

It's Time to Put this Dysfunctional U.S.-Israel Relationship to the Test

Our national interests and regional stability are suffering as Tel Aviv takes our blank check and works openly against peace.

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*U.S. **Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin** reached out to his counterpart in Israel on Wednesday to reaffirm Washington’s [“ironclad” support](#) for Tel Aviv to do what it needs to defend itself against “*Hamas and other terrorist groups*” amid escalating violence there this week. President Biden issued a similar statement [after his phone call](#) with Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**.*

As Daily Beast defense reporter Spencer Ackerman [pointed out](#) shortly after, this amounts to nothing less than a “greenlight” for Israel to keep pounding what it claims are military targets in the densely-populated Gaza strip. In essence, keeping our nose out of “their” business, just as Israel officials [had demanded](#) of Washington earlier in the week, regardless of the anti-American backlash it foments against the United States in the region.

This is the U.S.-Israel relationship in a microcosm. The blank check Washington has given to Tel Aviv by way of \$3.8 billion in annual aid, including high tech equipment to maintain its [“qualitative military edge,”](#) and deference on almost all political issues, has allowed Israel to resist agreeing to an equitable solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. Instead, it’s maintained an illegal and inhumane occupation that, in the words of Israel’s former Chief negotiator **Uri Savir**, [“is corrupting our youth.”](#) As such, this blank check prevents a two-state solution, undermines U.S. interests in peace and stability in the region, and ultimately also endangers Israel’s future as a democratic state.

And that’s not even taking into account that while telling the United States [to butt out](#) of its business, Israel [has openly attempted to thwart U.S. diplomatic measures with Iran](#), including efforts to rejoin the JCPOA and re-open diplomatic channels with Tehran. In fact, Israeli officials have not only warned openly that [war could follow](#) if the United States gets back into a “bad deal,” but are most certainly behind the [recent sabotage](#) of Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility, and the assassination of an Iranian [nuclear scientist](#) late last year.

And yet despite some attempts to balance the equation in Washington, successive

administrations have placed no conditions on the fulcrum of aid that has allowed Israel to cultivate the [most powerful](#) military force in the Middle East, complete with the most sophisticated weapons the United States can offer, and [an arsenal of nuclear weapons](#). Its homeland security, drone, and surveillance technology are unmatched, so much so that they are a [primary exporter](#) to the rest of the world. There is a reason why a quarter of inferior Hamas rockets fall short of targets while the Israeli missile strikes [hit Gaza targets with precision](#).

While much of the international community condemns Israel's annexation of Palestinian territory, razing of Arab neighborhoods, and racial and religiously discriminatory policies, the United States is the only country that uses its veto in the U.N. Security Council to shield Israel from any criticism or any sense of accountability. In fact, the United States [for a second time this week](#) thwarted a Security Council statement against Israeli violence on Wednesday. Consequently, we get blamed for Israel's policies by virtue of our role as Israel's enabler.

For all intents and purposes Israel behaves the way it does because it has no incentive not to. There are signs that the rest of the Middle East is getting a different memo — that Washington cannot be relied upon to fight its friends' battles, and that absent that firepower they may have to work out their own problems, with diplomacy. We are seeing that right now with Saudi Arabia [engaging in talks with Iran](#), its growing [detente with Qatar](#), and seeming interest in ending the war in Yemen. Meanwhile, Mideast rivals Egypt and Turkey are now holding their first ["frank talks"](#) since 2013.

Whether it's President Trump deciding not to retaliate for [alleged Iranian attacks on Saudi oil facilities](#), Biden announcing the United States would no longer assist Riyadh in its offensive operations against the Houthis in Yemen, or even the White House risking the ire of Turkey by using the word "genocide" to describe Ottoman slaughter of Armenians in 1915, the signals have been going out that Washington is slowly relinquishing its position as the Middle East's dominant military power.

Of course we're a long way from the ideal: Biden did no favors by recently greenlighting massive arms sales to the [UAE](#) and [Egyptian](#) regimes despite their systematic human rights abuses. In the case of the UAE, the monarchy continues to flout a U.N. arms embargo to [fuel a proxy war in Libya](#) (along with Turkey), and is still engaged in the war in Yemen, [despite claiming otherwise](#). We still don't know whether Biden will allow planned weapons deals made [under the Trump administration](#) to go through.

But an earnest effort to get back into the nuclear deal with Iran and an obvious military pivot to Asia should be more than a hint that the United States is no longer fully invested in old [Carter Doctrine](#) approaches that neither work, nor frankly, serve our national interest.

So why doesn't it send the same message to Israel? Despite its special status, the current relationship could be considered a seriously dysfunctional one. Where other countries in the Middle East are slowly coming to realize that diplomacy may be the pathway forward, Israel puts U.S. interests at risk by contributing to instability in the region. This is an open secret even in official Washington, and sometimes in moments of candor, it's spoken out loud.

Like when then-Centcom Commander David Petraeus, hardly an icon of radical thinking, [told a Senate committee in 2010](#):

The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [Area of Operations]. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas.

Predictably, Petraeus was slammed for seeming to blame Israel for the violence by extremists in the Palestinian territories and within its own borders. The shaming he and others have received for acknowledging the blowback for our hands-off approach to Israel in the region all but guarantees there won't be an honest conversation on whether it is truly time to use the leverage we have — [some \\$146 billion in assistance through 2020](#) — to help our Israeli friends steer a more peaceful path.

The Biden administration should take the same tough love tone with Netanyahu and his government as he has with the Saudis — for the sake of Israelis, Palestinians, and their neighbors in the region. And for our own sake. Every mosque stormed by troops, civilian killed, every home destroyed, can be tied to the United States. We will never be free, nor fully safe, until we confront this dysfunctional relationship head on.

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Featured image: Blinken meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on June 16, 2016

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