

Biden-Netanyahu standoff complicates the Gaza conflict



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Amid the extraordinary carnage in Gaza, the international community is witnessing with surprise and bemusement the spectacle of the US president standing eyeball to eyeball with the Israeli prime minister, with neither of them signalling any desire to give way. This spectacle is particularly astonishing since Joe Biden has consistently prided himself on being Israel's best friend and, during the Gaza war, has proffered almost unstinting support to Israel's war efforts.

Ties between the US and Israel, two of the world's closest allies, have generally been described with words such as "tightly knit," "unwavering support," and "ironclad." What, then, has gone wrong? It now appears that the large-scale killing of Palestinians in Gaza and the widespread pro-Palestine agitations in the US and several European cities have finally awakened the US president's conscience, or just rudely reminded him that he is losing support in the presidential race.

After seven months of wanton death and destruction, Biden started counselling restraint just as Benjamin Netanyahu was preparing to order a fresh assault on

Rafah, in southern Gaza, where nearly two million displaced Gaza residents have found temporary, albeit squalid, refuge.

All through March, the US president repeatedly conveyed to Netanyahu the need for a ceasefire and increased humanitarian supplies to the beleaguered enclave. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer described Netanyahu personally as a liability for Israel. Finally, in an unprecedented move, the US declined to veto a UN Security Council resolution that called for a cessation of hostilities and increased flow of humanitarian aid in Gaza.

Living up to his reputation as a master political manipulator, Netanyahu then adroitly shifted attention from Gaza to Iran by attacking the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, killing seven senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers, including two generals. The prospect of an Iranian retaliation pushed the US immediately back to the Israeli side. After the October 7 attack, Biden said, "We will make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens (and) defend itself." Secretary of State Antony



In the standoff between Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu, it is Biden who seems to have the weaker hand.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

Blinken, meanwhile, gushed, "... as long as America exists, you will never ever have to (defend yourself). We will always be there by your side." Fortunately for regional security, April's tit-for-tat exchanges between Iran and Israel were largely mere demonstrations of technology and capacity, with both sides deciding not to escalate matters further.

This brought Gaza back to the US's attention, amid widespread demonstrations on numerous university campuses expressing support for Palestinian aspirations, referring to Biden as "Genocide Joe" and calling for an immediate end to the conflict. On May 6, Biden advised Netanyahu not to invade Rafah. The Israeli prime minister immediately ordered aircraft to hit targets in southern Gaza, while a brigade seized the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. Another brigade moved to the border with eastern Rafah.

Two days later, in an interview on CNN, Biden publicly set out his red line, saying, "If they (Israelis) go into Rafah, I'm not supplying the weapons that have been used to deal with the cities." He also ordered a pause in the delivery of 3,500 bombs to Israel. Netanyahu remained unfazed. He categorically stated, "If we must, we shall fight with our fingernails."

Israel has not yet conducted a full-scale assault on Rafah, but it continues to launch regular attacks on targets there and intense bombing at the Rafah-Egypt border. Several dozen Palestinians have been killed. Israel has also dropped leaflets warning civilians that they will face "extreme force" if they remain

in the area. Last week, Israel hit a UN vehicle carrying emergency medical supplies to Rafah, while intensifying attacks in northern Gaza. Blinken has warned helplessly that the Rafah attack will inflict "terrible harm" on the population.

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The stakes for Netanyahu are very high. A ceasefire, without Hamas having been "annihilated," would diminish the prime minister's standing among his right-wing support base and could even lead the extreme right to topple his government. As soon as he ceases to be prime minister, Netanyahu will face the revival of criminal cases against him and possible imprisonment. Hence, he has every reason to continue the conflict in Gaza,

at least until Hamas' military commander, Yahya Sinwar, has been apprehended or killed and he can proclaim victory.

Netanyahu is on solid ground at home. He faces little domestic opposition to the conduct of the war, except from the families of the hostages. No influential group is calling for halting the Rafah attack or for an increase in humanitarian assistance.

The Israeli prime minister believes he can face off with Biden. He has already taken on a Democratic president, Barack Obama, on his home turf, when in March 2015 he attacked the nuclear agreement with Iran at a joint session of Congress. Now, he again enjoys the full backing of the Republicans who are criticising Biden for betraying Israel's interests by halting military supplies.

In this standoff, it is Biden who seems to have the weaker hand. In the presidential campaign, polls are still placing him neck and neck with Donald Trump, with the latter even marginally ahead in the swing states. The pause in supply of munitions is hardly likely to make much difference, given that Israel already has enough weaponry for the Rafah assault and billions of dollars of US supplies are ready for delivery.

A Biden climbdown is very likely. As an observer has noted cynically, "US red lines with Israel have been known to turn pink."

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Smoke rises after an Israeli strike as Israeli forces launch a ground and air operation in the eastern part of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip on May 7, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Who was Raisi and what does his death mean?

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The death of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi adds to the growing tensions the country is undergoing at present. From sanctions in 2018 causing further deterioration in the Iranian economy, to Iran's recent historic drone strikes against Israel, Raisi's death comes amid a situation where Iran is already tackling multiple difficult situations, on both the international and domestic fronts.

Raisi, who died in the crash of a helicopter he was riding on his return from a visit to Azerbaijan, held several important positions in Iran. From a town prosecutor, he saw himself promoted to the position of a provincial prosecutor, eventually becoming the chief prosecutor of Tehran. In the 1980s, Raisi was appointed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to the committee that was responsible for the executions of thousands of political dissidents.

Raisi was an ultraconservative hardliner, who served as judiciary chief in 2019, then became president in 2021 in an election that had low voter turnout and the widespread disqualification of other candidates who were deemed more moderate and reformist. His policies have been condemned both internationally and domestically.

Within Iran, Raisi has long been associated with repressive tactics. A conservative cleric, Raisi ensured stricter enforcement of the "hijab and chastity law" in 2022, a year after his election to the position of president. Soon, in a matter of weeks, the decision led to the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, sparking the "Jin Jiyan Azadi" movement in Iran. What occurred after is the severe repression of the ensuing protests, with 582 people executed in 2022, and 834 people executed in 2023. As is now well-known, violent crackdowns of the protests followed.



This kind of behaviour from Raisi was not new. A leaked 2016 audio tape positions Raisi as being involved in the executions of thousands of Iranian dissenters, despite his later denial of his role. In 1988, 5,000 people were executed, according to various human rights groups such as Amnesty International. The victims are said to be in unmarked mass graves and the event has been deemed an ongoing crime against humanity.

On the international stage, Iran's interests align with powerful nations such as Russia, China, Türkiye and the UAE, with political authorities in these states expressing condolences in the aftermath of Raisi's death. A staunch critic of the West, Raisi used incendiary rhetoric against Israel in light of the latter's attack on Gaza following Hamas's October 7 attack.

Speaking of enacting revenge against Israel for its actions in Gaza, Raisi was supportive of Israel's drone attacks on Israel.

With Israel attacking Gaza for over half a year, speculations have risen among some in the general public of a possible involvement by Israel in Raisi's death. Considering Raisi's anti-West sentiments and Iran's general stance against Israel, it is not surprising that these speculations have come about. The death of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in 2020 also makes such a possibility appear more credible.

The informal coalition led by Iran called the Axis of Resistance situates the country as an even greater threat to US interests. The backing of Houthis, Hezbollah and Hamas, the latter of which has claimed it is in "full solidarity" with Iran, makes the death of Raisi seem like it is in the strategic

RAISI HAS HELD SEVERAL IMPORTANT POSTS

In 2017, he lost the elections to be president, with Hassan Rouhani winning

In 2019, he was appointed head of the Iranian judiciary by Khamenei

In 2021, he became president in an election that saw low voter turnout the widespread disqualification of other candidates who were reformist and more moderate

He was a long time member of the **Assembly of Experts**, a group that decides who will replace the leader should the Supreme Leader pass away

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those loyal to him being amply rewarded with power and positions. Raisi's interim successor, Mohammad Mokhber, is also believed to be a Khamenei loyalist.

The main challenge, however, arises from the fact that Raisi was seen as a potential successor to the current supreme leader. According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was amended in 1989, articles 60, 113, and 114-142 situate the president as the person with the most power after the supreme leader. It is imperative to remember, though, that under Iran's current system, it is still the supreme leader who holds the most sway in every aspect of governance. This power has been compared to that of the Muslim Caliphs in the Middle Ages.

While previous presidents of Iran all had disagreements with the supreme leader, Raisi was seen as having what has been called an "unequivocal allegiance to the supreme leader" by Shahram Khoddi, a professor of Middle East politics at the University of Waterloo in Canada. With Raisi's demise, as per Article 131 of the constitution, the first vice president will become the president and a new presidential election must be held within the coming 50 days.

Raisi's death undoubtedly changes who will succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is 85 years old and known to be ill, though the Western press is accused of having exaggerated the extent of Khamenei's illness. It complicates the inner politics of Iran itself; it is believed that the son of Ali Khamenei, Mojtaba Khamenei, intentionally helped him to become president and trapped him in the position, to showcase his incompetence. It is unclear how Iran's political dynamic will play out in the coming days, in a regime where the Iranian people are largely frustrated with the economy and social and political repression. Given the turbulent state of the Middle East at the moment, the repercussions of Raisi's death could have effects in not only Iran but also the wider region.