

Biden isn't so fond of Netanyahu to grant him a blank cheque from the US

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U.S. President Joe Biden attends a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as he visits Israel amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in Tel Aviv, Israel, October 18, 2023.

REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

The United States has extended its full military, strategic, and political support to Israel since the killing of more than 1,400 Israelis by the Hamas militants on 7 October. The US-Israel alliance is based not only on common foreign policy goals in the Middle East but also on shared religious and socio-cultural ideas such as open society, pluralism, democracy, and free market economy. Evangelical Christians or Catholics believe that the Jews' return to Jerusalem or ancient Israel is in accordance with the Biblical narrative. Former US presidents, too, were in complete alignment with the Jews—Harry S Truman developed 'a sense of appropriateness in the return of Jews to Palestine' and Lyndon B Johnson was told by his grandfather "to take care of the Jews, God's chosen people".

Joe Biden, then vice-president visiting Israel in 2010, explained how and when he developed his "love for this country". "It started at my dinner table with my father, who you would refer to as a righteous Christian...my father's support for Israel...generated a feeling for Israel that

began in my gut and went to my heart, and the older I got matured in my mind...my father often spoke passionately about the special connection between the Jewish people and this land," he had said.



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On Wednesday, he was in Tel Aviv as the first US president to visit Israel in wartime. When Biden expressed his complete solidarity and support for Israel a day after the Hamas attack, many Israelis felt reassured about their national security. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has neither apologised nor taken responsibility for the colossal failure of his government to protect Israeli citizens. Ronen Brar, head of the country's intelligence agency Shin Bet, and the Mossad have taken responsibility.

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Biden's looking after his own

Notwithstanding the 'special relationship' and unbreakable alliance with Jerusalem, Biden is in Israel because he has more pressing interests in the Middle East.

First, he does not want Israel to prolong this war; Russia's war against Ukraine is still going on. He saw Israeli officials using extreme language against Palestinians, fervently speaking about taking revenge: Defence minister Yoan Gallant called Hamas militants "human animals" and Israeli envoy Ron Prozor likened them to ISIS who must be "destroyed". The American President has already cautioned Israel not to enter Gaza with force, considering the lives of civilians and the necessity of humanitarian aid. In his 60-minute interview on *CBS News*, Biden said that he is personally involved in the security of Israel and that re-occupying Gaza will be a "big mistake" for Israel.

Jerusalem needs to look at the larger picture—a complete obliteration of Hamas is unlikely as the organisation has deep roots among millions of people inside and outside Gaza. Such an ideological movement can't be defeated merely with tanks and surgical strikes in battle.

The resolution of the conflict with the Palestinian Authority will make Hamas's theocratic and fanatic mission impossible. Hamas survives as long as Israel carries on with the occupation.

Second, Biden does not want Iran to meddle with the worst crisis that Israel is facing after the infamous Yom Kippur War of 1973. He has sought to deter Iran and its militia, Hezbollah, from escalating this violent episode. Three days ago, the US conveyed to the Iranians through backchannels not to take any part in the ongoing war in Gaza.

Third, Biden wants the world—specifically China, Russia, and Iran—to see the US in a leadership position in the ongoing Middle East crisis. Over the past decade, many nations and Gulf states started perceiving the US as having grown tired of its deep engagement in the region. To combat this perception, Biden proactively led historic missions like Saudi-Israeli normalisation and the recently conceived India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Such ambitious geopolitical goals may wither away soon if the Israel-Gaza conflict is not contained.

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No blank cheque for Israel

Finally, Biden is also in a bind when it comes to the Israeli leadership. He is not fond of Netanyahu, having opposed his politics for over a year. Much against the US interests, Netanyahu allied with some extreme national-religious parties that do not support the two-state solution with the Palestinians. Later on, the right-wing coalition even unilaterally pushed the judicial reforms that threaten the democratic credentials of Israel. Biden has refused a diplomatic welcome for Netanyahu at the White House for the past 10 months probably due to such differences with the Israeli PM.

While supporting Israel fully in this war, Biden also expects Netanyahu to commit to the long-denied State for Palestinians and work afresh with the Palestinian Authority, ironically led by highly unpopular and corrupt leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel is expecting global sympathy for itself while fighting Hamas. But sincere effort and commitment to peace with Palestinians, most of whom aren't aligned with Hamas, is a prominent precondition, which Israel has overlooked for long. How much Biden can influence the Israeli leadership on this matter at this hour is critical. It will undoubtedly be the right thing to do if he expects other powers like Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf States, Europe, and India to support his leadership in the Middle East. Israel depends a lot on military aid and political support from the US, and Biden doesn't have enough fondness for Netanyahu to grant him a blank cheque.

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(Edited by Humra Laeeq)