time in many decades, a real shift might be occurring. In other words, Has the last year of war permanently changed the US-Israel relationship? If so, how? If not, why?

Geoff Aronson, Andrew Bacevich, Daniel Bessner, Dan DePetris, Robert Hunter, Shireen Hunter, Daniel Levy, Rajan Menon, Paul Pillar, Annette Sheline, Steve Simon, Barbara Slavin, Hadar Suskind, Stephen Walt, Sarah Leah Whitson, James Zogby

Geoff Aronson, Middle East Institute:

The relationship between the US and Israel remains grounded in seminal US-Israeli understandings reached in the aftermath of the June 1967 war, according to which the US pledged to maintain Israel's conventional military superiority over any combination of regional enemies. In return, Israel committed to maintain ambiguity about its nuclear weapons arsenal — undeclared and undeveloped. During this last year in particular, the Biden administration has remained true to this commitment to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) — a commitment enshrined in US law — notwithstanding unprecedented concerns about Israel's (mis)use of US-supplied weapons. The US insists that its support for Israel remains "ironclad." "Make no mistake," insists the president, "the United States is fully, fully supportive of Israel." However, the unprecedented deployment of US forces to defend against Iranian missile attacks against Israel undermines Israel's long-held contention at the heart of US-Israel strategic cooperation — that the conventional arsenal supplied by the US to Israel, or QME, enables it to "defend itself by itself." The consequences of this critical Israeli dependence upon Washington's direct military engagement remain to be seen.

Andy Bacevich, co-founder of the Quincy Institute, Boston University: No real change will occur in the US-Israeli relationship as long as President Biden remains in the White House. What has changed over the past year are popular American attitudes toward Israel. Israel's "right to defend itself" cannot offer an adequate moral justification for the brutal punishment inflicted on the Palestinian people. Many Americans had grown accustomed to seeing the Arab-Israeli conflict as a contest between an innocent



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) and US President Joe Biden hold a bilateral meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington on July 25, 2024. **BLOOMBERG**

party and a guilty one. Events in Gaza and Lebanon have demolished that formulation once and for all.

Daniel Bessner, University of Washington: It's far too early to tell whether Israel's assault on Gaza has changed the US-Israel relationship. On one hand, there's been unprecedented youth criticism of Israel and the "uncommitted" campaign indicates that in several important swing states unquestioning US support for Israel might become a significant liability. Nothing will really change until the current generation of leaders gives way to younger politicians who came of age in a different moment, something that isn't exactly in the offing.

Dan DePetris, Defense Priorities: It's quite clear that the last year of war hasn't changed much of anything in the US-Israel relationship. US officials may be more vocal about their disagreements with Israeli policies and more willing to confront their Israeli counterparts rhetorically. But the actual policy doesn't match the rhetoric. The US is still effectively

enabling Israel to escalate even as it calls for regional de-escalation. It continues to sell large munitions and offensive weapons to Israel unconditionally while at the same time begging Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to sign a ceasefire deal in Gaza and make peace in Lebanon. It remains virtually nonchalant, even as Israel, the junior partner in the relationship, pursues highly risky strategies that could eventually blowback on US forces in the Middle East. The US isn't incapable of reforming the relationship — it's unwilling.

Robert Hunter, former US Ambassador to NATO: America will continue rock-solid support for Israel's security: It's deep in US culture. Further, Israel's perspective on the Middle East continues dominating the narrative in US society, politics, most think-tanks, and main-stream media. Thus without serious blow-back in Washington, Israel

managed to kill the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, while thwarting US efforts to reduce tensions with Tehran; and President Biden is able to give Israel near-total support, in practice though not words, for its military actions in Gaza and Lebanon. But the human toll of today's multi-faceted conflict has raised questions about the terms of US support for Israel's actions. There is erosion of initial sympathy for Israel's response to Hamas' horrendous slaughter last October 7. Some incalculable portion of younger Americans is less committed to virtual carte blanche for Israel's leaders. Yet however US domestic politics develop, they — more than US interests — will shape America's regional policies.

Shireen Hunter, former diplomat, Georgetown University: Following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the war in Gaza has caused serious tensions in Israel's relations with

the United States. Israel's indiscriminate bombing of Palestinians, the large number of dead (41,000-plus), massive destruction, and Washington's inability to end the war have been the main causes of these tensions.

With Israeli attacks in recent days, minor clashes between Israel and Hezbollah expanded to major conflict and the killing of the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, thus increasing the risk of Iran's response. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the fundamentals of US-Israel relations will change, at least not soon. This is because no state, notably any key Arab state, has risked antagonizing the US by helping the Palestinians. In short, in terms of its relations with Arab and other states, the United States has not paid any political or other price for its unstinting support of Israel.

Daniel Levy, US/Middle East Project:

The US support for Israel this past year (irrespective of its illegal actions in Gaza and elsewhere) represents more continuity than change. That manifests itself in the indispensable and constant conveyor belt of weapons supplies, the political-diplomatic cover and the alignment with, and repetition of, Israeli narratives — no matter how implausible, incredulous or extreme those are. But as the world around the US/Israel bubble reconfigures, the spillover looks different. The Trump innovation — unquestioningly embraced by Biden — of attempting to advance an Israel/allied Arab state regional hegemony, premised on the marginalization of Palestinian rights and embrace of Israel's apartheid and displacement project, lies in tatters. It cannot be sustained even by willing regimes as Israel insists on alienating and enraging ever-broader swathes of Arab opinion. Nevertheless, expect the D.C. blob to double down on pushing this pitiful paradigm.

More intriguing perhaps is the realization of the deepening and staggering level of Israeli dependence on the US — precisely at a time when the relationship is contrib-

