

The Biden Administration's Dangerous Move to Deepen Military Ties with Israel

The Biden administration's recent elevation of Israel to a “full military partner” sets a dangerous precedent and works against U.S. interests.

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Global Research, January 18, 2023

[Mondoweiss](#) 14 January 2023

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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*Two years ago, the outgoing U.S. administration of **Donald Trump** did some bureaucratic realigning of what countries fall under which military command groups. Israel, which had been part of the EUCOM (European Command) group was transferred to CENTCOM (Central Command), which encompasses the Middle East and some of South Asia.*

It was the sort of boring detail that doesn't generate headlines, and many who do hear about it yawn and move on quickly. But when it was announced on January 15, 2021, [it was celebrated](#) by pro-Israel groups in the United States and by Israeli officials.

At the time, I noted that this was part of capitalizing on the Abraham Accords and pushing forward with the idea of forming a “Mideast NATO.” [I tweeted](#), “This bears close watching. The burgeoning #Israel - Arab States military alliance, built by the #Trump administration for a military confrontation with #Iran, is not something @JoeBiden is going to reverse. The question will be how he manages it and what he decides to use it for.” We're starting to see what this Biden policy looks like.

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— Mitchell Plitnick ☐☐ (@MJPlitnick) [January 19, 2021](#)

The Biden administration has pressed forward with the military aspects of the Abraham Accords' vision, letting it be known at the end of 2022 that Israel, as part of its new position

in CENTCOM, [had been elevated](#) to “full military partner” in terms of strategizing and planning with the United States.

In some ways, this is little more than a rhetorical change. After all, it’s no secret that the U.S. and Israel coordinate matters of regional strategy very closely, have lines of communication that are buzzing all the time between political and military planners from the top of the chain of command to the bottom, and work jointly throughout the Middle East region. But, as [analyst Paul Pillar points out](#), this more public elevation of the U.S.-Israel military relationship brings the United States closer to a military alliance with Israel, a relationship which, if it results in an official alliance, runs the risk of an American commitment to Israel’s defense that could easily drag the U.S. into more fighting in the Middle East, even if that’s not Washington’s intention. And it would mean that commitment happens without any kind of public debate.

As Pillar notes,

“The risks of a closer military relationship with Israel center on Israel’s tendency to get involved in deadly scrapes. Israel is the Middle Eastern state that has thrown its military weight around, with multiple attacks on the territories of other nations, more than any other state in the region. Israel has repeatedly initiated wars, including the big one in 1967, which began with an Israeli attack on Egypt. Later came repeated Israeli invasions of Lebanon, multiple devastating military attacks on the Palestinian-inhabited Gaza Strip, an attack on an Iraqi nuclear reactor (an attack that revived and accelerated a covert Iraqi nuclear weapons program), and a later similar attack in Syria.”

It is fair to argue that the *de facto* military alliance with Israel that Pillar fears already exists. If Israel goes to war, even if it’s a war of its own making, there is likely to be enormous pressure in Washington to support that effort. Whether that pressure would be successful is a matter of debate, a debate that could not happen if we officially commit to Israel as an ally.

We should keep in mind Pillar’s example of the 1967 war, a war that Israel started, but which is far more often described by Israel and its supporters as a “defensive war,” a claim which goes unchallenged the overwhelming majority of the time. (Note: This is a significant point that Israel still uses. To refute it and to see a more accurate history, see, among many sources, Charles D. Smith, [Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict](#). Even Israel’s former foreign minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami [refutes the pre-emptive strike idea](#).) The fact that there are relatively few people who understand that Israel was not facing an imminent attack, and both the United States and Israel itself knew it, illustrates the danger to the United States of an increased military commitment to Israel. The massive funding and diplomatic cover the U.S. gives Israel are bad enough. But as Pillar explains, the threat of Israel dragging the United States into another Middle East war, is already real and growing.

“With Netanyahu now back in power at the head of his radical coalition, and with Iran having expanded its nuclear program in response to Donald Trump’s foolish abandonment of the agreement that had severely restricted that program, the danger of Israel instigating a war with Iran is as great as ever,” he writes. “For Netanyahu, the preferred scenario would have the United States, rather than Israel, assume the main burdens and costs of such a war. Especially given Israel’s long record of covert operations against Iran, the ability of Netanyahu’s government to manipulate events and bring about such a scenario is

substantial.”

Pillar, a longtime U.S. intelligence analyst, cautions that any U.S. military relationship, with Israel or any other country, entails serious risks and ought to be carefully weighed against the benefits to U.S. interests as well as widely debated and carefully considered.

Even aid to Ukraine is a matter of constant public debate, despite the fact that every aid package that is going there makes big headlines and remains [quite popular with most Americans](#). Yet as Israel becomes a closer military partner, with the risks that entails, there is no more than a mention here and there.

What would that debate look like? As with any other policy matter that carries risk, it would depend on what you see as U.S. interests. Many of us believe that a more just, egalitarian world that respects human rights, shares resources equitably, and nurtures the human spirit is a U.S. interest. But that is clearly far from the world we live in.

Still, while we work to get more people to support those principles in a material way, we can also look at what a more conventional view of U.S. interests would include. Surely, it would include regional stability in the Middle East. But what does that mean?

I would argue that U.S. interests aren't being well served by Joe Biden's foreign policy in general. Even before he was elected, and certainly since he was elected, Biden has pursued a policy of belligerence toward China. He dragged his feet for an extended period regarding the restoration of the Iran nuclear deal until a more hardline and belligerent Iranian administration came in, compromising the international effort to get the deal back in place. [I've described elsewhere at some length](#) my issues with his approach to Russia, and how U.S. policy for decades has been misguided, although the invasion of Ukraine was an unmitigated and horrific crime for which Russia bears full responsibility. I do not think Biden's zeal for revitalizing NATO (which Vladimir Putin, I assume unintentionally, has done an incredible job of helping with), and his utter refusal to deal with the ongoing refugee crisis that is largely the result of U.S. policies over decades in Latin America as well as Haiti serve U.S. interests well either.

In the Middle East, the elevation of Israel to partnership is meant in the short term to strengthen the idea of a regional alliance similar to NATO. Ironically, and rather foolishly, it's an attempt by Biden to enhance the region's ability to defend itself, but, as Pillar makes clear, it actually enables those very regional partners, Israel and the United Arab Emirates (which, itself, has considerable sway in Washington) to draw the U.S. into their conflicts.

Even aside from the more idealistic concepts of justice, freedom, and human rights, it is very much in the U.S. interest to distance itself from Israel's ongoing crimes against the Palestinian people and its regional aggression, which so often takes the form of covert attacks in Iran and overt ones in Syria and Lebanon. It is also in the U.S. interest to distance itself from the devastation that Saudi Arabia is still wreaking in Yemen, as well as its ongoing funding of various militias across the region; and from the UAE, which behaves in a similar fashion in the region and, like KSA, is one of the most brutal autocracies in the world.

It is in the United States' interest to find mutually beneficial accommodations with China because, as it will learn to its chagrin, its regional allies in the Gulf and in the Levant are going to pursue their own interests and maximize the benefits available in relationships with both the U.S. and China, as well as with Russia. Instead, Biden dreams of a "Mideast NATO"

that will stand against not only Iran, but China and Russia as well.

If that seems unrealistic, it is. Regional stability and U.S. interests are served by promoting Palestinian freedom, and democracy throughout the region. That means supporting movements for freedom and democracy throughout the region. It does not mean the United States, with its compromised positions throughout the world, leading some neoconservative crusade to bring democracy at the point of a gun or with murderous sanctions. Rather, it means working with and through the United Nations and other global institutions to support and enable civil society groups in these countries and letting them do their work of promoting justice in their homes.

Even that is far off the table, such egalitarianism being foreign not only to the United States but to states in general. But what is not unrealistic, is for the United States to at least cease acting *against* its own interests. The U.S. gains nothing and loses much by covering for Israel's apartheid system and constant violations and outright denial of Palestinian rights. It gains less than it loses by groveling before Mohammed Bin Salman in Riyadh and deepening its partnership with the dictatorial UAE. It is in U.S. interest to lower tensions with Iran and encourage its reintegration. Magnifying the belligerence, especially at the behest of the Saudis and Israelis who want to force the current Iranian rulers out (a strategy which only makes it *more* difficult for Iranians struggling for their freedom and for the change they want to see in Iran) is a self-defeating strategy.

Since taking office, Biden has, of course, nurtured this pipedream of a "Mideast NATO," most recently [this week](#) at a meeting of the so-called "Negev Forum," which brings together the Arab states that have relations with Israel to plan for major trade deals and build the military alliance, with smaller, minor working groups focused on efforts mostly meant for public relations such as cultural and scientific exchanges.

The pace of normalization has been slower than Washington probably hoped, and there are [no immediate prospects](#) of more Arab states following the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco into the Faustian bargain with Israel. Indeed, the Negev Forum itself highlighted the difficulties faced by Arab countries trying to work with Israel as Jordan boycotted the confab in solidarity with the Palestinian Authority, who have refused to join the Forum, which they correctly understand to be aimed at thwarting their ambitions of freedom from Israeli domination.

U.S. interests are best served not by facilitating trade and military deals between brutal autocracies and apartheid states. They are not served by inching toward a security pact with Israel. They are served by using the considerable leverage the U.S. has with allies like Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, among others, to recognize the basic rights of those to whom they deny them. Continuing down the road of further enriching corrupt elites and ignoring or even shielding human rights violators from consequences in order to strengthen a belligerent stance against other states will only end in the same destruction, loss of life, and massive waste that have characterized U.S. policy in the Middle East for all of this century and much of the last one.

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