

## U.S. Support for Israel Bolsters Its Own Interests

Despite growing public resentment of support for Israel, policymakers continue to fund violations of international law.

The United States has long been an international outlier in supporting Israel's far-right government. On February 20, the Biden Administration [cast](#) its third veto in four months to block a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, [one of forty-eight](#) vetoes in which it was the only dissenting vote of resolutions challenging Israeli policies in recent decades. The United States was among ten out of the 193-member U.N. General Assembly [to oppose](#) the measure. The United States is an [outlier](#) even among our closest allies: Only one other member of NATO, the Czech Republic, directly opposes a ceasefire.

The United States' support for Israel validates a fifty-six-year-long occupation coupled with [unprecedented violations](#) of international law and human rights standards.

The close relationship between the United States and Israel has been one of the most consistent features in U.S. foreign policy for nearly five-and-a-half decades. The more than [\\$3 billion](#) in military aid sent annually to Israel by Washington—cumulatively [far more](#) than the United States has provided any other single country in the world, despite Israel's small size—is rarely questioned in Congress, even by liberals who [normally challenge](#) U.S. aid to governments that engage in widespread violations of human rights or by conservatives who [usually oppose](#) foreign aid in general. Earlier this month, a [large bipartisan majority](#) in the Senate voted to send an additional \$14 billion in military aid to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Although U.S. backing of successive Israeli governments, like most foreign policy decisions, is often rationalized on moral grounds, there is little evidence moral imperatives play more of a determining role in guiding U.S. policy in the Middle East than in any other part of the world. While most Americans [share a commitment](#) to Israel's survival as a Jewish state, this would not account for the level of financial, military, and diplomatic support provided. American aid to Israel goes well beyond protecting Israel's security needs within its internationally recognized borders. In addition to [ongoing war crimes](#) in Gaza, U.S. assistance has supported policies groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch [have characterized](#) as a form of apartheid.

If Israel's security interests mattered to American policymakers, U.S. aid to Israel would have been highest in the early years of its existence, when its democratic institutions were strongest and its strategic situation most vulnerable. The aid would have declined as its military power grew dramatically and its violence and repression against Palestinians in the occupied territories increased. Instead, the opposite happened: major U.S. military and economic aid [did not begin](#) until *after* the 1967 war. Indeed, 99 percent of U.S. military assistance to Israel since its establishment came only after Israel proved itself to be far stronger than any combination of Arab armies and after Israeli occupation forces became the rulers of a large Palestinian population.

Similarly, U.S. aid to Israel is significantly higher now than it was in the 1970s when [Soviet-armed](#) Arab regimes threatened to destroy it. By contrast, not only are the neighboring states' armed forces relatively weaker, but they have all either [recognized](#) Israel or pledged to do so in return for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory.

Only Iran could be seen as a greater threat today. However, Israel still has a [far stronger military](#) that includes nuclear weapons and Iran's military is focused more on threats from the heavily-armed Arab monarchies along the Persian Gulf and possible attacks by the United States and Israel over its own nuclear program.

In short, the growing U.S. support for the Israeli government is not motivated primarily by objective security needs or a strong moral commitment to the country. Rather, as elsewhere, U.S. foreign policy is [motivated primarily](#) to advance its own perceived strategic interests.

There is a broad bipartisan consensus among policymakers that Israel has advanced U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond. For example, Israel has successfully prevented victories by radical nationalist and Islamist movements in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, while also keeping anti-American regimes like Syria and Iran in check. The militaries of the United States and Israel are inextricably tied. Israel's frequent wars have provided [battlefield testing](#) for American arms, and Israel's intelligence service has assisted the United States in intelligence-gathering and covert operations.

Israel has also served as a conduit for U.S. arms to regimes and movements too unpopular for openly granting direct military assistance. During the Cold War, this included apartheid [South Africa](#), the Islamic Republic of [Iran](#), the military junta in [Guatemala](#), and the Nicaraguan [Contras](#). More recently, Israel has backed [Colombian](#) paramilitaries and various [Kurdish](#) militia [as well as](#) Moroccan occupation forces in Western Sahara.

Israel has cooperated with the U.S. military-industrial complex on [research and development](#) for new jet fighters and [anti-missile](#) defense systems. The country has even trained U.S. forces bound for [Iraq](#) and other Middle Eastern destinations in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

**As Joe Biden [once said](#), “Were there not an Israel, the United States would have to invent an Israel to protect [its] interests in the region.”**

Support for Israel's ongoing occupation and repression is not unlike U.S. [support for](#) Indonesia's twenty-four-year-long occupation of East Timor or Morocco's ongoing [occupation](#) of Western Sahara. If beneficial to the U.S., Washington is quite willing to support the most flagrant violations of international law and human rights by its allies and block the UN or any other party from challenging it. As long as the amoral imperatives of realpolitik remain unchallenged, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere will not reflect the American public's [long-standing belief](#) U.S. international relations should be guided by humanitarian principles.

There are significant sectors of the population that [question](#) U.S. policy towards Israel and Palestine, yet there is a widespread consensus among elite sectors of government and the media in support of the United States backing Israel's war and occupation. Many of the same liberal Democrats in Congress who supported progressive movements on other foreign policy issues have sided with rightwing Republicans on Israel and Palestine. Therefore, while the perceived strategic imperative is at the root of U.S. support for Israel, there are additional factors that have made this issue more difficult for peace and human rights activists than most others.

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One of these is the sentimental attachment many liberals have for Israel. Many Americans also identify with Israel's internal democracy for its Jewish citizens, progressive social institutions (such as the kibbutzim), and its important role as a sanctuary for an oppressed minority group that spent centuries in the diaspora. Through a mixture of guilt regarding Western antisemitism, personal friendships with Jewish Americans who identify strongly with Israel, and fear of inadvertently encouraging antisemitism by criticizing Israel, there is enormous reluctance to acknowledge the seriousness of Israeli violations of human rights and international law.

[The Christian Right](#), with tens of millions of followers and a major voting bloc for the Republican Party, is another (perhaps unlikely) key source of support for Israel. It has thrown its immense media and political clout in support of Netanyahu and [other rightwing Israeli leaders](#). Based in part on a messianic theology that sees the ingathering of Jews to the Holy Land as a precursor for the second coming of Christ, the battle between Israelis and Palestinians is, in their eyes, simply a continuation of the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, with God in the role of a cosmic real estate agent who has deemed that the land belongs to Israel alone—secular notions regarding international law and the right of self-determination notwithstanding.

Meanwhile, mainstream and conservative Jewish organizations have [mobilized](#) considerable lobbying resources, financial contributions from the Jewish community, and citizen [pressure](#) on the news media and other forums of public discourse in support of the Israeli government. Although the role of the pro-Israel lobby is [often greatly exaggerated](#)—with some even [claiming](#) it is the primary factor influencing U.S. policy—its role has been important in certain tight Congressional races and in helping to create a climate of intimidation among those who seek to moderate U.S. policy, including growing numbers of progressive Jews. While not the main factor in U.S. support for Israel, it has made it more difficult to challenge.

The arms industry also stands to gain greatly from U.S. support for Israel and its military operations. The industry [contributes](#) five times more money to Congressional campaigns and lobbying efforts than AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups, and has a considerable stake in supporting massive arms shipments to Israel and other Middle Eastern allies of the United States.

Although somewhat inconspicuous, the [widespread racism](#) toward Arabs and Muslims so prevalent in American society is often [perpetuated](#) in the media. This is compounded by the identification many Americans have with Zionism in the Middle East as a reflection of our own historic experience as pioneers in North America, building a nation based upon noble, idealistic values while simultaneously suppressing and expelling the indigenous population.

The failure of progressive movements in the United States to challenge U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine in an effective manner has also played a role in the current situation. For many years, most mainstream peace and human rights groups [avoided the issue](#), not wanting to alienate many of their Jewish and other liberal constituents supportive of the Israeli government and not wanting to be accused of allying with antisemites. As a result, without any countervailing pressure, liberal members of Congress had little incentive not to cave in to pressure from supporters of the Israeli government. Meanwhile, some anti-Israel groups have engaged in extreme rhetoric, sometimes crossing the line into outright antisemitism, further alienating potential allies in challenging U.S. policy.

Despite these obstacles, the need to challenge U.S. support of the Israeli war and occupation is more important than ever. Not only has it led to enormous suffering among Palestinians and other Arabs, but [it hurts](#) the long-term interests of both Israel and the United States, as increasingly militant and extremist elements arise out of the Arab and Islamic world in reaction. Ultimately, there is no contradiction between support for Israeli Jews and support for Palestinian Arabs, for Israeli security and Palestinian rights are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent on each other.

Opposition to U.S. support for the Israeli government [has reached](#) an unprecedented level. While neither the Biden Administration nor the leadership of either party on Capitol Hill appear to be listening at this point, the majority of Americans now clearly want a change in U.S. policy. If U.S. policy was simply the fault of a powerful lobby, it would be easier to change. Unfortunately, it is far more complicated than that, and understanding the dynamics of U.S. policy is critically important if we are going to change it.