

How the US became Israel's closest ally

The US has stood with Israel throughout history. What does it mean for the Gaza war?

By Nicole Narea; Oct 13, 2023; vox.com

Despite political differences that at times [strained relations](#) between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US [President Joe Biden](#), the outbreak of war in Gaza has reaffirmed that the US and [Israel](#) remain as tightly knit as ever.

In recent days, US officials have reiterated their unwavering support for Israel – diplomatically, financially, and militarily. Biden, who has [previously criticized Netanyahu's right-wing government](#), was unequivocal in an [address](#) at the White House earlier this week: “We stand with Israel ... And we will make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens, defend itself, and respond to this attack.”

Appearing alongside Netanyahu on Thursday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, “You may be strong enough on your own to defend yourself, but as long as America exists, you will never ever have to. We will always be there by your side.”

US officials have also urged Israel to take “[every possible precaution](#)” not to harm civilians as the country ordered a “[complete siege](#)” of Gaza in response to the Palestinian militant group [Hamas's](#) deadliest attack in decades, in which [more than 1,200 were reportedly killed](#). So far, Israel has seemingly ignored those urges: As of Friday afternoon, Israeli airstrikes had killed [more than 1,700](#) in Gaza, and Israel is preparing for a ground invasion, giving civilians a 24-hour deadline to evacuate northern Gaza that the United Nations says will be [impossible to meet](#).

The US nevertheless has continued its unconditional aid to Israel, which has totaled [\\$158 billion](#) (not adjusted for inflation) since World War II – more than the US has given to any other nation. While US officials have said that they will not send troops to Israel, the US also remains deeply involved in supporting the Israeli military and security forces. In the wake of the recent attack by Hamas, it is sending [guided-missile carriers and F-35 fighters](#) among other equipment, and [Congress](#) is likely to authorize additional aid as well.

The long history of US military aid to Israel has helped the nation develop its military prowess, and it continues to represent a significant share of Israel's military budget. Over time, it has become less critical operationally as Israel has built up its own military production capacity, but the US has continued its aid as a demonstration of its resolute support for Israel, even in the face of [global opposition](#) to the country's treatment of Palestinians.

A brief history of US-Israel ties

The US supported the creation of a Jewish state after World War II, but in the initial decades of its existence, the bond wasn't particularly remarkable. President John F. Kennedy made it more a point of emphasis, calling it a "[special relationship](#)," predicated on a shared commitment to Israel's right to exist in peace, in 1962, and the relationship only really began to flourish following the 1967 War.

That war saw Israel defeat a coalition of Arab states, suffering comparatively few casualties in the process with little help from outside forces, and occupy swaths of new territory, including Gaza and the West Bank. The US had been [concerned](#) about Soviet influence in the region and that the conflict could have expanded into a Cold War proxy battle if it had escalated further. But Israel put a quick end to it – and made itself an attractive ally at a moment when the US was [preoccupied with the Vietnam War](#) and did not have the bandwidth to get involved militarily in the Middle East.

"What's key about the '67 War was Israel defeated the Arabs hands down in six days with absolutely no American military assistance," said Joel Beinin, a professor of Middle East history at Stanford University. "What that said to the United States was, 'These guys are good. We are in a mess in Vietnam. Let's be connected to them.' And things developed gradually over time."

At first, the US was mostly giving, but also selling weaponry to the Israelis, as well as allowing them to borrow from US banks at lower-than-market rates to support development efforts. In the 1980s and '90s, the US and Israel began cooperating on research and development and production of weaponry. And in 1999, as former President Bill Clinton set out to [foster lasting peace](#) between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the US signed the first of three 10-year memorandums committing to provide billions in military aid annually.

After the 9/11 terror attacks, that money helped spur advancements in Israel's surveillance technology and signal intelligence, which by the 2000s, "were at least as good as and in some cases better than [that of] the United States," Beinin said.

In 2011, Israel implemented its [Iron Dome](#) – a short-range air missile defense system that uses radar technology to destroy rockets fired by Hamas and other militant groups. The system uses US-constructed parts, and is funded in part by the US.

Currently, Israel receives \$3.8 billion in military aid from the US annually under a memorandum signed in 2019. That accounted for about 16 percent of Israel's [total military budget](#) in 2022 – a significant fraction, but not so large that Israel still depends on US aid in the way it once did.

"This relationship has played a huge part in the advancement of sophistication of the Israeli armed forces," said Michael Hanna, US director of the International Crisis Group, an organization focused on conflict prevention. "Israel's relationship [to the US] is also unique in the region and that is demonstrated in the US commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge, which is aimed to guarantee that Israel remains militarily superior to any other regional military."

Israel has also developed advanced manufacturing capabilities such that there are very few weapons or crafts that it could not produce on its own without US assistance, Beinlin said. The exception might be F-16 and F-35 fighter jets, but even parts of those crafts are currently manufactured in Israel. That has made Israel the [10th largest military exporter](#) in the world – and also made the US conversely reliant on Israel.

"The military-industrial surveillance complexes of both countries are very tightly intertwined," Beinlin said. "American capacities are now to some extent dependent on Israel."

Why the US believes supporting Israel is in its interest

The US has strong historical and economic ties to Israel. The US, which has supported the formation of a Jewish state since World War II, is Israel's [top trading partner](#), with annual bilateral trade of [nearly \\$50 billion](#) in goods and services.

Beyond that, US officials have also long maintained that America's relationship with Israel holds strategic value as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, keeping at bay unrest that would threaten access to the regional oil supply on which [America remains dependent](#).

Initially, Israel served as a countervailing force to Soviet influence, but this line of thinking persisted even after the Cold War. And it became even more pervasive after 9/11, when it was discovered that some of the perpetrators of the attack were citizens of Saudi Arabia, which the US counted as another key ally in the region. Doubting that it could continue to rely on the Saudis, the US leaned more heavily on Israel based on the perception that it had more shared values and interests. That includes a shared commitment to democracy, though Netanyahu's [undemocratic plan to overhaul the Israeli judiciary](#) has recently put that in question.

"It's not only a long-standing moral commitment; it's a strategic commitment," then-Vice President Biden [said](#) in 2013. "An independent Israel, secure in its own borders, recognized by the world is in the practical strategic interest of the United States of America. I used to say ... if there were no Israel, we'd have to invent one."

More recently, Israel has been a key pillar of the US's [stated goal](#) to create an "integrated, prosperous, and secure Middle East" as it [looks to turn its focus to other](#)

[parts of the world](#), including [Russia](#) and [China](#). The [Trump administration](#) facilitated agreements to normalize relations between Israel and several of its Muslim-majority neighbors, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. There is speculation that Hamas's attack was [intended to upend talks](#) brokered by the Biden administration to also normalize relations between Israel and its main regional rival Saudi Arabia so that they can form a united front against [Iran](#), a common enemy that financially supports Hamas.

"Israel is in the American camp, no ifs, ands, or buts. We don't have to even worry about it. And that's why Secretary Blinken is over there to show solidarity," Beinlin said.

However, the Gaza war may threaten Israel's position to act as a vehicle for US peacemaking in the region.

American public support for Israel has historically been high, though it's starting to shift

Supporting Israel has also historically been incredibly politically popular in the US, bolstered by a [well-funded pro-Israel lobby](#) in Washington. However, that public support has markedly waned in recent years, particularly among Democrats, who marginally supported Palestinians over Israelis in a [March 2023 Gallup poll](#) for the first time.

[Some argue](#) that the benefits of the US's relationship with Israel do not justify their moral and literal price. As Stephen Walt, a professor of international affairs at Harvard Kennedy School, noted in [Foreign Policy](#), Israel did not support the US in two wars against Iraq and even [required the US's protection](#) from Iraqi Scud attacks in the first Gulf War. Moreover, he wrote before the Gaza war, "decades of brutal Israeli control have demolished the moral case for unconditional US support."

But US policymakers seem to have accepted that it's just the cost of maintaining the special relationship, which is not just military and political in nature, [but also personal](#).

"The United States would rather that that Israel didn't massacre Palestinians. The United States would rather that Israel didn't annex the West Bank, which it is in the process of doing," Beinlin said. "Sometimes, allies don't do what you want."

The role of US aid in past violence – and what it could mean going forward

US aid has helped build up Israeli weapons capacity, and human rights groups have [documented incidents](#) in which those weapons were used in the commission of war crimes and unlawful attacks in Gaza even before the war broke out.

"We've called for all states to end all forms of complicity in those crimes, including suspending military assistance, so long as these crimes are being perpetrated," said Omar Shakir, Israel and Palestine director at Human Rights Watch.

In a [2021 outbreak of violence](#), for instance, Human Rights Watch documented three airstrikes in Gaza in which 62 Palestinian civilians were killed where there were “no evident military targets in the vicinity.” Under international law, only military objectives – not civilians or civilian “objects” – can be targeted. In two of those attacks, [American munitions were used](#).

“Although Israel now has its own arms and weapons industry, US military aid obviously still plays an important role, and we regularly see the US going even beyond its significant provision of military aid and upping the provision of services when there’s outbreaks of hostilities,” Shakir said.

That’s happening again amid the Gaza war. It’s likely that the US Congress will authorize additional funding for Israel in the coming days and weeks, but before lawmakers can do so, they will have to [choose a new House speaker](#). Biden has [reportedly floated](#) a proposal for \$2 billion in supplemental aid that would go towards missile interceptors for the Iron Dome, artillery shells, and other munitions. However, the White House could try to tie that aid to other, less bipartisanly popular causes – including funding for Ukraine and Taiwan and border security – which could delay its passage in the Republican-led House.

Israel may welcome that support as a “statement of diplomatic and political solidarity,” Beinon said, but “it won’t be critical in terms of what Israel is about to do now – unless they fire so many bullets that they run out of them.”

The show of US support could deter potential actors in the region who could escalate the conflict, such as Iran and Hezbollah, the Islamist militant group based in Lebanon. But it could also stir anti-US sentiment in the Middle East as neighboring countries witness the death and destruction wreaked by Israeli forces in Gaza.

“The tightness and breadth of this relationship ... have made the US a target when faced with Israeli excesses,” Hanna said. “It is hard for the US to distance itself in any way from Israeli military operations.”

