



The United States' Imperial Foreign Policy Is the Deadly Enemy of Progress at Home

The US military spends trillions on death abroad that could be spent on improving life back home.
By [Mark LeVine](#) and [Stephen Zunes](#) June 14, 2021

“It’s *hazoy* [hallucinatory] — f**king *hazoy*.”

So explained a well-known artist, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, as he sat in the tiny “safe room” (in fact, the bathroom) of his Jaffa apartment, chatting over WhatsApp during the latest flare-up of extreme violence in the Holy Land. Rampaging mobs of right-wing Jews marauded through the neighborhood below his window while missiles shot from Gaza screamed overhead.

Hallucinatory. There is no better word to describe the belief by Israeli leaders that they can forever squeeze Palestinians, on both sides of the Green Line, without forcing an explosion of resistance that would cast an increasingly harsh light on the undemocratic underpinnings of Israeli rule “from the river to the sea.”

As Joe Biden’s tone-deaf support for Israel once again demonstrates, hallucinatory Israeli attitudes are never far or even separable from America’s own long-standing foreign-policy hallucinations. In a post-Trump, post-George Floyd, post-pandemic world, Biden’s dogged support for Israel makes a mockery of his talk of a more humane and planet-friendly foreign-policy agenda.

But it’s not just a matter of hypocrisy in the international arena. Much more dangerous is the hallucinatory belief that the United States can continue its hyper-militarized foreign policy, its unhesitant support for dictatorial regimes and occupying armies, and its undermining of international legal institutions without fatally undermining core domestic policy imperatives.

Progressive Empire?

The idea that the United States can pursue progressive policies domestically and amoral, imperial policies abroad has always been a fantasy. It has diminished and even doomed Democratic presidencies from Lyndon B. Johnson (see Vietnam) to Barack Obama (see Yemen). Today, President Biden’s laudatory moves on issues like racial, environmental, and economic justice and equality are already being threatened by the continuation of a [trillion-dollar-a-year military empire](#) with [almost a thousand bases](#) — to boot, an empire that engages in ongoing large-scale [arms sales](#) and aid to gross human-rights violators, refuses to join the International Criminal Court (ICC), abuses its veto power on the United Nations Security Council, and formally recognizes illegal territorial conquests by allied governments.

Indeed, President Biden’s efforts to fight the “existential threat” of climate change are especially undermined by his insistence on maintaining the huge carbon footprint produced by stationing over 160,000 US troops in over 150 countries around the world, along with the ships, planes, tanks, and other carbon-emitting machines to support them. All this makes the US military the [single largest entity](#) responsible for greenhouse gases in the world today. Indeed, now that the pandemic is winding down at home, there is already massive pressure to cut back on Biden’s “once in a generation” spending for infrastructure and other laudable policy goals on fiscal grounds, even as our massive military budget — 40 percent of global military spending by a nation representing just four percent of the world’s population— remains untouched.

To be sure, Biden has made strides to move the United States at least partially toward international legitimacy: steps like rejoining the Paris Climate Accord and the UN Human Rights Council, entering negotiations to rejoin

the seven-party nuclear agreement with Iran, restricting (at least for the moment) a few arms transfers to Saudi Arabia, recognizing the Armenian genocide, and upholding the promise of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan are not to be dismissed. But these moves don't fundamentally change the priorities or impact of a foreign-policy system whose single-built purpose has always been to maintain a US-led global capitalist order that is literally poisoning our planet and putting the very [survival of organized humanity](#) at grave risk in the coming decades.

Significantly, Biden appears to be upholding some of Donald Trump's most controversial moves, such as recognizing Jerusalem as solely Israel's capital and moving the US embassy there. He has also maintained the Trump-era recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan region of Syria and Morocco's illegal annexation of the entire nation of [Western Sahara](#), which has been recognized by eighty-four countries and is a full member state of the African Union. The United States is virtually alone in the international community regarding each of these decisions, which directly violate the UN Charter, a series of UN Security Council resolutions, and other basic tenets of international law.

Beyond the existential threat of climate change, America's continued unwillingness to play by the rules on human rights and international law clearly harms key elements of Biden's foreign-policy agenda. With what standing can his administration uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine against Russian irredentism, or Taiwan against China's growing assertiveness, when it supports conquest and annexation in Palestine and Western Sahara? How can it chastise Syria's terror bombing of its own cities while defending similar actions by Israel in Gaza — not to mention the deadly US-led bombing campaigns in Raqqa in Syria and West Mosul in Iraq? What credibility does it have to oppose dictatorships in Myanmar or Belarus while helping prop up dictatorships in Egypt and the Persian Gulf? How can it object to Russia's [abuse of its veto power](#) to protect Syria from accountability while [abusing the United States' veto power](#) to protect Israel?

And how can the UN Security Council and ICC fulfill their ever more urgent role of providing the international framework for a peaceful and sustainable future when the United States undermines them at every turn? Equally important, how can President Biden undo authoritarian tendencies at home — as epitomized by the politicization of the Department of Justice under Trump — if his administration continues to weaken and politicize the ICC, International Court of Justice, and Security Council to escape accountability abroad? Warning that American democracy is "[in peril](#)," as the president declared on Memorial Day, will do little to protect democracy if Mr Biden remains unwilling to acknowledge — never mind confront — the key role America's imperial foreign-policy system has played in corrupting and eroding it over the long term.

In that speech, Biden claimed that in "Korea and Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and thousands of places in between — these Americans weren't fighting for dictators; they were fighting for democracy." In reality, the Iraqi and Afghan governments for which Americans are fighting are both ruled by notoriously corrupt governments with terrible human-rights records. Back in the past, the South Korean and South Vietnamese regimes that 80,000 Americans died to defend were brutal right-wing dictatorships. Indeed, it's hard to think of any US military intervention since World War II in which American soldiers were "fighting for democracy."

While we've been told that our freedom and liberty is "why they hate us," the sad reality is that much of this hatred comes from the fact that the United States remains the world's number-one arms suppliers to dictatorial regimes and armies of occupation. Seeing "Made in USA" on tear-gas canisters and bomb casings is of greater relevance to the peoples on the receiving end than the democratic system and individual liberties we have at home.

This also augurs poorly for the United States addressing the ongoing migrant crisis at the southern border without ending its decades-long support for brutal military dictatorships, genocidal wars, and, more recently,

devastating “structural adjustment” policies fueling so much poverty and violence in countries like El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This in addition to the insane “war on drugs” in Mexico that has pushed millions of Mexicans northward as well.

Given [Kamala Harris’s comments](#) this week, perhaps the administration imagines that telling migrants “Do not come” — and continuing to violate US and international law by not allowing asylum seekers to enter the country — will somehow improve the situation. This further reveals the vacuity of the Biden administration’s declaration that “the United States is back” — unless the president means back to the same policies of entrenching poverty, authoritarianism, and violence that created the border crisis to begin with.

Fueling the Disaster

Finally, Biden’s continued support of violent and repressive regimes and the global system they maintain undermines the very social, political, and economic forces the United States must support in order to enact the massively disruptive decarbonization of the global economic system.

Whether in the Middle East, Central America, or Africa, America’s oppressive allies play key roles in global extractive industries, the military-security system, and large-scale agribusiness that together are the most important drivers of climate change and its attendant global environmental devastation. These regimes will fight mercilessly to preserve their wealth and power; only an insurmountable combination of foreign and domestic pressure will force them to change. As of now, Biden’s policies are strengthening rather than weakening them — and making it even harder for mass nonviolent civic opposition movements to survive, never mind achieve enough power to force significant change.

Biden’s domestic agenda is in many ways laudable. But we’d be hallucinating if we thought it could be successfully enacted without directly taking on our hypocritical foreign-policy system and the deeply entrenched and powerful interests it represents. It’s a fight we’ve barely acknowledged, never mind engaged. Now, it’s the closing rounds, and we’re way behind.

Losing is not a survivable option.

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