

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 101 (May 2021)

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June 2021

The 11-day internecine violence between Israel and Palestine had reignited public debate regarding US support for Israel, forcing Biden to recenter Israel in Middle East policy. Biden assertively demanded a halt to the Israeli offensive from Netanyahu, and sent Blinken to express loyalty to the traditional pro-Israeli stance, while stressing desire to restore relations with the Palestinians. Relationships with different Arab and European countries focused on common interest in regional calm, which facilitated a multilateral mediation towards a ceasefire. Meanwhile, neither the restoration of the JCPOA nor US-Turkey relations seem within grasp.

A. Israel-US Relations

The US demonstrates commitment to Israeli security amid Israel-Hamas fighting. Early in the month, President Biden [approved](#) a \$735 million arms sale to Israel, including precision-guided munitions. President Biden [spoke](#) to Prime Minister Netanyahu amid the escalation between Israelis and Palestinians. Biden expressed his ironclad commitment to “Israel’s right to defend itself” and the two “committed to working together on challenges ahead”. On the same day, Blinken also [discussed](#) de-escalation with Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi. In an interview, Blinken also reaffirmed that “Israel has a right to defend itself”. In a conversation with President Rivlin, Blinken [stressed](#) the importance of the US-Israel relationship and reaffirmed Israeli right for self-defense. During his visit in Israel, Blinken also [met](#) Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Gantz, and Foreign Minister Ashkenazi “to demonstrate the commitment of the United States to Israel’s security” and “to work toward greater stability and reduce tensions in the West Bank and Jerusalem”. Secretary Blinken [expressed](#) concern at “the inter-communal violence” and discussed efforts to halt the violence with Foreign Minister Ashkenazi. Expanding the spheres of military cooperation, the Israeli Air Force and the US Space Force [conducted](#) their first virtual call to discuss collaborative projects and commitment to work together to meet the emerging challenges in the space domain.” President Biden also reportedly [met](#) the Head of Mossad Cohen in Washington early this month to discuss Iran policy.

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The US restrains international response to Israel-Hamas violence. Due to pressure from the US, the Security Council [failed](#) to issue a statement on the escalation between Hamas and Israel and the situation in Jerusalem. As the violence between Israelis and Palestinians intensified, the US [postponed](#) an urgent Security Council meeting aiming to gauge the developing situation by three days. Nevertheless, Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) the grave need for humanitarian assistance in Gaza with UN Special Envoy for Middle East Peace Wennesland.

B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

The US is drawn back to the center of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading efforts to reach calm. During the 11 day-long fighting between Israel and Hamas, Biden spoke to Netanyahu at least 4 times. While reiterating US support for Israeli self-defense, Biden resolutely [demanded](#) de-escalation from Netanyahu. Meanwhile, Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to High Representative Borrell about pathways to halting the violence and stressed “the crucial role the U.S.-EU partnership plays in the region”. In a press conference with Danish Foreign Minister Kofod, Secretary Blinken [asserted](#) that Israelis and Palestinians have an equal right to enjoy “safety and security”. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) shared concern about the violence between the Israelis and Palestinians with French Foreign Minister Le Drian. Secretary Blinken discussed efforts to quell Israeli-Palestinian violence with [Norway](#) and [Canada's](#) foreign ministers. Secretary Blinken [affirmed](#) in an interview in Copenhagen US commitment to the two-state solution and called on the sides to eschew from further escalation, while refusing to clarify whether the US is willing to exert pressure on Israel in any form. At the request of President Biden, Secretary Blinken [visited](#) Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt and Jordan following the Israel-Hamas ceasefire.

Biden keen on warming relations with the Palestinians, signing aid and pledging to reopen the Jerusalem consulate. President Biden [sent](#) a letter to Palestinian counterpart Abbas in light of the escalation, the first known engagement between the two since Biden assumed office. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to President Abbas about the violence between the Israelis and Palestinians, the first contact since Blinken became Secretary of State. Blinken denounced the Hamas rocket attacks and stressed “his belief that Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, dignity, security and prosperity”. Following the ceasefire, the State Department [issued](#) additional aid to the Palestinians estimated at around 110\$ million, including more than \$30 million to UNRWA; this is compounded upon the 250\$ million in aid announced earlier this year. USAID director Power [reassured](#) that the aid will solely benefit the Palestinian people, and not Hamas. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to President Abbas about efforts to maintain the ceasefire, US-PA cooperation and Gaza access to humanitarian aid. In a speech following the reaching of the ceasefire, Biden [stressed](#) the importance of reconstruction efforts in Gaza under PA supervision and [acknowledged](#) Egyptian indispensable role in mediation. Biden's 2022 budget proposal [includes](#) increased USAID and State Department funding to further support UNRWA. In his meeting with President Abbas in Ramallah, Secretary Blinken [vowed](#) that the Biden administration will move to reopen the Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem. Secretary Blinken

also met with Palestinian civil society leaders and [stressed](#) the importance of civil society to a vibrant democracy.

The Biden administration elucidates opposition to evictions. State Department Spokesperson Price [condemned](#) violence by both Israeli and Palestinian extremists, and is “deeply concerned” about the evictions of Palestinian families in Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah. Myriad Democratic representatives, including [McMollum](#), [Tlaib](#), [Bush](#) and [Newman](#), condemned the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah. White House Spokesperson Psaki said that White House officials [discussed](#) the eviction of Palestinian families with Israeli officials. The US officials emphasised that the evictions “work against our common interests” and clarified that Israelis and Palestinians “deserve equal measures of freedom, security, dignity and prosperity”. In an interview to the Israeli press, Blinken [asserted](#) that unrest in Jerusalem, as well as further evictions, could cause further instability.

Progressive Congress members turn assertive at the cost of Israeli airstrikes and evictions. 28 Democratic Senators, led by the Jewish Senator Ossoff, [called](#) on the Biden administration to push for an “immediate ceasefire”. 25 House Democrats [signed](#) a letter submitted to Secretary Blinken urging the State Department to oppose the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan. Likewise, numerous Democratic Senators [implored](#) the Biden administration in a letter to fulfil promises to reopen the PLO mission in Washington.

C. The US and Israel’s relations with the Arab World

US ushers Arab countries into the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations arena. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) “shared concern about the violence in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza” and Morocco's role in regional stabilization with Moroccan counterpart Foreign Minister Bourita. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Bahraini Foreign Minister al-Zayani about collective efforts to strike a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) efforts “to bring the current violence in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza to an end” and stressed UAE role in “promoting a more peaceful Middle East” with Emirati counterpart Al Nahyan. Later in the month the two discussed again, and Blinken [expressed](#) gratitude to the Emirati Foreign Minister for the country’s effort to bring the violence in Israel to a halt. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Egyptian counterpart about the importance of US-Egyptian cooperation in ending the violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians. President Biden called Egyptian President Al-Sisi to [discuss](#) the ceasefire and revamping peace efforts between the Israelis and Palestinians. In his Middle East visit, Secretary Blinken [convened](#) with Al-Sisi where the latter stressed Biden’s commitment to Egypt-US relations and reiterated appreciation of the mediation efforts. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Saudi counterpart Farhan Al Saud about “efforts to calm tensions in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza” and highlighted the importance of Saudi “continued progress on human rights”. Days following the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Saudi counterpart Fahran Al-Saud about the importance of preventing future conflict, as well as elevating living standards in Gaza.

US-Jordan relations focus on maintaining the Jerusalem status quo and regional stability. Secretary Blinken [denounced](#) rocket attacks on Jerusalem in a conversation about US-Jordan strategic allyship Jordanian counterpart Safadi. In a shared press conference in the White House Blinken [called](#) on all sides to de-escalate and Safadi urged respect for Palestinian rights. Later in the month, Blinken and Sadafi [discussed](#) the escalating violence between Israel and Hamas, and expressed shared commitment to establish a “sustainable calm”. During his visit in Jordan, Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to King Abdullah II about shared commitment to the ceasefire and Jordanian stewardship over the Temple Mount.

D. US Middle East policy

JCPOA talks remain deadlocked while fire exchange results in enhanced military presence. In the third briefing on the indirect talks with Iran in Vienna, a Senior State Department official [stated](#) that the Iranians “have shown some seriousness”, and warily stated that a re-compliance might be possible within the coming weeks. Yet in an interview with MSNBC, Secretary Blinken [asserted](#) that whether Iran is willing to take genuine steps towards the restoration of the JCPOA is uncertain. Echoing Blinken, National Security Advisor Sullivan [claimed](#) in a press briefing that the indirect talks are currently at an “unclear place”. In another interview to BBC Radio 4, Blinken [reiterated](#) the importance of the JCPOA to the preservation of a non-nuclear Iran. German Foreign Minister Maas and Secretary Blinken [agreed](#) on the importance of trans-atlantic cooperation to counter “Iranian destabilizing activities”. In a joint press conference with British Foreign Secretary Raab, Secretary Blinken [denied](#) rumors surrounding a US-Iran prisoner swap, and expressed resolve to bring American prisoners in Iran to the US. The Pentagon [claimed](#) that a US Coast Guard ship in proximity to Iranian waters fired warning shots after 13 Iranian vessels approached US Navy vessels. Meanwhile, the US [deployed](#) additional firepower in the Middle East as two U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress arrived at a military base in Qatar. In an interview to the Israeli press Blinken [asserted](#) that while the US seeks to restore the JCPOA, it is determined to make it “longer and stronger”.

Biden remains keen on striking a ceasefire in Yemen, to no avail. An inter-agency delegation headed by National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, [traveled](#) to the Middle East to convene with officials from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Jordan. The delegation stressed the importance of US-Saudi strategic partnership and the realization of peace in Yemen. Special Envoy Lenderking [returned](#) from the Middle East after convening with Saudi, Omani and Jordanian officials. He convened with Crown Prince Bin Salman to discuss a comprehensive ceasefire and Houthi attacks. Likewise, he discussed common commitment to a lasting ceasefire with Omani Foreign Minister al-Busaidi. He convened with numerous Jordanian officials, including King Abdullah II to discuss regional issues, including the need to resolve the bloody Yemen crisis. Upon his return from a trip to Qatar, Jordan and Oman, U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy [expressed](#) optimism about the “grassroots of de-escalation” he observed in Yemen. Meanwhile, the State Department [expressed](#) disappointment in the Houthi refusal to meet with the UN Special Envoy and commit to peace negotiations. The State Department [issued](#) additional

sanctions against two Houthi leaders, Yusuf al-Madani and Muhammad Abd Al-Karim al-Ghamari for their involvement “in military offensives that exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, pose a dire threat to civilians, and destabilize Yemen.” In a bi-partisan letter sent to Secretary Blinken, Senators [urge](#) the US to pressure other countries to contribute aid to Yemen.

US-Lebanon military partnership reaffirmed, while the US attempts to further sideline Hizballah. The US [sanctions](#) seven individuals who work in “financial operations with Hizballah ties” to impede “the group’s ability to operate in the global financial system”. The statement refrained from naming Hizballah a terrorist organization. The State Department and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) [conducted](#) a “Defense Resourcing Conference” where the US affirmed its commitment to US-LAF partnership with \$120 million in military assistance for 2021.

The US continues to balance condemnation of Turkish actions with minimal cooperation. The State Department issued a statement [denouncing](#) Erdogan’s “anti-semitic” remarks in his condemnation of Israeli attacks on Gaza, and affirmed commitment to “to combatting anti-Semitism in all of its forms”; Erdogan purportedly [claimed](#) that Israeli “terrorism” is “in their nature”. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) the importance of US-Turkey strategic cooperation and human rights promotion with Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu.

D. Further Readings

1. Matthew Lee, [Analysis: Violence upends Biden’s Israel-Palestinian outlook](#), *Associated Press*, May 12
2. Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig, [Can Biden Pivot to Asia While Israel and Gaza Burn?](#), *Foreign Policy*, May 14
3. Joshua Krasna [A Wave of “Smile Offensives” in the Middle East: Why, and How Real?](#), *Middle East Program*, May 27
4. [Next Steps for U.S. Policy in the Ongoing Crisis in the Middle East](#), *Center for American Progress*, May 27
5. Frank Newport, [Americans’ Religion and Their Sympathies in the Middle East](#), *Gallup*, May 28