

U.S. Weapons Transfers to Israel Shrouded in Secrecy — But Not Ukraine

The Biden administration put out a three-page list of arms for Ukraine, but information on weapons sent to Israel could fit in one sentence.

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One month since Hamas's surprise attack, little is known about the weapons the U.S. has provided to Israel. Whereas the Biden administration released a three-page [itemized list](#) of weapons provided to Ukraine, down to the exact number of rounds, the information released about weapons sent to Israel could fit in a single sentence.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby acknowledged the secrecy in an October 23 [press briefing](#), saying that while U.S. security assistance "on a near-daily basis," he continued,

"We're being careful not to quantify or get into too much detail about what they're getting — for their own operational security purposes, of course."

The argument that transparency would imperil Israel's operational security — somehow not a concern with Ukraine — is misleading, experts told The Intercept.

"The notion that it would in any way harm the Israeli military's operational security to provide more information is a cover story for efforts to reduce information on the types of weapons being supplied to Israel and how they are being used," William Hartung, a fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and expert on weapons sales, told The Intercept. "I think the purposeful lack of transparency over what weapons the U.S. is supplying to Israel 'on a daily basis' is tied to the larger administration policy of downplaying the extent to which Israel will use those weapons to commit war crimes and kill civilians in Gaza."

A retired Marine general who worked in the region, who asked for anonymity because he

was not authorized by his former employer to speak publicly, attributed the secrecy to the political sensitivity of the conflict. In particular, the retired officer said, weapons used in door-to-door urban warfare, which are likely to result in civilian casualties, are not going to be something the administration wants to publicize. (The National Security Council did not respond to a request for comment.)

In recent years, flare-ups of violence between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip have often entailed Israeli air wars with limited numbers of Israeli troops entering the besieged coastal enclave. The last time there was a large-scale ground incursion by the Israel Defense Forces into Gaza was during the Israelis' [2014 Operation Protective Edge](#).

While the 2014 invasion saw Israeli troops in Gaza for less than a month, Israel's defense minister [recently told reporters](#) the war would take at least several months. The goal of removing Hamas completely from power is widely expected to take a significant commitment to a long-term ground presence and heavy urban fighting. According to the [New Yorker](#), Israeli officials told their American counterparts that the war could last 10 years. The Biden administration is [reportedly](#) worried that Israel's military objectives are not achievable.

On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [told](#) ABC News, "Israel will, for an indefinite period, will have the overall security responsibility because we've seen what happens when we don't have it."

"Delicate Matter Politically"

Hamas's attack on Israel, which took place on October 7, resulted in a cascade of arms assistance from the U.S. Though the Biden administration at first [declined](#) to identify any specific weapons systems, as details trickled out in the press, it has gradually acknowledged some. These include "precision guided munitions, small diameter bombs, artillery, ammunition, Iron Dome interceptors and other critical equipment," as Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder [has said](#).

What "other critical equipment" entails remains a mystery, as do specifics about the quantity of arms being supplied, which the administration has refused to disclose. When a reporter asked for a "ballpark" figure for the security assistance during a background [press briefing](#) on October 12, the Pentagon demurred. "I'm not going to do that today and would defer you to the government of Israel," a senior defense official told the reporter.

"To date, U.S. government reporting on arms transfers to Israel has been sporadic and without any meaningful detail," Stimson Center research analyst Elias Yousif [recently concluded](#). "Updates should be compiled on a single factsheet page, as is the case for Ukraine, and include details on the authorities invoked for the provision of assistance as well as the type and quantity of arms provided with enough specificity to enable public research and assessments."

Hartung, the Quincy fellow, noted the contrast with the administration's openness on military aid to Ukraine.

"Transparency on arms transfers to Ukraine came in large part due to the administration's feeling that they were engaged in a noble venture," Hartung said. "Although Israel certainly has the right to defend itself against the kind of horrific attack carried out by Hamas, its

response — bombing and blockading a whole territory of 2 million people, killing thousands of innocent people in the process — has been described by independent experts as committing war crimes.”

“So even as the Biden administration backs Israel with weapons and rhetoric,” Hartung said, “it is a delicate matter politically to give all the details on U.S. weapons supplied to the Israeli military, some of which will certainly be used in illegal attacks on civilians if the war continues to grind on.”

Beyond just the quantities, there are specific weapons the Pentagon is providing Israel which have not been publicly disclosed, the Marine general told The Intercept.

As the arms continue to flow, dozens of C-17 military transport planes likely carrying munitions have criss-crossed the Atlantic traveling between the United States and Israel, open-source flight tracking data show, with most landing at Nevatim Air Base, an IDF base in Israel’s southern Negev desert. President Joe Biden has requested \$14.3 billion in aid for Israel in addition to the over \$3 billion in [military assistance it already provides](#). Most recently, the Biden administration is planning to send \$320 million in precision Spice bombs to Israel, as multiple outlets informed by Congress reported on Monday.

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Featured image: U.S. Air Force personnel unload a KC-135 Stratotanker at an undisclosed location, designated by the military as within the U.S. Central Command “area of responsibility,” on Oct. 23, 2023. Photo: U.S. Air Force

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