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Why can't the United States end allies' wars?

| Dafna H. Rand

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Executive summary

Wars, whether between or within states, are not ending in the 21st century. Frozen conflicts, on-again-off-again fighting, and stalemates have become the norm. The United States learned this the hard way in Iraq and Afghanistan and is likely to see the same outcome in Iran: neither full-scale war nor lasting peace, for some time to come.

A war fought by a U.S. security partner, without direct U.S. military action, might appear to be a war the United States should be able to end. After all, the United States often spends tens of billions of dollars to sustain a partner's ability to fight, accruing deep influence in the process.

This report examines why influencing a partner's warfighting and war-termination decisions has become so difficult for the United States over the past decade. The United States has supported the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression, and Israel in its war in Gaza. We conducted 30 interviews with senior U.S. officials involved in decisionmaking on these three wars, as well as officials involved in the U.S. decision to end the war in Afghanistan in 2020. We also reviewed hundreds of public documents, arriving at several generalizable conclusions. The United States finds it difficult to agree with its partner on a joint end state—a shared set of political goals, or a working definition of victory—at the outset of a war. U.S. domestic support for a war erodes steadily over time and erodes more quickly when there is public concern about a partner's conduct in the war. Finally, over time, divergent interests naturally emerge between the partner and the United States—disagreements over strategy and operational design, as well as over whether ending the war quickly serves each country's national security objectives.

Introduction

In the 21st century, intrastate and interstate wars persist longer than expected—and longer than comparable wars did in the 20th century. Even when the initial stage of intense conflict subsides, or one side declares a ceasefire, a conclusive and definitive “war termination” is rare. Instead, frozen conflicts, stalemates, and periodic pauses in fighting have become the norm. Over the past 25 years, the United States has learned that the long wars it began in the 2000s were hard to end. The U.S. military withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 after a painful exit and attempted a similar withdrawal from Iraq in 2011—though President Barack Obama sent U.S. troops back to fight ISIS in 2014 and 2015.

Partly because of the protracted nature of wars involving U.S. boots on the ground, U.S. national security strategy shifted in the 2010s toward building partner capacity, enabling partners to fight joint adversaries and threats without direct U.S. involvement. One would expect the United States to exert considerable influence over the duration of its partners' wars, as well as over how those wars are conducted. After all, in wars fought by close U.S. security partners, the United States shares the same national security goals and typically provides an overwhelming share of the hardware, defense and intelligence equipment, training, and support that sustains these campaigns. Yet recent experience suggests otherwise.

This report addresses a central policy puzzle specific to the wars of U.S. security partners: Why is it so difficult for the United States to shape its partners' decisions on war termination and to influence their operational design and conduct?

To answer this question, we examined four recent moments in partner wars: Afghanistan in the lead-up to the 2020 Doha agreement, the first few years of the Saudi Arabian-led coalition's campaign in Yemen starting in 2015, Ukraine's defensive war following Russia's 2022 invasion, and Israel's war in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, attacks. We conducted more than 30 interviews with senior officials at the National Security Council, the Departments of Defense and State, and the intelligence community who had been key decisionmakers at the time. These interviews were complemented by facilitated discussions among senior officials, extensive review of hundreds of public statements and documents, and consultations with foreign officials in partner capitals to understand how U.S. diplomatic messages were received. Asking participants the same set of questions across all four conflicts revealed recurring patterns, as well as instances in which interviewees offered differing accounts of the same high-level diplomatic and interagency meetings.

Although our research initially focused on four case studies, Afghanistan ultimately emerged as *sui generis*. Unlike the other cases, the United States had invaded the country and created the partner it was supporting militarily and politically (the Afghan National Security Forces and the Afghan national government). The United States under President Donald Trump then decided to end a war it had begun. Given these differences, as well as space constraints, this first report focuses on Ukraine and Gaza, drawing on Afghanistan and Yemen to illustrate broader trends.

Overall, we found similar patterns across U.S. partnered wars. When it comes to war termination, the United States unsurprisingly shares its partners' interest in total victory. Yet the longer a war continues, the harder it becomes for the United States to influence how the war is waged and how long it lasts. Over time, U.S. officials come to favor termination through negotiated settlement as the option most likely to secure U.S. interests. As for influencing the operational

design or conduct favored by the partner, the degree of U.S. influence waxed and waned at various points during each conflict.

Despite the inherent differences among the cases, we identified several additional consistent findings. First, the United States finds it difficult to agree on end goals with its partner at the outset of a war. In each case examined for this paper, early discussions between the United States and its partners were vague about expected political horizons, what the "day after" would look like, and the terms on which victory would be achieved. Many—if not most—of the 30 officials interviewed for this paper expressed regret over this lack of clarity in the initial diplomatic conversations, noting that it complicated subsequent diplomacy between the United States and its partners.

A second key finding across all four cases was that domestic political support for the partner's war was initially high—measured by both general public and congressional opinion—but gradually diminished. Debates arise over the morality and legality of the decision to go to war and over the partner's conduct in fighting it. Domestic opinion can shift regarding whether to continue supporting an enduring partner war. And while U.S. military, diplomatic, and intelligence officials are initially closely aligned with their counterparts in the partner government and military on strategy and operations, differences emerge over time. This divergence is in part inevitable since the United States does not exercise command and control over how the war is conducted. As the cases below reveal, however, U.S. decisionmakers' frustration with their limited influence creates friction, eroding U.S. support for the campaign's continuation and leading the United States to favor the war's termination.

These findings point to a new way forward for U.S. security partners engaged in war—even a war that enjoys support at the highest levels of the U.S. government and among the American public. U.S. national security decisionmakers need to seize the maximum leverage available at

the outset of a partnered conflict to negotiate, define, and clarify U.S. desired political objectives and end states up front, particularly since U.S. leverage over its partner tends to decline after the war's initial stages. Over time, the partner is likely to remain far more committed to continuing the war than to ending it, at nearly any cost—and this divergence is likely to erode domestic and congressional support for continued U.S. assistance. U.S. security, intelligence, and diplomatic assistance should therefore be predicated on a complete, transparent agreement on the shared end state, along with a roadmap for concretizing U.S. expectations.

As U.S. leverage diminishes, the National Security Council and the president will need to maintain disciplined, coherent oversight over operations across all national security departments and agencies. When U.S. partners perceive cacophonous, inconsistent messaging across U.S. channels, it becomes easier for them to dismiss U.S. decisionmakers or play agencies off one another. And while every White House may find it easier to consult with the president through an exclusive senior circle on matters of partner war, this exclusivity risks marginalizing the interagency's technical expertise and experience with partners—both of which are sources of U.S. leverage at each national security agency.

Finally, the United States cannot afford to press only its partner to end a war; it can and should design diplomatic strategies aimed directly at the adversary. Some officials may view direct diplomacy with an adversary as a betrayal of U.S. partners, but such diplomacy is necessary in partnered wars, where the adversary often regards the United States as a party to the conflict even if it has never fired a shot.

Why don't wars end decisively?

Academics use the term “war termination” as a layperson might—meaning, when and how a war ends. Yet, as our interviews revealed, the term feels awkward to most U.S. policymakers because of its neutrality regarding specific outcomes. In practice, the United States may seek the end of a partner's war, but only on certain terms. And the United States will often prioritize other national interests over war termination itself—homeland defense, the prevention of nuclear war, or the eradication of a dangerous terrorist group, for example. War termination can also be highly unjust, unfair, or even immoral, particularly when the aggressor is rewarded, and the victim is forced to concede and compromise on settlement terms. Finally, diplomatic efforts to end wars—including those led by outside powers—often fail, since the parties themselves tend to view the stakes as more existential than do the outside powers, including superpowers, attempting to mediate.

The concept of war termination is further complicated, in the context of U.S. policy, by the difficulty of identifying precisely when a war ends. Because peace processes stall, and frozen conflicts may be only semi-settled before violence resumes, the definition of war termination can be subjective and elusive.¹ Temporary ceasefires or cessations of hostilities may pause conflicts, but fighting often resumes. Conflicts are more likely to end frozen than fully resolved, particularly in cases of irregular warfare, insurgency, and counterinsurgency.²

Social science findings should offer some (cold) comfort to policymakers who have found it increasingly difficult to end wars, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Azerbaijan to Yemen. Statistically speaking, wars of all types have lasted longer since 1991: In recent years, scholars have documented historically high rates of state-based armed conflict (state vs. state or state vs. nonstate), alongside historically low rates of conflict resolution.³ The growing prevalence of intrastate wars—which tend to be more protracted than interstate wars—contributes in part to this trend. Even among intrastate wars alone, scholars have found that civil war termination rates declined by 24% between 1990–2009 and 2010–2019.⁴ In terms of conflicts involving nonstate actors, decisive, clear endings are rare—terrorist and insurgent groups often go into hiding or retreat as they are losing ground. Nonstate groups are rarely willing to declare defeat formally and instead prepare for a future round of fighting.

Because wars are not ending as quickly—or as often—as they once did, academics continue to investigate why. Some scholars point to the lengthy duration of warfare by pointing to specific geographies or economic conditions that make it more costly to surrender than continue fighting.⁵ Another key factor is the internationalization of intrastate conflict, meaning that internal conflicts within a state are increasingly drawing in outside powers. This trend has increased both the duration and lethality of conflicts.⁶ According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the number of internationalized intrastate conflicts more than tripled between the first and second decades of the 21st century. And there have already been 22 such conflicts since 2020—the same number as the entire 2010s.⁷

Other scholars attribute wars' increasing duration to wartime leadership dynamics and societal norms around conflict resolution. Compared with premodern warfare, they argue, modern democracies in particular struggle to broker the compromises necessary to end wars, given the risk of domestic political backlash.⁸

Overall, while there are mixed explanations for why wars fail to end, the statistical findings are consistent. Scholars have found that the probability of successful war termination through negotiations falls to 19% when mediation occurs after 12 months of conflict, compared to a 37% chance of success when mediation occurs between one and three months after the onset of conflict.⁹ This finding confirms an observed characteristic of warfare in the 21st century: the longer a war continues, especially after 12 months, the harder it is to broker a political settlement or negotiation. Each side is also less likely to give up, putting down its arms and accepting defeat.

Why did we choose these four cases?

To investigate why the United States has had difficulty ending its security partners' wars and influencing their operational design, we began by considering four cases in which the United States fought with and through a partner on the ground: Afghanistan after the initial stages of the U.S. invasion; Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other allies as they supported the Yemeni government against the Houthis, starting in 2015; Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression after 2022; and Israel in its war in Gaza following October 7, 2023. These cases share obvious similarities but also deep dissimilarities.

In three of the cases, the belligerent initiated the war by attacking a U.S. ally or partner. The Houthis descended on Sanaa and ousted the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi in 2015. Russia, despite extensive diplomatic efforts to deter it, invaded Ukraine and attempted to seize its capital, Kyiv, in 2022. The Iranian-backed terrorist group Hamas invaded southern Israel in 2023, conducting a violent assault against both civilians and Israeli military personnel. The governments of Yemen, Ukraine, and Israel responded by mounting campaigns to fight what they regarded as existential battles for their security and territorial integrity. In each

case, the White House determined that the partner deserved immediate and extensive U.S. security support. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates took up the cause of the Yemeni government, forming a military coalition that 10 countries (including the United States) eventually joined.¹⁰

Afghanistan differed from the other cases in part because America's eventual military partner, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), was itself created by the United States. The United States launched the war through partners—initially the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban local leaders—before leading the fighting directly, with tens of thousands of U.S. troops on the ground. The United States eventually engineered the creation of the Afghan national government, whose security forces became its key partner. In Yemen, by contrast, the United States regularly used military force directly: special operations forces deployed on the ground in mid-2016 to counter al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.¹¹ Moreover, from 2015–2021, the United States was a formal combatant, having signed up to join the Saudi-led military coalition formed to rout the Houthis.

Other dissimilarities abound. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was an interstate war, while the conflict in Yemen is and was a complex civil war. Hamas, a designated terrorist group ruling the Gaza Strip, represents a third type of combatant, bearing some similarities to the Taliban. Unlike Hamas, however, the Taliban was the official ruling regime of Afghanistan both before 2001 and after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

Yet the four cases share certain similarities. In each, there had been earlier rounds of violence between the U.S. partner and the adversary. Hamas-Israeli conflagrations arose in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021, each time after Hamas used Gaza as a base for attacks on Israel, drawing Israeli responses. Russia's February 2022 campaign to seize Ukraine cannot be understood without reference to its earlier seizure of Crimea and parts of the Donbas (the Donetsk

and Luhansk regions) in 2014, despite periodic Ukrainian efforts to retake some of this territory between 2014 and 2022. The Houthis, meanwhile, had a long history of insurgency against the central Yemeni government in Sanaa, with multiple earlier rounds of fighting preceding their successful rout of government forces in 2014–2015.

Overall, the cases chosen for this report capture a moment within a longer history of on-again, off-again fighting. In each case, the U.S. partner had not achieved a final, conclusive political settlement. In every period of fighting discussed below, initial efforts to quickly defeat the aggressor failed, and the conflicts grew more complex and protracted. Whether fighting the Taliban, the Houthis, Russia, or Hamas, U.S. partners faced wars far more difficult than anticipated—each presenting Washington with evolving, unpredictable questions about how, when, and on what terms to resolve it. War termination was never the single or highest priority at the start of any of these conflicts. In Ukraine, in fact, U.S. officials' greatest initial fear was that the war would be resolved too quickly, in Russia's favor, as the United States prepared to arm Ukrainians for a potential insurgency to prolong the war.¹²

Paper findings

Finding one: Initial factors contributing to U.S. wartime support for partners diminish over time.

The first finding of this paper is that a series of factors converge, leading the United States to support its partners at the outset of their wars. First, and most intuitively, the United States seeks to reassure that partner, counter an adversary, project deterrence, and/or prevent escalation. The United States and its partner typically share a threat assessment regarding the adversary, even when the threat is more existential for the partner than for the United States.

Second, beyond countering a shared adversary, the United States is often committed to allies beyond the immediate security partner at war. In defending Ukraine and the government of Yemen, the United States served not only those specific bilateral relationships but also reinforced confidence across a broader alliance system built on shared threat perceptions. In both cases, key allies outside of the conflict zone, in Europe and in the Gulf states, pressed the United States to resist undesirable concessions to the aggressor. The existential threat felt by NATO allies after Russia's 2022 invasion contributed to the U.S. commitment to arming and assisting Ukraine. According to several interviewed officials, regard for certain European allies' views at times restrained U.S. willingness to press Ukraine toward a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities.¹³

Third, moral and normative factors shaped U.S. decisionmaking. Americans and their leaders alike—across both political parties—were outraged by Russian aggression in February 2022, and a strong moral commitment undergirded U.S. support for Ukraine's defense. There was a consistent and widespread belief that legal, moral, and strategic interests all aligned in favor of resisting Russian territorial aggression, and that defending Ukraine amounted to defending the international rules-based order.

Similarly, a moral consensus emerged in the White House and Congress after October 7 that Israel was justified in responding to the attacks its civilians had suffered by targeting Hamas and seeking to end its rule in Gaza. Hamas is and was a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization with American blood on its hands even before its October 7, 2023, assault on southern Israel killed approximately 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and captured 251 civilian hostages.¹⁴ President Joe Biden's moral and personal identification with Israeli security concerns contributed to his decisionmaking, both throughout his career and during the Gaza war. Fourth, and closely tied to these moral and normative calculations, U.S. public opinion strongly matters at the outset of a war.

Over time, each of these factors—and an administration's perception of these factors—can change, including the risk-reward calculations, the sense of long-term versus short-term national security interests, and views on the justness of the war itself and the war's conduct. In Afghanistan, Trump, unlike his predecessors, decided that war termination mattered more to U.S. interests than the risks of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Breaking with 15 years of precedent, he sidelined the security partner (the ANSF and the government under President Ashraf Ghani) and began directly negotiating with the Taliban over the terms of U.S. and allied surrender.¹⁵ Officials working in his administration confirmed that Trump was aware of the trade-offs between seeking an end to the Afghan war in the form of the 2020 Doha agreements and other U.S. national security considerations.¹⁶ In public, at least, Trump did not explain the risks involved, however, or admit that the 2020 Doha agreement undercut U.S. obligations to partners in the Afghan national government.

While Biden defeated Trump in 2020, he shared his predecessor's view that ending the war in Afghanistan was the right decision, despite the immense risk.¹⁷ Biden and his team failed to sufficiently convey to the American people their painful and high-risk decision to choose war termination over other important national security considerations. These known risks included empowering the Taliban and the group's dangerous domestic and foreign policies.

Meanwhile, in Yemen, the Obama administration quickly joined the Saudi-led coalition that emerged in 2015 to push back the Houthis from Sanaa, the country's capital and most populous region, and other seized territory. The United States' decision to join the partners' war effort in part reflected a desire to deter Iran (the Houthis' backers) from further involvement in Yemen and the region. The timing mattered too: Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners were nervously watching as the United States and other world powers successfully concluded nuclear talks with Iran around the same time that the Houthis, with likely

Iranian tacit encouragement, overran an Arab capital city. The United States had repeatedly promised and reassured the Gulf Arab states that the Iran nuclear deal did not signal the end of the U.S.-Gulf security partnership. Still, these states were afraid of U.S. abandonment, and so when they asked the United States to join their military coalition in 2015, it was hard for the Obama White House to say no.¹⁸

The Gulf allies promised Obama and his team that the war would be over in six weeks. Yet the war continued throughout 2015 and 2016 despite intermittent ceasefire efforts.¹⁹ During the last four months of the Obama administration, although the president and Secretary of State John Kerry tried to negotiate an end to the war between the Houthis and the government of Yemen, they ran out of time.²⁰ War termination emerged as a priority for Obama but was unachievable before he left office. Trump disengaged from war termination or any diplomatic efforts in Yemen, allowing four more years of both U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led campaign and the continuation of a bloody internal struggle.

In 2021, Biden announced America's formal exit from participation in the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen.²¹ Over the following months, recognizing that the Saudis, Emiratis, and other regional actors in the coalition were themselves interested in ending the war, the Biden administration intensified U.S. diplomatic efforts to broker a settlement between the Houthis and the coalition of actors governing southern Yemen, now known as the Southern Transitional Council. U.S.- and U.N.-led diplomatic efforts contributed to a tentative ceasefire in 2022, which unraveled in the wake of October 7, 2023.

The histories of the Afghan and Yemeni cases illustrate how U.S. presidents can come to conclude that war termination, rather than continued fighting, better serves U.S. national interests. Over time, ending a war without total victory may become more strategically important to the United States than continuing to fight in hopes of complete victory.

In the Ukraine case, there was overwhelming consensus across the executive branch and Congress that supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and defending its armed forces was a vital U.S. national security interest. Pushing back against Russia's 2022 aggression by mobilizing an alliance of NATO and European partners could deter future Russian aggression. The Biden administration was not interested in ending the war on non-ideal terms. Pragmatically, there was a belief that Russia, caught in a quagmire, would eventually deplete its military and economic power. Meanwhile, Ukraine's defense assets, capabilities, and innovations were growing each month, improving its future deterrent capacity. Many interviewees described the growth of this future Ukrainian deterrent capability as an undervalued form of "leverage" that would eventually end the conflict more permanently and prevent future rounds of Russian aggression.²²

Biden officials also viewed it as essential that the war ended on terms favorable to Ukraine, given that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was closely watching the situation unfold. Rewarding Russian aggression with territorial concessions would undermine efforts to deter a PRC invasion of Taiwan.²³

By late 2022, while the determination to protect Ukraine's sovereignty as a core national security interest never wavered, divergent views emerged within both branches of the U.S. government regarding the possible benefits of war termination. Many believed that a political settlement would ultimately be the only way to secure overarching U.S. goals in the region. Finally, many officials across the Department of Defense worried about the effect of a prolonged war on U.S. stockpiles and munitions inventories.²⁴

In Gaza, the U.S. government shared Israeli war aims to eliminate Hamas' military threat. Officials also understood that U.S. support for Israel after the October 7 attacks would help to deter Iran and its proxies, avoiding a regional war that could draw in the United States more directly. One important manifestation of this early

concern about regional deterrence involved the Pentagon's redeployment of the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in the Eastern Mediterranean on October 11, 2023, and decisions to send the USS Dwight Eisenhower to the Eastern Mediterranean shortly after.²⁵

The U.S. assessment of its national security interests became more complex as the war in Gaza continued beyond its expected duration, particularly as Israel's operational successes failed to translate into the strategic objective of dislodging Hamas from Gaza.²⁶ Nonetheless, throughout the Biden administration, there was consistent support for Israel's war effort, including to degrade and deter Iranian-backed proxies, to diminish Hamas' capabilities, and to release the hostages—12 of whom were U.S. citizens.²⁷ What changed by 2024, however, was the administration's assessment that a ceasefire/hostage deal was the best way to secure these U.S. goals.

Finding two: Concern about a partner's ethical conduct in war could undermine overall U.S. domestic support for that war.

American public opinion and U.S. congressional views are critical to sustaining support for a U.S. security partner. However, the perceived justness of the war—as well as the American public continuing to view the U.S. partner as the “good guy”—can shape these views. While Saudi-led coalition allies often directly appealed to Congress for assistance, they were unable to sustain congressional and public support for the Yemen campaign as it persisted.²⁸ In 2015, the U.S. Congress began raising concerns about the considerable number of civilian casualties resulting from the Saudi-led coalition air campaign. By October 2015, a group of bipartisan senators began questioning why the United States was supporting the military coalition, especially as its sorties at times hit school buses and civilian structures rather than legitimate Houthi targets.²⁹ By 2018, public opinion polls revealed strong opposition by the U.S. public to America's involvement in the Yemen war.³⁰

To a much lesser extent, in Afghanistan, strategic and moral concerns gradually arose about the professionalism and conduct of U.S. security partners on the ground, as well as the capabilities of the government overseeing them. Distaste for the corrupt, often brutal local leaders fighting on behalf of the United States and Afghan national government against the Taliban weakened enthusiasm among Americans and U.S. leaders for the continued presence of U.S. troops. It also eroded the legitimacy of the Afghan government and its security forces in the eyes of the Afghan people.³¹

In Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, drawing on a long history of mobilizing congressional support against White House pressure, did so again with notable success after October 7, 2023.³² Still, congressional, executive, and U.S. public concerns about Israeli conduct in Gaza arose almost immediately after the initial attacks on Israel. Gaza's demography and geography, exacerbated by Israeli control over its border openings, left its approximately 2.2 million civilians with little ability to flee the fighting. In the days after October 7, 2023, as the Netanyahu government began shutting off the water, internet, and electricity to Gaza, officials in Washington grew alarmed. The rise in civilian casualties and attacks against civilian infrastructure during the entirety of Israel's air and ground operations, as well as the Israeli government's on-again, off-again approach to Gaza humanitarian access, led to growing U.S. opposition to the war itself, in addition to U.S. support for it.

Finding three: U.S. domestic public support for partners' wars may diminish over time anyway, even if the public continues to believe the war is just.

Americans and their leaders never changed their minds on the perceived justness of the war itself in Ukraine. Over time, however, U.S. support for the war dwindled in part because of changing political winds and public sentiment. Congress shared the Biden White House's overwhelming

support for Ukraine in 2022: in fact, in March and then May, congressional supplemental assistance totaled \$53.8 billion in overall funding, with roughly \$26 billion explicitly dedicated to defense and security assistance.³³ In September 2022, Congress passed a third supplemental bill providing Ukraine \$12.5 billion, with \$7.5 billion for security and defense assistance.³⁴

While the Biden administration ultimately was able to offer the Ukrainians almost every weapons system that they asked for—holding back in 2022 and 2023 in a few cases because of either inventory concerns or escalation risks—Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy proved a dexterous advocate for his country and cause. He often bypassed the Biden administration to appeal directly to congressional appropriators with specific requests for military equipment, ranging from requests for Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) to long-range drone programs.³⁵

In part in response to Zelenskyy's lobbying, a faction across Congress, think tanks, and in the media demanded that the Biden administration move faster to provide the most potent weapon capabilities. However, these loud, potentially outsized voices occluded the fact that the Biden administration was facing shrinking political operating space beyond the Beltway. While broad American support for Ukraine endured, the public began questioning whether they should be providing taxpayer-funded weapons and other material support.³⁶ Biden officials were caught by surprise when, in late 2022 and into 2023, Republican attitudes shifted toward a more tepid embrace of Ukraine's cause, as candidate Trump and some isolationist Republicans began to question the logic of continued aid to Ukraine.³⁷

As the congressional debate over the fourth Ukraine supplemental funding bill dragged on from 2023 to 2024, Republican members began to articulate a war weariness, or certainly skepticism, toward protracted security assistance for the Ukrainians. According to many interviewees, the congressional debate on the fourth Ukraine

supplemental undermined U.S. influence with its partner Ukraine, reduced U.S. credible commitments in the eyes of Russia, and changed the Ukrainian Armed Forces' perceptions of its long-term ability to depend on U.S.-supplied military assistance.³⁸

Finding four: The United States must define the political goals of the war upfront with its allies. As time passes, the United States and its ally will inevitably develop differences regarding these goals.

As the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz observed, war is the continuation of policy by other means—and therefore understanding the political end is the crux of the enterprise. In all the cases analyzed for this paper, discussions between the United States and its partners at the conflict's outset about political goals and preferred end states were vague. The United States might have had a desired political outcome in mind (for example, ensuring that a non-Hamas Palestinian entity ruled Gaza with some autonomy) but allowed the security partner to define the war aims. Often, the partner's vision of these end goals shifted over time.

Many interviewees recalled that every inter-agency meeting began with a restatement of three U.S. objectives when it came to Ukraine: ensuring the country remained a viable, sovereign state; maintaining alliance unity across NATO; and avoiding a direct U.S.-Russia war. That said, officials recognized from the start that these three U.S. objectives likely did not mirror Ukraine's top priorities. As many indicated, when the partner is the main victim and provides the main response force, it is difficult for the United States to craft "rigid and definitive end states ... because of adversary response, U.S. political will, and yet unknown U.S. and partner capability."³⁹

Regarding the contours of a political settlement, the United States, both publicly and privately, consistently messaged that U.S. policy—or, more specifically, its public posture—was "nothing

about Ukraine without Ukraine.”⁴⁰ This meant that the United States would not define the terms governing the conflict’s resolution. Even though senior officials repeated this position publicly, the Biden administration also repeated what many U.S. officials believed the Ukrainian leadership understood to be a shared strategy: Ukraine’s offensives in mid-2022 should aim to regain lost territory before seizing the land bridge to Crimea, threatening something highly valued by Russian President Vladimir Putin. This strategy was built around pressuring Russia to negotiate a settlement or ceasefire by cutting off any chance of further Russian advances. However, interviewees offered mixed views on whether the Ukrainian side—particularly President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his top foreign policy adviser, Andrei Yermak—had internalized this U.S.-articulated strategy and its political goals early in the war.⁴¹

Beginning in mid-2022, according to those interviewed, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) increasingly believed that Ukraine would only be able to regain some, but not all, of its territory lost in 2022, and certainly not the territory lost in 2014.⁴² U.S. military chiefs began to see diplomacy—and unfortunately, Ukrainian territorial concessions to Russia paired with significant Western security guarantees—as critical to any potential settlement or endgame. Even if the overarching political goals of Ukraine’s 2022 offensives were not completely defined or agreed upon, by the fall of 2022, senior U.S. officials, including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, were beginning to suggest that Ukraine’s next offensive offered “an opportunity to negotiate.” Ukraine should “seize the moment,” Milley said.⁴³ Despite these public remarks by the chairman, the U.S. government had not made an internal decision to convey this message. In response, other senior officials quickly walked these comments back, reiterating continued U.S. policy: Washington would not insist or force upon Ukraine the specific timing, conditions, or positions for political negotiations.⁴⁴

One DOD official recalled in an interview that he had been surprised to learn that there were so few civilian-led U.S.-Russia and U.S.-Ukraine back-channel efforts at play across the inter-agency in 2022 and 2023 to begin probing the contours of a political agreement. (There were a few notable channels of U.S.-Russia communication on other issues.) “I had assumed that the civilians in the White House and the State Department were actively engaged with the Ukrainian government to discuss its willingness to look at maps and consider territorial compromises, as early as the spring of 2022—of course along with security guarantees and other factors that would be negotiated.”⁴⁵

Yet at the time, failing to prioritize these back channels made sense, as there was no inter-agency agreement that the top U.S. priority was ending the war.⁴⁶ Although the interagency focused on sanctioning Russia, diverting Europe’s dependencies, weakening Russia’s leverage by generating new energy sources for Europe, and identifying other forms of pressure on Russia, most interagency interviewees interpreted two priorities coming out of the White House: managing nuclear de-escalation and risk, and providing Ukraine with sufficient security assistance to defend itself.⁴⁷ As one interviewee put it: “I came out of the Deputies Committee meetings believing that we were doing two things: supporting an ally as quickly as possible, while avoiding pushing Russia into a situation where it might consider using nuclear weapons. Finding a way out of this war was not a top priority.”⁴⁸ (When asked, officials who had served in the White House and were then interviewed for this project did not agree with this characterization of their priorities at this time.)

In short, there was internal disagreement, complexity, and inconsistency in how much the Biden administration should impose a political endgame. One senior official interviewed for this paper, reflecting on the back and forth with the Ukrainians about strategy and policy goals, suggested that perhaps the United States should have employed “positive leverage” with Ukraine—

working on the end goals first, from February 2022 onward, rather than the means of achieving them. He said:

“The one thing I keep on reflecting on is this: What if we had been riskier? If we had gone further in providing the Ukrainians with the ATACMS and other advanced weaponry they wanted upfront. And at the same time, we had gone harder at them to make concessions in terms of territory, NATO membership, etc. Would that have had outcomes? I don’t think it’s very likely. But I have kicked around the idea that we could have tried that risky approach in the beginning.”⁴⁹

Immediately after October 7, Washington rejected calls by the international community for a ceasefire in Gaza; this issue led the United States to veto several United Nations Security Council resolutions on Gaza.⁵⁰ In the winter of 2024, U.S. end goals changed, and officials began planning for a ceasefire in Gaza. The gulf between the allies began to widen as Israel was clear that it disagreed on the importance of urgently ending the war. By late winter 2024, according to one senior U.S. official, “we knew that there would be less and less value in continuing the fighting; a Hamas-Israel deal involving hostage releases became the primary American goal.” The Israeli public understood that their government was in no rush to end the war. That winter, mass public demonstrations against Netanyahu began, motivated by Israelis’ conclusion that releasing the hostages would require some sort of ceasefire, however imperfect.⁵¹

According to one senior U.S. official, arriving at a shared assessment of desired end states for the Gaza war, and then a shared agreement on the means of achieving them, would have necessitated the U.S. and Israeli military and intel channels jointly assessing or defining what it meant to degrade Hamas. Based on U.S. experiences fighting al-Qaida, ISIS, and other terrorist groups, U.S. policymakers and defense officials understood that Hamas—whether the political, military, or ideological components of the organi-

zation—would never be eliminated entirely. They also understood that Palestinian suffering during the war itself, including the destruction of houses and livelihoods and, in many cases, civilian casualties, would be fodder for additional and ongoing Hamas recruitment.⁵²

Another source of Israeli-U.S. disagreement on the end states related to the vision for “day-after” plans. To many interviewed for this project, the biggest mistake, upon reflection, was not demanding that Israel put forward its own blueprint delineating who would rule when Hamas was defeated, and who would take on security, municipal, and governance responsibilities in its place. One interviewee went so far as to argue that U.S. security assistance to Israel should have been conditioned on U.S.-Israeli agreement regarding an eventual political plan for Gaza.⁵³

Meanwhile, the United States and Israel never reached an agreement on the war’s expected duration. In the fall of 2023, Washington expected the war in Gaza to last no more than a few months. Yet according to officials on both sides, no clear discussion took place between the allies in the weeks immediately following October 7 about what victory would look like or when Israel would consider its goals achieved. Several officials interviewed recalled concern, as early as October 2023, about a growing dissonance between the United States and Israel over operational priorities: the United States focused on releasing hostages, preventing regional escalation, and weakening Hamas’ hold on Gaza, while the Israeli government focused primarily on the last of these goals.⁵⁴

Finding five: Over time, the United States and its partner are likely to miscommunicate and diverge in their decisions regarding ends, ways, and means.

In both the Ukraine and Gaza cases, the policy imperatives to show support to an ally that had been attacked—and the crisis nature of the early days and weeks following Feb. 24, 2022, and

October 7, 2023—precluded high-level ally-to-ally negotiations over an end state. After the initial shock of the crises, however, subsequent miscommunications about alignment of ends, ways, and means created friction in the relationships between the United States and its partners.

In Ukraine, Biden's stated goals, as described in public and private, were to secure Ukraine's independence as a viable state by building up its defensive capabilities while landing Russia a strategic defeat that would deter its future ambitions across the continent. Friction with the Ukrainians developed primarily over how to build up these defensive capabilities. Ukrainian senior officials would publicly and privately complain to Congress that the White House was not moving quickly enough to provide necessary weapons. Yet in Kyiv, there was perhaps less of an appreciation for the sound reasons behind the limiting constraints on the security assistance: the United States was concerned about U.S.-Russia nuclear escalation; U.S. defense assistance and procurement is always slower than our partners (including the Ukrainians and Israelis) would like; and there was some degree of concern regarding U.S. defense inventories.

One official described a "Goldilocks zone" created by the Biden White House—a balancing act between limiting risks of nuclear escalation and gradually expanding weapons support to Ukraine. The administration believed that providing a certain class of weapons more quickly would have commensurately increased escalation risks.⁵⁵ Wary of Ukraine's unrealistic ambitions of reclaiming all of the Donbas and the additional territory Russia had gained in 2022, these officials were concerned that if Ukraine was too successful on the battlefield—particularly if it looked like it could retake Crimea—Russia might cross the nuclear threshold.⁵⁶ Several senior officials interviewed for this project argued that though the preoccupation with nuclear escalation was understandable in 2022, it persisted long after it became clear that Ukraine, following its losses in 2023, could not reclaim enough territory to provoke a limited tactical nuclear response by Moscow.⁵⁷

There was another type of friction between Washington and Kyiv that reoccurred in the communication between the United States and its allies across the other three cases studied for this report: close partners can still misunderstand one another's diplomatic messages. Biden publicly articulated the administration's theory that Ukraine's battlefield gains would help it to achieve a better negotiating position with the Russians in public diplomatic settings.⁵⁸ Whether he sufficiently emphasized this strategy with the Ukrainians in private, and whether Zelenskyy fully internalized it, remained in doubt. Several interviewees recounted meetings where Zelenskyy and Yermak talked about regaining all of the territory lost by Ukraine to Russia since 2014 (including Crimea), with senior U.S. officials trying to push back to no avail.

In terms of how to align ends, ways and means, in the Gaza case, U.S. officials after October 7, 2023, conveyed the importance of using targeted military operations when fighting terrorists such as Hamas, drawing on America's own experience in Iraq and elsewhere. Officials also repeatedly stressed the importance of protecting civilians as a means of delegitimizing terrorist groups that govern as political actors.⁵⁹ Yet senior officials uniformly agreed that the Israeli government and military, particularly at senior levels, did not fully absorb these messages on the importance of a tailored, precise operational design and the need for a limited war.⁶⁰

Findings specific to the Ukraine war

Interviewees describe a White House that only became interested in negotiated war termination in Ukraine by 2024. Even then, many believed it was futile to prioritize diplomatic talks, since they judged Russia unwilling to end the war. Given the political risks—at home, with Ukraine's congressional champions, and abroad, with some European allies—of pushing Ukraine into concessionary negotiations, the White House saw little value in the effort while Russia remained unwilling to compromise.

Others argued that ending the conflict was never considered a top priority, and certainly did not supersede the top goals of ensuring Ukraine's security and Russia's strategic failure in its aggressive ambitions in Europe and beyond—ambitions that threatened the broader international order.⁶¹ Relatedly, many State Department officials linked support for Ukraine to the Biden administration's 2021 promise that "America was back" in its support for allies. Defeating Russia decisively on the battlefield would curb its appetite for further aggression in Europe, while pressuring Ukraine to accept a flawed deal would diminish U.S. deterrence vis-à-vis Russia and other adversaries.

As discussed above, many compelling arguments were offered across the interagency for why time—that is, war continuation—favored U.S. interests. Continued fighting would weaken the Russian military, benefiting European security. Each month the war continued, Ukraine made progress building its own defense industry, assembling the foundations of its own future deterrent capability.

Of course, the United States could have ended the war in 2022 or 2023 had war termination been its top priority. According to one official, this would have meant pursuing a deal directly with Russia: a ceasefire, freezing the lines of conflict, taking NATO membership off the table, ending assistance to Ukraine, and leaving Kyiv to manage on its own. Such a deal would have meant Russian control over the Donbas as well as other territories it seized in 2022. The terms would have been unjust and unfair, in this official's view, but the war could have ended.⁶²

A third view articulated by interviewees explained a middle ground alternative—between demanding Ukrainian surrender and avoiding negotiations because of the assessment that Russia was not interested and time favored the United States, Ukraine, and its allies.⁶³ In 2022, when Ukraine had achieved surprising gains and momentum on the battlefield and before the outcome of Ukraine's (failed) 2023 counteroffensive was clear, there was an opportunity to reach out to Russia, these officials concluded.⁶⁴

Finding it difficult to have difficult conversations with the Ukrainians

Several interviewees discussed sometimes fraught conversations with Ukrainian partners over operational and diplomatic issues. Some recalled a 2022 debate about whether Ukraine could press on after seizing Kherson toward Crimea in the south. The United States favored a sequenced approach—Kherson first, then, depending on how Ukrainian forces fared, a push toward Kharkiv. (A U.S. defense official recalled an operational desire to see how Russia would respond if its forces collapsed under pressure from the Kherson offensive.)⁶⁵

U.S. officials were therefore surprised when Ukrainian forces departed from what they saw as "the agreed-upon sequencing plan," pursuing Kherson and Kharkiv simultaneously. The Ukrainian approach ultimately succeeded, though it was bolder and riskier. There were mixed views about the Ukrainians' decision to diverge from the planned sequencing operation. As one individual explained, "A partner doing things differently is not always a terrible thing, and in the case of Ukraine it was a mixed bag. Sometimes we gave terrible advice, and when the Ukrainians ignored it, that was a good thing. We didn't have forces on the ground and sometimes lacked insights the Ukrainians had. Other times we had sound judgment, which the Ukrainians ignored."⁶⁶

A further source of contention was the major counteroffensive planned for 2023, which, after some delay, began that June. One official questioned whether the United States should have continued pressing Ukraine to proceed given mounting signs it would fail. Another senior defense official acknowledged that even before the counteroffensive started, the United States had significant gaps in its understanding of the operating environment and was not always sure where the Ukrainian Armed Forces agreed or disagreed with U.S. views on operational design. The most important divergence, according to many officials, was between the U.S. desire to focus on Melitopol and the Ukrainian preference

to spread resources along a 600-mile front. It also became clear to some U.S. officials that Zelenskyy and his political advisors periodically overrode military advisors to shift battlefield plans in ways they judged politically advantageous.⁶⁷ As a result, there was less U.S. visibility into Ukraine's military planning.⁶⁸

Some attributed the friction, miscommunications, and lack of visibility between the United States and its Ukrainian partner to the limited civilian (or DOD) presence at a drawn-down U.S. Embassy, which was constrained by security requirements. Many agreed that the U.S. intelligence ties with the Ukrainians were stronger than the diplomatic and defense channels. Without the U.S. military present on the ground, there was less familiarity with the battlefield conditions—compared to British forces, which were forward deployed, for instance.⁶⁹ A former defense official described the absence of a U.S. military presence in Ukraine as “profoundly weakening,” noting that even frequent daily communication cannot substitute for colocation with allies.⁷⁰

Planning for diplomatic scenarios began too late

Several interviewees from the Pentagon and White House reflected that perhaps the U.S. government's planning for diplomatic frameworks, security assurances, NATO status, and border arrangements came too late. The Biden administration only began focusing seriously on these questions in 2024, anticipating that 2025 would be a “year for negotiations.” Some suggested that 2022-2023, in the run-up to Ukraine's counter-offensive, should have been the inflection point at which the United States signaled to Kyiv that a diplomatic initiative would follow the offensive, regardless of its outcome. Expediting the U.S.-Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) would have made sense, both to give Ukraine confidence to negotiate and to convince Russia of the durability of U.S. support.

According to one official, a draft BSA completed by the interagency in 2023—but shelved by the White House—could have served as a natural vehicle for signaling credible commitment to the American public, Ukraine, Russia, and U.S. allies simultaneously. This official recalled that the White House grew wary of discussing U.S.-Ukraine negotiations once the 2023 supplemental stalled, and it was particularly reluctant to raise with Congress the prospect of long-term U.S. resource commitments to Ukraine as part of a peace deal. Yet pursuing the BSA alongside the 2023-2024 supplemental debate could have reassured Congress by illustrating the administration's actual strategy: tapering direct assistance over time while investing in Ukraine's long-term defense-industrial independence, as part of a written burden-sharing arrangement with allies to deter future Russian aggression.⁷¹

Many suggested the administration had repeatedly boxed itself in by declaring there would be “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”—signaling it would not dictate the terms of any settlement. That stance made it harder for Washington to push concrete diplomatic plans. At the time, though, it also seemed prudent not to tip the U.S. hand to Russia about where it might encourage Ukrainian concessions.

Leverage left on the table

Members and staff of Congress interviewed for this project, along with Biden administration officials who frequently briefed Congress, said the administration failed to capitalize on a potential “good cop/bad cop” strategy for influencing its Ukrainian partners. For example, when the administration's fourth Ukraine supplemental request faced mounting congressional opposition in 2023-2024, some in Congress and the executive branch believed that domestic political difficulties gave Biden an opening for a frank conversation with Zelenskyy—one that would spell out the timing and scope of U.S. security assistance and the need to consider negotiations while U.S. commitments to Ukraine remained strong. Such a conversation would also have

signaled that U.S. policy could shift if Trump, or a candidate with similar views, won the White House the following year—giving the 2023–2024 period added urgency as a closing window to lock in U.S. support.⁷²

Findings specific to the Gaza war

Initial diplomacy after October 7, 2023

The immediate days following October 7—and the profound trauma that enveloped Israel’s leadership and national security apparatus—shaped the diplomatic tone between the United States and Israel in ways that would have lasting consequences for U.S. leverage throughout the rest of the war. What some have described as Biden’s “bear hug” was, according to top Biden administration officials, an attempt to greet a traumatized ally with reassurance and empathy in October 2023. Many recalled how Biden tried to convey a carefully calibrated two-part diplomatic message, including in his speech in Tel Aviv: a sympathetic statement of support, followed by a warning.⁷³

“I am sure those horrors have tapped into so—some kind of primal feeling in Israel, just like it did and felt in the United States: Shock, pain, rage—an all-consuming rage. ... But I caution this: While you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it. After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. And while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes. ... Choices are never clear or easy for the leadership ... But it requires being deliberate. It requires asking very hard questions. It requires clarity about the objectives and an honest assessment about whether the path you are on will achieve those objectives. The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas. Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people.”⁷⁴

Many interviewees for this project accompanied the secretary of state, the president, and the secretary of defense on the initial U.S. diplomatic trips to Israel in October 2023. They broadly agreed that Israeli officials primarily heard the reassurances—the “we have your back” portion of the message. There was more uncertainty about whether the Israelis had fully absorbed the accompanying admonitions and warnings, including the clear public statements Biden made, like the one above. Some conceded that the warning to respond to October 7 cautiously could have been delivered more forcefully by U.S. officials in private during these trips. Others believed that no matter how vociferously U.S. officials conveyed the warnings, the traumatized Israeli government had no interest in internalizing the message that it needed to be careful in how it prosecuted the Gaza war.

One U.S. official noted that the miscommunication ran both ways: the United States failed—or did not want—to fully hear what Israeli officials themselves were conveying in the early days of the war. The Israelis told U.S. officials that Israel was prepared to use overwhelming force against Hamas, suggesting to the diplomats visiting after October 7 that a comparable attack on U.S. soil would have provoked a devastating and unrestrained American response. This official speculated that the Biden administration may have engaged in some wishful thinking, expecting Israel to mount a more limited response to October 7 rather than unleash a full-scale, punishing military assault.⁷⁵

Operational leverage in the months after October 7

In the view of many interviewed, the United States successfully exercised its leverage in October 2023 by dissuading Israel from opening a two-front war against Lebanon and Gaza simultaneously and restraining Israel from attacking Iran in the weeks after October 7. According to *The New York Times*, Israel was prepared to launch an attack on Hezbollah in mid-October until senior Biden administration officials

convinced it otherwise, dispatching an aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean to deter Iran (the USS Gerald R. Ford and then later, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower). Additional instances of early leverage cited by senior officials include Blinken's success pushing Israel to restore water, internet, and energy access to Gaza after those services were cut off in the immediate aftermath of October 7.⁷⁶

Many also pointed to Israel's delayed ground invasion—which did not begin until late October 2023—as a product of U.S. pressure. The administration had pushed back on Israel's initial operational plans, compelling the Israelis to return to them with a more coherent plan for how the hostages would be released and Hamas' leadership eliminated. A number of interviewees argued that the U.S. operational leverage exerted in the early months could have been stronger. The U.S. military was never tasked with developing an alternative operational design for the Gaza campaign but rather to respond to Israel's own plan. A U.S. military plan put forth may have been more effective at protecting civilians and dislodging Hamas' rule earlier.⁷⁷ According to one participant in the early discussions about Israel's operational design in Gaza:

"The interagency approach was to embrace the plan and ask how it could be executed more effectively—rather than to push back on Israel's plan. When Israel returned with a revised proposal after the United States shared some revisions, we should have written our own plan. In retrospect, we had the operational leverage in those early weeks to be more aggressive in telling Israel how we thought the campaign in Gaza should be designed."⁷⁸

One official familiar with DOD discussions with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) noted that the real mistake was not working together on a timeline for the operational plans in Gaza. Instead, there were mixed understandings among officials in Washington about the war's intended duration, although Netanyahu warned in October

2023 that it would be "long and difficult."⁷⁹

It was only in January 2024 that Netanyahu announced specific time horizons for each part of his campaign—indicating that the first stage ("aerial bombardment") had lasted three weeks; the second phase (the "massive maneuver") campaign had lasted three months; and the upcoming phase ("establishing control") would last six months.⁸⁰ And one interviewee offered:

"We were never sure exactly what was guiding predictions of how long the operations would last. Meanwhile, when I talked to mid-level IDF J5 planners [the key branch of the IDF involved in strategic planning with United States Central Command] in October 2023, one individual said to me: 'Well, there is no way the United States will let us fight in Gaza more than 3 months,' so that is why we are being vague about how long it will take."

January 2024 as a missed opportunity to shift U.S. strategy

Several officials identified a missed opportunity in December 2023 and January 2024, after the initial shock of October 7 had begun to subside and after the first major offensives in Gaza City and Khan Younis had concluded—with significant collateral damage, heavy Palestinian civilian casualties, and fewer high-value targets eliminated than anticipated.⁸¹ At that point, these officials argued, there was an opening to address Israel's pattern of tactical success with the potential for overall strategic failure. The United States should have refocused on Israel's long-term security versus the diminishing returns of continuing the war. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin attempted to articulate this message publicly at a Reagan National Defense Forum:

"So, we will continue to press Israel to protect civilians and to ensure the robust flow of humanitarian aid. First and foremost, that's the right thing to do. But it is also good strategy. ... So, the lesson is not that you can win in urban warfare by protecting civilians. The lesson is that you can only win in urban

warfare by protecting civilians. You see, in this kind of a fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population.”⁸²

Biden could have framed Austin’s public message not as criticism, but as emphasizing a strategic concern: that Israel’s current path risked producing a strategic defeat—one that would ultimately leave the country less secure. Indeed, as the internal debate intensified within the Biden administration during the winter and spring of 2024 over how much “daylight” between the United States and Israel could or should be tolerated, many officials later reflected on the missed opportunity to take the “bear hug” to its strategic endpoint. In other words, the White House could have proactively told the Israelis that the United States would continue to support them and stand by their security, but that Washington’s judgment about how best to defend Israel over the long term diverged from Israel’s. To many, this version of pressuring Israel—“the daylight”—would have been effective.⁸³

Other officials rejected the idea that a rebuke of Israel’s war conduct could rest on strategic security grounds alone. They argued that conveying American concerns—publicly and privately—about Israel’s use of overwhelming force in Gaza, its seeming disregard for civilian harm, and its inconsistent approach to humanitarian access were not merely tactical issues.⁸⁴

Throughout 2024, the White House remained wary of the perceived political costs of visibly diverging from Israel, even as its public statements increasingly voiced concern about Israel’s conduct of the war. As early as November 10, 2023, Blinken told the press that “far too many Palestinians have been killed” during Israel’s offensives. According to all officials interviewed, the White House, State Department, and Department of Defense continued to convey that message—along with repeated calls for greater humanitarian access—to Israeli officials, both privately and publicly.⁸⁵

Congressional opportunities for greater leverage

Many officials familiar with the executive branch’s congressional briefings in late 2023 reported that members of both the House and Senate were asking tough questions about Israel’s operations and strategy. Members of the armed services committees, for example, requested copies of Israel’s war plans and asked U.S. military officials whether Israel’s military objectives were achievable weeks after October 7. They also pressed on postwar governance—the “day-after” question.

To some former executive branch officials, these congressional questions could have created a diplomatic opening for the Pentagon and the White House to formally request that Israel clarify its military, strategic, and political objectives and its end state—at a minimum to satisfy key Senate committee chairs. Given such early congressional concern—concern that may have surfaced only in closed-door briefings—there was perhaps a missed opportunity for the White House to lean on Congress to convey directly to the Israeli government: “We will not continue to support you until you articulate your military and strategic end state.”⁸⁶

Congressional activism intensified in 2024, as many members began calling on the administration to withhold security assistance to Israel and condemning Israel’s violations of international humanitarian law, including its restrictive humanitarian policies.⁸⁷ Yet the administration failed to proactively enlist these senior members of Congress to pressure Israel to improve its war conduct. Congress may also have been helpful in July 2024 to put pressure on Netanyahu to agree to the Biden administration’s hostage deal that was on the table.

The Rafah case revealed available leverage

In late 2023, during the first two major campaigns of the war, in Gaza City and Khan Younis, IDF air and ground power had leveled city blocks, with overwhelming costs to civilian life and infrastructure.⁸⁸

In response, Biden told the Israeli government—publicly and privately—that the United States did not support Israel’s plan to use ground troops and air support against two Hamas battalions in Rafah, a city in southern Gaza to which more than 1.3 million Palestinians had fled from points farther north.⁸⁹ In the winter of 2024, the White House and the Department of Defense increased U.S. “operational diplomacy” with the IDF—a set of intensive, technical military-to-military conversations about how the IDF was conducting the war in Gaza.

Some interviewees concluded that a combination of stronger DOD pressure on Israeli operational planning, a delay in the Rafah operation stemming from U.S. opposition, and the president’s blunt warnings ultimately yielded a more limited Rafah operation—one that reduced the civilian harm inflicted during the offensive. Individuals involved in these talks suggested that the United States persuaded Israel to shift its initial Rafah planning toward a more scoped, limited operation. They also noted that this kind of positive pressure on operational design could and should have been applied to the earlier campaigns in Gaza City and Khan Younis in 2023. One official observed that Israel nonetheless still went into Rafah despite the president’s very public opposition to the offensive, reflecting how little the Israeli government was moved by U.S. threats and red lines.⁹⁰

There was disagreement among the interviewees about the effects of the White House’s decision to hold back a shipment of 500-pound and MK-84 2,000-pound bombs in April 2024.⁹¹ (The administration later moved forward with the shipment of 500-pound bombs.⁹²) To some, the

fact that the Rafah operation—which the Israelis delayed for a number of months due to U.S. opposition until May 6, 2024—was more careful in its treatment of civilians reflects, in part, the influence of this conditionality. They argued that this successful use of security assistance as leverage might have been scalable elsewhere.⁹³

To others, the White House kept quiet about its decisions to withhold dangerous weapons—weapons the U.S. military had itself deemed too dangerous for urban settings—thus undercutting the conditionality’s effect. In other words, by not publicly revealing the holds on weapons, the United States signaled clear ambivalence about applying conditionality at all. Withholding the 500-pound and MK-84 2,000-pound munitions from April 2024 onward may have forced Israeli government and military planners to modify their operational plans; nonetheless, any positive effect was undermined when the Israeli prime minister’s office leaked the U.S. decision a few weeks after Washington had quietly conveyed it to the Israeli government and accompanied the leak with a broadside against the White House in early May.⁹⁴

There was broad consensus among interviewees, however, that when the United States decided to withhold a defense item deemed unnecessary to the operation and/or excessively lethal, with inherent danger to civilians, it should have done so with a proactive communications strategy—explaining U.S. goals and making clear what change in Israeli behavior it was trying to induce. In this case, there was a strong view within the U.S. government that Israel should not conduct a Rafah operation at all if it would undertake the campaign in the same way as it had approached its earlier offensives, risking mass civilian harm at a time when 1.3 million Palestinians had taken refuge there. Many believed that by keeping quiet about its conditionality, the Biden White House missed an opportunity to speak more publicly about the challenges of warfare in dense urban environments like Gaza—and about the fact that the U.S. military itself has grappled with these same challenges.⁹⁵

Ultimately, the effects of any U.S. leverage exerted to limit the Rafah operation—whether through positive or negative levers—were short-lived. While the formal clearing offensive in Rafah led to fewer civilian casualties than earlier operations, many civilians fled to a new humanitarian zone outside Rafah called Al-Mawasi.⁹⁶ In the spring and summer of 2024, civilians sheltering in this zone were subject to repeated strikes, with hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths.⁹⁷ In short, while the Rafah case study illustrates that there was clearly room to influence Israel's operational plans, it is unclear whether the White House and the DOD fully deployed this leverage—especially targeting the pressure at every level of Israel's political, strategic, and operational leadership.

Security assistance as leverage: After action reflections

Except for in the two publicly noted cases discussed above,⁹⁸ the Biden administration refrained from conditioning security assistance to Israel despite growing differences in U.S.-Israeli end goals and preferred strategy, and despite U.S. disapproval of civilian harm in Gaza that intensified each month the war persisted. The question of whether to hold back other defense articles, or to create some form of conditionality, emerged across the interagency in 2024, leading to extensive internal debate. According to officials interviewed, two central arguments typically prevailed against further conditioning of security assistance.

The first concerned the balancing act facing the United States as it tried to navigate twin goals: deterring Iran and preventing a regional war, on one hand, and eroding Hamas's capabilities and securing hostage releases, on the other. Officials involved in the conditionality debates came to believe that limiting U.S. security assistance to Israel would undermine the first goal, with only uncertain benefit to the second.⁹⁹

A second argument also prevailed in these discussions, according to those involved. Drawing from the experience of mediating diffi-

cult ceasefire negotiations, officials began to see a pattern: when the United States increased the pressure it visibly levied on the Israeli government, Hamas' demands, and ultimately its intransigence, tended to intensify. In other words, officials came to believe by the spring of 2024 that publicly pressuring Israel would make Hamas less willing to strike a hostage deal, hardening its negotiating position. If ending the war and releasing the hostages ranked as the United States' top priorities, they believed, Washington needed to remain in lockstep with the Israeli government to pressure Hamas into negotiating.¹⁰⁰

Yet a few officials, on reflection, questioned their earlier assumptions behind this second argument—particularly their firm belief, throughout the first half of 2024, that a hostage deal was even achievable under the Biden administration. As one put it:

“The one thing I keep going over in my head is whether it was true that a deal was imminent. From April through August of 2024, we heard that a deal could come any minute, so we kept pushing off the decision about cutting off weapons or any other ‘tough love’ measures with the Israelis. But we were wrong—Netanyahu was never going to make a deal with us until Sinwar was killed.

“But at that point, the Israeli public was with us; they wanted the war to end. If we were not going to get a deal in the end, we might have considered cutting off some weapons and putting more pressure on Israel—standing with the people of Israel rather than their leaders. It wouldn't necessarily have changed Netanyahu's calculus, but at least it would have been a statement that we believed the war needed to end—that continuing it was no longer achieving strategic gains worth the cost of deep civilian harm to Palestinians.”¹⁰¹

Officials interviewed for this project held a range of views on various “what if” scenarios. For example, what if applying conditions on U.S.-

provided security assistance, including possibly holding back only certain offensive weapons, could have yielded leverage to achieve at least three U.S. goals: greater influence over Israel's operational military plan; input into postwar governance arrangements for Gaza; and influence over Israel's conduct in allowing humanitarian aid and limiting Palestinian civilian casualties?

To some, holding back some weapons could have been effective, especially if the United States had applied this leverage proactively. At the start of the war planning deliberations between Israel and the United States, discussion of security assistance could have been more closely tied to debates about operational design and campaign planning, with those discussions routed through Joint Staff J5 (strategy and planning) channels with military planners in Israel. Had defense officials requested Israel's campaign plan and insisted—at the operational level—that new purchases and program approvals be tied to demonstrated operational requirements, this could have opened a legitimate and productive form of conditionality: one that prompted substantive discussions about how the war was being prosecuted and what the IDF actually needed versus what it wanted. If the United States had concerns about the use of certain weapon systems in dense urban environments, the proactive conversation could have addressed the operational plan directly.

Many officials came to believe that because all of the policy discussions were confined to a small inner circle of mostly White House officials, there were few opportunities to introduce and sustain more technical, structured forms of accountability from Israel to its closest ally and security provider. This overall observation was repeated by many interviewees: that the closed nature of decisionmaking—confined to a few individuals—excluded more creative, technical ideas from emerging, ideas that could have influenced Israel to conduct the war differently.¹⁰²

One official offered one such idea:

“From the beginning, we could have simply created a ‘go list’ of security items acceptable to provide under these conditions. Rather than assuming we could change behavior through leveraged conditionality, we should have made this a matter of unilateral U.S. policy—the United States will not provide weapons to partners that could cause mass civilian harm.”¹⁰³

Others disagreed that this approach would have succeeded, noting that the prime minister's office was skilled at reframing any substantive discussion of security assistance conditions, delays, or tough questions as “Biden betraying Israel in its hour of need.”¹⁰⁴ To these officials, the political costs of the prime minister attacking the Biden administration would be too high to bear.

To some, Washington forfeited its leverage by failing to enforce existing legislative and congressional mandates that linked the provision of defense transfers to U.S. partners to these partners' compliance with various international humanitarian laws. For instance, Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act prohibits security assistance or defense sales to partner governments restricting the delivery of U.S. humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁵ The Biden administration was deeply concerned about Israel's restrictions on humanitarian access, especially to northern Gaza in August–November 2024.¹⁰⁶ However, one interviewee noted that holding Section 620I out in abeyance as a looming threat—even if it was never imposed—produced some meaningful improvements in Israel's approach to humanitarian distribution in Gaza during the last months of Biden's presidency.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, many officials criticized the State Department's unwillingness to apply the Leahy Law, which bars assistance to foreign military units that have committed gross human rights violations without undertaking meaningful accountability processes, to the many IDF units accused of violating humanitarian law either in

Gaza or with Hamas detainees.¹⁰⁸ These officials argued that simply applying U.S. laws on the books would have signaled to Israel that it was not an “exceptional” or exempted partner.

As discussed above, many of the calls for the Biden administration to condition security assistance to Israel on Israel’s change of policy, strategy, and conduct during the war came from members of Congress. In one such instance, the White House reacted to congressional concerns by promising members of Congress that it would issue National Security Memorandum 20 (NSM 20) from the White House. The memorandum asked for assurances that 11 U.S. security partners receiving arms transfers—including, relevantly, Israel—were taking all possible measures to uphold international humanitarian law.¹⁰⁹ NSM 20 mandated that if the secretaries of state and defense could not reliably certify the credibility and reliability of the security partner’s written assurances, they must recommend remedial measures, including the potential suspension of transfers.

According to those involved with the NSM 20 discussions within the interagency, however, the administration never utilized the leverage it offered.¹¹⁰ When the Biden administration announced that the Israeli government’s reassurances were credible—despite abundant information suggesting otherwise—this chosen approach to the NSM 20 process ended up significantly eroding the Biden administration’s credibility in the eyes of its congressional and outside critics.¹¹¹ It also might have eroded the United States’ diplomatic leverage with the Israeli government.¹¹²

Where leverage was left on the table

Beyond the differing views of how the Biden administration underutilized the leverage offered by U.S. security assistance, officials also failed to fully employ the broader levers of statecraft. Public diplomacy was one prominent underutilized tool. Some interviewees argued that the White House’s messaging in particular did not offer enough

sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza, nor an affirmation of their rights. Others argued that the public messages across the interagency should have explained with greater detail why the United States was supporting Israel, and why the United States saw Iran, its regional proxies, and their war against Israel as a national security threat.

Still some other officials thought that another source of untapped leverage was the United States’ ability to marshal political support at the United Nations. In 2023, and then through most of 2024, Washington abstained or rejected a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions with objectionable language, either because it called for an immediate ceasefire without release of the hostages or, in one case, failed to call out Hamas for its crimes.¹¹³ To some officials, rather than reflexively support Israel at the United Nations, U.S. officials could have creatively deployed U.N. resolutions and actors to persuade Israel, Hamas, and other regional players.

Aside from public and private statements about civilian protection and limiting civilian casualties, the United States did not apply the same intense tactical pressure on Israel regarding civilian casualties as it did on humanitarian access. Rather than pressing deeper into the operational and tactical questions—why casualties were so high, and what Israel needed to change in its operations or rules of engagement—Washington repeatedly stated only that too many civilians were being killed and too much civilian was being infrastructure destroyed.¹¹⁴ While the capabilities of the security partner recipients differed, DOD and State had begun a purposeful training and engagement effort on the laws of armed conflict with Saudi Arabia during the Yemen war at the end of the Obama administration, in 2015–2016.¹¹⁵ While these types of approaches may not have worked, there was a missed opportunity to engage career mid-level experts to solicit their ideas and expertise. Neglecting these “technical” diplomatic channels—while keeping all sensitive discussions of civilian harm at the highest levels—may have left persuasive, nonpolitical sources of U.S. leverage on the table.

Where leverage was used, but perhaps ineffectively

The Biden administration spent significant resources and time trying to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.¹¹⁶ Although everyone from the president on down in the administration was focused on improving humanitarian access, according to many interviewed, the types of leverage deployed missed their mark, and a poor interagency process undermined their effect. Some former State Department officials reflected that humanitarian access should never have become a negotiating concession for Israel. From the beginning, the United States should have put down parameters—certain immutable requirements for humanitarian aid—rather than allow the topic to become a source of leverage for Hamas to demand and Israel to deny during repeated rounds of negotiations. Others argued that rather than fixating on the number of trucks carrying humanitarian aid and other goods that arrived in Gaza each day, the United States should have invested earlier in building new systems to ensure aid reached the right places.¹¹⁷

The focus on humanitarian access, and how to pressure Israel to lift its restrictions, consumed enormous attention. However, many U.S. efforts failed to significantly change Israeli policy, with a few exceptions: in April 2024, Biden placed an angry, heated call to Netanyahu after humanitarian workers with the World Central Kitchen were killed. The president's intervention improved the humanitarian situation on the ground within hours.¹¹⁸ In addition, the U.S. secretaries of state and defense sent a letter to Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer in October 2024 describing unacceptable obstacles to humanitarian delivery in detail.¹¹⁹ As one official put it:

“What we should have learned from the presidential call in April 2024 and the public letter in October 2024 was that we could spend hundreds of hours on lower-level diplomacy haggling over truck counts at the border, but we were more likely to see action

from the Government of Israel when we laid out our concerns directly and publicly at the highest level, with specific details of what was lacking and what needed to change. The lesson was not therefore to throw up our hands and conclude that only Joe Biden could move the Israelis, but rather that our pressure at all levels of the interagency had to be intricately connected with the President's pressures—but this type of coordination rarely occurred.”¹²⁰

In June and July 2024, as discussed above, many hoped that an imminent hostage deal or ceasefire would be the best way to address Washington's concerns about the Gaza humanitarian crisis. Some officials acknowledged being caught off guard by the rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Gaza by September 2024. To many, there were significant process failures within the U.S. government, such that “everyone and no one was accountable for pressuring Israel to let in humanitarian aid.”¹²¹ Another official reflected: “It's not that humanitarian issues in Gaza were not front and center. They were. It is that everything broken about the interagency process when it came to the Gaza war prevented us from achieving results that reflected the extent of our efforts.”¹²²

Recommendations for future policy-makers approaching partners' wars

1. Agree with the partner on desired political goals at the outset. In wars fought by U.S. security partners, the United States must reach agreement with them on shared goals and the desired postwar end state at the very start of the conflict—however difficult, traumatic, and uncertain that initial period may be. Across the Yemen, Ukraine, and Gaza cases, the communication between the United States and its partner

regarding these big-picture, forward-looking political and policy goals locked in within the first few weeks, creating a path dependence that shaped the relationship and partner discussions for years. In each of these partner wars, subsequent political disagreements became increasingly difficult to resolve precisely because no agreement on shared goals had been established at the outset. In the Gaza case, many officials argued that demanding a “day-after” strategy early on would have materially improved U.S. influence over the course of the war.

One idea suggested by a participant in this project is for the United States to establish a “security contract” or memorandum of understanding at the outset—a written agreement on the terms of U.S. support, including war aims and definitions of success—to be reviewed every three to six months. Something written on paper could also help organize the U.S. interagency internally.

Part of the challenge is that surprises will abound as a conflict’s trajectory evolves. Many interviewees noted that Ukraine exceeded U.S. expectations on the battlefield in the war’s first months, heightening Ukraine’s sense of autonomy from U.S. support and making U.S. officials more reticent to impose conditions or demands. Some within the U.S. government believed the United States was well positioned to limit Ukraine’s possible end goals, precisely because Washington had so grossly underestimated Ukraine’s military capabilities at the start of the war. Yet because of this lock-in effect, when Ukraine’s battlefield performance later faltered, U.S. officials did not adjust the dynamic.

The broader lesson, from the U.S. side, is that confusion about end states tends to emerge over time when differences in threat perception between the United States and its partner are not made explicit. Where does support for the partner rank among overall U.S. national security priorities? What threats is the United States willing to live with that its partner is not? The United States must be brutally honest with its partners about its answers to these questions.

2. U.S. leverage over partners is a diminishing good. While U.S. leverage with its partners may seem to be in short supply at the start of the war, diplomats and officials should assume they will have even less pull with a partner in the future. Most security partners are hesitant to concede when they perceive themselves to be winning, hoping their negotiating position will improve over time. Yet wars become harder to end the longer they endure. The United States must recognize that pressuring its partners to end wars will get harder, not easier, as time passes and the partner grows better able to resist U.S. pressure.

Today, some Biden administration officials, watching Trump’s difficulties in ending the war in Ukraine, have concluded that Russia’s continued intransigence—even when Trump is offering an unfair, pro-Russian deal—further proves that earlier, more balanced Biden-era negotiation efforts would have failed. This conclusion rests on faulty logic: Russia’s decisionmaking today differs from whatever its calculations may have been at the start of the war, as Moscow’s views have been shaped by the events of the intervening years. Over that time, the credibility of U.S. commitments has diminished, in part because of the very public congressional debates about security assistance in 2023 and 2024, which revealed the limits of U.S. willingness to commit indefinitely to Ukraine’s defense. To some extent before and then to a greater extent after Trump became president, Russia has watched as the United States voiced concerns about Zelenskyy’s government. This daylight between the United States and Ukraine has likely emboldened those in Moscow who want to hold out for Ukraine’s defeat.

3. Establish a proactive, conditional approach to U.S. material support before legal and moral concerns arise. In wars where security partners are doing the bulk of the fighting without U.S. boots on the ground, concerns about partners’ operational conduct are inevitable. Because these concerns often carry negative reputational consequences—ethical or otherwise—for the United States, pressure ultimately builds to hold

back security, intelligence, and other assistance that might be enabling partners to wage war in ways that fall short of U.S. principles and expectations. Rather than raising these concerns with a partner only after troubling battlefield conduct emerges, it is critical that this discussion occurs from the outset.

A participant in this project suggested that the United States form a standing committee of inter-agency U.S. and partner officials to review security assistance, intelligence sharing, and other forms of material support periodically and consistently against benchmarks such as humanitarian access and compliance with the laws of armed conflict, in keeping with the many U.S. laws that provide guardrails on these issues. Such a mechanism would be established before concerns materialize, not in response to them. The group would include lawyers, regional experts, military planners, and security assistance experts familiar with the relevant battlefield dynamics and the technical aspects of operational design—people able to reach agreement and make decisions at a level removed from senior political leadership. This standing committee would then coordinate, inform, and shape senior-level communications to maximize the effectiveness of U.S. leverage.

4. Do not be deterred by a partner's (perceived) political salience and support within U.S. domestic politics.

The Biden administration at times may have overestimated the degree of congressional and U.S. public support for the Gaza war and continued security assistance to Ukraine—thus wrongly perceiving the White House's decisionmaking space as narrower than it may have been. While both Israel and Ukraine had strong sway within U.S. domestic politics, the Biden administration should have stood firmer, resisting the “reverse leverage” that both countries and their leaders were adept at wielding. At times, the Biden White House let its security partners influence its decisionmaking, rather than the other way around.

To soften the political blow of distancing the United States from popular security partners—particularly when those partners attempt to use Congress to shame or pressure the executive branch—future administrations should strategically deploy congressional allies as direct diplomatic interlocutors. As members of Congress grew increasingly frustrated with Israel's conduct in Gaza, the Biden administration could have sent these members to convey their concerns directly to the Netanyahu government, deploying the full weight of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus as leverage.

5. Maintain back-channel communication with shared adversaries, applying pressure through regional partners.

In security partnership wars, the United States tends to interpret its role as influencing and strategizing primarily with its partner and the partner's broader alliance network. Meanwhile, the United States must also develop ways to influence the adversary. A more active and consistent U.S. back channel to Russia—on issues beyond risk management—arguably should have been established earlier in the conflict. The United States could have engaged with Russia in ways that did not betray its Ukrainian partners. Similarly, rather than delegating to Qatar (and, on occasion, Turkey) the responsibility of pressuring Hamas, the United States should have considered engaging Hamas directly, as the Trump administration later did in 2025. The Biden administration focused so intensively on Israel that it often missed opportunities to pressure Qatar and Turkey more forcefully to bring Hamas to the negotiating table.

6. Recognize that a tightly managed inter-agency can be a source of leverage over a partner, while multiple, uncoordinated channels with partners can undermine U.S. leverage.

Confusion within senior levels of the U.S. government about end goals in Ukraine derived in part from interagency disagreement and debate. Senior U.S. officials assumed that critical conversations had taken place with their partners—whether or not they had—and held differing assessments of whether the Ukrainians

fully understood U.S. strategy and policy, including, for example, whether the goal of the 2022 and 2023 counteroffensives was to position Ukraine for peace talks. Incoherence within the U.S. system—both vertically and horizontally—compounds the challenge of maintaining a clear and consistent message to partners.

When there are serious policy differences across the interagency, as there were in the cases discussed above, keeping decisionmaking confined to a small, closed set of officials will be appealing. The Biden White House kept the inner circle small and closed on the Gaza war (and other issues), in part due to concerns about leaks. However, this approach had the direct negative effect of excluding multiple sources of potential leverage. Sanctions, public diplomacy, military training programs, and other levers of statecraft cannot be used in concert to pressure a partner, positively or negatively, if only a small group of generalists close to the president is making just-in-time decisions without the benefit of technical expertise.

When disagreements arise within the interagency, however bitter, the White House is best served by facing them head-on, making clear the president's direction—even if some officials are unhappy with it. When it comes to communicating with its security partners, the United States must consider both its internal and external communication by the president and his top advisors as key levers of statecraft—and assume the hardest messages to partners will need to be made through these channels. Yet in addition to very senior-level diplomats, national security officials, and cabinet officials, there are dozens of other sub-cabinet officials who can help add greater expertise and technical sophistication to the message. An organized national security process ensures that every element of the interagency, including operational components, delivers the same message to the partner and acts in ways that reflect the overall strategy. This becomes especially important as wars persist longer than anticipated, since individual interagency bureaucracies are likely to develop their own

approaches to partner management. The siloing of these relationships with a U.S. security partner will undermine overall U.S. influence.

7. If a decision is made to condition security assistance to influence a partner's behavior, it must be embraced fully and transparently, backed by a proactive communications strategy. Quiet, opaque, or half-hearted coercive conditionality is counterproductive. Moreover, a security partner needs clarity about the goal posts to understand what change of behavior or practice will unlock the conditional holds.

There was confusion, in both Israel and the United States, about whether and how the Biden administration was deploying security assistance conditionality toward Israel—due in part to a lack of clarity over whether delays in moving defense items through the bureaucratic process were intentional or simply the product of an inherently slow process. (The United States was slower than Israel or Ukraine would have liked in routine security assistance processing, but according to those interviewed, the delays were unintentional; simultaneously supporting and expediting tens of billions of dollars in weapons systems to both Israel and Ukraine produced unanticipated bottlenecks.) However, the ambiguity surrounding the U.S. decision to withhold 2,000-pound bombs from Israel in 2024 fed into a broader Israeli government narrative that the United States was intentionally slow-rolling security assistance—deepening mistrust between the two partners and leaving the Biden administration on the defensive, as if it had to keep proving the depth of its commitment.

The United States could have taken a more overt, direct, and proactive approach to conditionality from the outset of the war. Moreover, while the hold on the 2,000-pound bombs initially offered real promise as leverage, its impact was diminished when Israel seized the initiative to disclose the decision first—framing it as an attack by the White House.

8. Do not overestimate the effectiveness of diplomatic messaging within a partner's bureaucracy. Even when U.S. systems are internally coherent, a partner's bureaucratic systems during wartime are often fragmented and dysfunctional. In this environment, U.S. officials must work overtime to ensure their messages are received, processed, and acted upon—and, where necessary, push partners to build the internal coordination mechanisms needed to make that possible.

In the Gaza case, U.S. efforts to prompt Israel to improve humanitarian access often faltered when officials in Washington assumed that messages sent through top-level political channels were being effectively relayed across the Israeli government. In practice, messages were flowing neither up nor down as intended across the Israeli government. The situation improved markedly after Biden's April 2024 call to Netanyahu, and again when Blinken and Austin released a public letter detailing humanitarian concerns in October 2024. The letter's "name-and-shame" dimension contributed to its effectiveness, as did the simple fact of consolidating, in one public document, detailed humanitarian expectations paired with an emphasis on accountability for outcomes—not merely outputs, such as the number of humanitarian aid trucks crossing the border.

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About the author

Dafna H. Rand serves as a senior fellow at Brookings and a Robert E. Wilhelm Fellow at MIT's Center for International Studies. Her research examines a range of international security and governance questions—focusing on the Middle East, the threat of rising authoritarianism, the future of U.S. foreign aid, and the future configuration of multilateral organizations, including regional organizations and their capacity to prevent conflict. Rand has served over the past 20 years in the U.S. Senate, on the National Security Council, and at the State Department, where her last two posts were director of foreign assistance and assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor.

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