

Leading Liberal Zionist Voices Call for Ending U.S. Aid to Israel

A New York Times Op-Ed featuring liberal Zionist leaders calls to end military aid to Israel as the country passes a law gutting its judiciary. This is the moment people working to end U.S. aid to Israel have been waiting for.

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The damage Israel is causing to its support base in the United States is becoming more apparent. A very bright warning flare went up this weekend, appearing once again in the New York Times. This time, it was columnist Nicholas Kristof [who took a much bolder and far less speculative](#) step than his colleague, Tom Friedman did last week by suggesting that the very heart of AIPAC's mission—annual military aid to Israel—should be phased out.

Friedman, you might recall, [floated the idea that a "reassessment"](#) of the United States' relationship with Israel might be on the horizon, if not already starting. [As I noted](#), that was meant as a warning to Israel, not a reflection of any actual steps by Joe Biden's White House to launch a policy process of reassessment. Indeed, as [subsequent](#) events [confirmed](#), and as was indicated by the fact that Friedman cited no sources, even anonymous ones, this was the columnist trying to use his column to get Israel to back off because political winds are shifting. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not heed the warning, instead [moving forward uncompromisingly](#) on his domestic agenda and [misleading the media](#) about his conversation with Biden. Needless to say, that didn't sit well in Washington.

A Liberal Zionist Argument for Ending Military Aid to Israel

Kristof launched his next volley on Saturday, the Sabbath. That was likely not a coincidence, as it meant that many religious Jews in the U.S. would not see it for a while and Israel would be slower to respond than usual, much like when the U.S. government releases controversial statements late on Friday afternoon.

Kristof's column strikes at the very heart of the lobbying might of pro-Israel forces, and uses noted liberal Zionists to do it. Former Ambassadors to Israel Dan Kurtzer and Martin Indyk,

former diplomat Aaron David Miller, and J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami all chime in on why they think it would be a good idea to stop sending billions of dollars in military aid to Israel every year.

These voices, all appearing in the *New York Times* under the byline of one of the United States' most prominent columnists calling for an end to U.S. military aid to Israel is no small thing, although it's tempered a bit. Kristof is quick to note, "...the reason to have this conversation is that American aid to another rich country squanders scarce resources and creates an unhealthy relationship damaging to both sides." In other words, it's not that we don't still love you, Israel, it's just that we think you've grown up and don't need the money anymore.

But that is absurd on its face. There's nothing about this moment that is any different for Israel economically than it's been for at least the [past thirty years](#). Israel's economy has been capable of paying for its own military for a very long time.

Kristof also claims that the money sent to Israel each year could instead be used to aid countries in much more dire need. That's true, but doing so would hardly necessitate cutting aid to Israel. The annual \$3.8 billion that Israel gets is a drop in the ocean of annual [U.S. spending](#), which totaled \$6 trillion in 2022, and that was a significant downgrade from the \$7.25 trillion spent in 2021. According to [the Council on Foreign Relations](#), the U.S. ranked 22nd out of 24 developed countries in the amount of aid it gives as a percentage of GDP. So we can, and should, be giving more without cutting anything.

Digging deeper into Kristof's piece, we see the real reasons behind his thinking. Dan Kurtzer, ambassador to Israel during George W. Bush's first term, told Kristof, "Aid provides the U.S. with no leverage or influence over Israeli decisions to use force; because we sit by quietly while Israel pursues policies we oppose, we are seen as 'enablers' of Israel's occupation."

How seriously we oppose those policies is a matter of debate, but Kurtzer is not alone in his concern over how aid to Israel makes the U.S. look to people around the world. Although by now, it is a mundane point, and taken as normal, [American officials have voiced such concerns](#) in the past. Still, the relationship has endured for all these decades, and even now, when Israel's public image in the United States is at a historic low, criticism directed at it is perilous, as Pramila Jayapal saw just last week.

Yet the voices of people like Kurtzer and Martin Indyk, ambassador to Israel under Bill Clinton, might have been mildly critical of Israel in the past, but they had always stopped well short of calling for even slowing U.S. military aid. Obviously, the current far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu has managed to irritate Israel's more liberal supporters in Washington in a way Israel has never done before.

Netanyahu Escalates the Insults

The proposed judicial reform is the key reason, of course. Netanyahu's attempt to render Israel's judicial system unable to do anything but obey the Knesset's every word threatens all the propaganda about "democracy" and "shared values" that are the only way Democrats have to justify their lockstep support of Israel regardless of its many crimes. But it is more than that.

Netanyahu has made a mockery of the United States as its patron. While the Biden administration has fallen over itself to keep the cash flowing to Israel; to shield Israel at the United Nations and other international fora; and to promote the truly evil myths that anti-Zionism and BDS are nothing more than forms of antisemitism, Israel has responded by making commitments to Washington it never intended to keep, often abrogating them as soon as the [meetings where they were made were over](#). Netanyahu also [misled the media](#) about the phone call the two had last week. That didn't sit well with Biden at all.

All of this has led these key figures in the liberal Zionist, Washington community to beat the drums on the most sacred of cows on Capitol Hill — U.S. aid to Israel. Yet even there, the calls are tempered with a sense that they don't believe it to be possible.

Aaron David Miller, who coined the phrase "[Israel's lawyer](#)" in reference to former U.S. "Peace envoy" Dennis Ross, told Kristof, "Under the right conditions and in a galaxy far, far away, with U.S.-Israeli relations on even if not better keel, there would be advantages to both to see military aid phased out over time." Clearly, he does not believe it to be possible, even if cutting off the aid to Israel might be desirable.

Jeremy Ben-Ami of J Street offered a similar sentiment. "There's a serious conversation that should be had ahead of this next memorandum of understanding about how best to use \$40 billion in U.S. tax dollars. Yet instead of a serious national security discussion, you're likely to get a toxic mix of partisan brawling and political pandering."

Ben-Ami is certainly correct when it comes to Congress. The [shameful display](#) of Israeli President Isaac Herzog addressing a joint session of Congress right after the debacle of Democrats joining Republicans [to browbeat Rep. Pramila Jayapal](#) for daring to point out that Israel, which deprives millions of Palestinians of freedom, rights, property, and often their very lives for no reason other than their ethnicity, is a racist state, shows that Congress, with a few notable exceptions, remains unwilling to challenge Israel and its American supporters.

Given the tidal shift the current Israeli government is causing, that can change, but it would require two things. One is time, as that sort of entrenched support doesn't turn around overnight. The second is leadership, and that must come from the White House. Joe Biden is both personally and politically disinclined to provide that leadership. He'd much rather grit his teeth and bear the humiliations, as he has in the past. But Netanyahu is pushing it so hard he may not leave Biden much choice.

Even as Republicans [absurdly blast Biden as "antisemitic"](#) for trying to convince Israel to stop record-setting settlement expansion and expanding its brutal authoritarianism from Palestinians to its own Jewish citizens, they will have a much stronger case in describing him as weak if he continues to allow Netanyahu to spit in his face with only a metaphorical "thank you, sir, may I have another?" in response. They won't say it directly as that might imply that they think Biden should not do as Netanyahu says. But they will capitalize on Biden's kowtowing to Netanyahu's extremism in roundabout ways.

In any case, Biden is not there yet. In a recent speech to the Atlantic Council, his Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the audience that "I think we've seen Israeli democracy in all of its vibrancy. It's telling a remarkable story right now. That's playing out, and I'm confident the system will be able to deal effectively with it." As [I asked last week](#), how the mere existence of protests, which are seen frequently in authoritarian states, demonstrates the

existence of a “vibrant democracy” is, at best, unclear.

But Blinken is setting up the narrative the Biden administration wants to use if Netanyahu’s judicial reform fails. They will double down on Israel’s democracy, shout to the heavens about the shared values that were demonstrated, and how the bond between us is more “unbreakable” than ever.

Opening the Door to Ending Military Aid to Israel

That might be starting even now. Just hours after I wrote these words on Monday, the Knesset voted on the first major bill in the overhaul process. It passed, and now the Israeli judiciary’s power to check any excesses of the government has been erased. In an effort to stop this, President Herzog tried to broker a compromise with the considerable added leverage of the threat of some [10,000 military reservists refusing duty](#)—an unprecedented threat in Israeli history—along with a planned [strike called](#) by a forum of some 150 Israeli businesses. These factors were also bolstered by another [public statement from Biden](#) calling for Netanyahu to stop the bill from moving forward.

But still, the bill passed. Now, it must be used by advocates for Palestine in Washington to press forward with calls for the end of aid to Israel.

The current [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU), which laid down the terms for ten years of aid to Israel, runs through September 2028. The negotiations for the next one will likely start to gather steam in late 2025. Netanyahu has given advocates in the U.S. an opening to build political momentum against a new MOU, and that could have the effect of either diminishing it, placing conditions on it, or even stopping it altogether. The time to start building that momentum is now, taking advantage of the opening this moment provides.

Even if future parts of the judicial reform doesn’t pass, the topic has been broached, and that opening must be exploited. For decades, AIPAC has succeeded in its founding goal, its prime directive: to sustain and maximize aid to Israel. It built an impenetrable wall around that aid.

That wall has finally begun to crack. This is the moment people who want to see that aid stopped have been waiting for. Now is the time to go after U.S. aid to Israel, but not for the reasons Kristof proposes. That aid should stop for one reason above all others: because it is used to fund the oppression of the Palestinians, whether one wants to term that occupation or apartheid. It’s the argument that can’t be countered, and its time has finally come to Washington.

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*Featured image: Daniel Kurtzer (Left), Aaron David Miller (Center), and Martin Indyk (Right)
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