



Biden Threatens to Stop Arms Shipments to Israel, Harming Both Countries

Matt Kenney
Vice President for Government Affairs

Zac Schildcrout
Policy Analyst

Yoni Tobin
Policy Analyst

In an unprecedented move to undermine a vital U.S. partner, President Joe Biden told CNN's Erin Burnett in a clip that aired May 8 that if Israel goes into Rafah, beyond its current operations, the United States will [not provide](#) offensive weapons to Israel such as bombs and artillery shells. And, according to earlier reports, the Biden administration has already paused certain U.S. arms shipments to Israel in order to [send a message](#) of U.S. disapproval of Israel's plan to conduct major combat operations in Rafah due to the perceived risk to civilians.

Eliminating Hamas's last brigade in Rafah, however, is critical to defeating Hamas and enabling aid to flow into Gaza. Any U.S. attempts to delay or prevent such an operation will only strengthen Hamas and prolong the suffering of civilians. Indeed, the administration has, ironically, suspended the delivery of the very precision-guided munitions (PGMs) that are critical to the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) ability to hit terrorist targets accurately while mitigating the risk to civilians. Moreover, by so publicly denying a partner's attempts to defend itself, President Biden is emboldening U.S. adversaries and jeopardizing regional stability. In particular, a nuclear Iran and/or a dangerous escalation by Hezbollah grow more likely if these adversaries believe that Israel lacks sufficient munitions and U.S. support to confront them.

The United States must resume the shipment of all weapons to Israel or risk endangering its close partner while significantly undermining its own strategic interests in the Middle East.

What Happened?

- On May 8, President Biden [told](#) CNN's Erin Burnett, "civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of [U.S.-supplied] bombs and other ways which they go after population centers. I made it clear that if they go into Rafah ... I'm not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities, to deal with the problem."
 - » Biden also stated, "it's just wrong. We're not going to supply [Israel] the weapons, the artillery shells ... they're not going to get our support if in fact they go [into] these population centers."
 - » Asked if ongoing limited IDF operations in eastern Rafah constitute Israel going into Rafah, Biden responded, "they haven't gone into the population centers. What they did was right on the border."
- On May 6, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that the Biden administration "has delayed the sale of thousands of precision weapons to Israel."

- » According to the article, “since March, the Biden administration also hasn’t advanced the congressional notification process on another \$1 billion in weapons deals for Israel that include tank ammunition, military vehicles and mortar rounds, U.S. officials said.”
 - The piece noted that “those potential deals included the transfer of \$700 million in 120 mm tank ammunition, \$500 million in tactical vehicles and less than \$100 million in 120 mm mortar rounds,” according to U.S. officials cited in the report.
- On May 7, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that “President Biden paused an arms shipment to Israel last week to prevent the U.S.-made weapons from being used in a long-threatened assault on the city of Rafah, administration officials said on Tuesday night,” including 1,800 2,000-pound bombs and 1,700 500-pound bombs, and “the administration is reviewing whether to hold back future transfers, including guidance kits that convert so-called dumb bombs into precision-guided munitions.”
- On May 7, *Politico* [reported](#) that “the Biden administration is holding up shipments of two types of Boeing-made precision bombs to send a political message to Israel, according to a U.S. official and six other people with knowledge of the deliberations.”
 - » The article stated that the precision munitions were “ready to be shipped to Israel when word of the hold came down,” according to a senior congressional aide and two other sources. According to a defense industry official, the Biden administration told Boeing to halt the shipment for “political reasons.”
 - » The article also says, citing an administration official, that the Biden administration is “essentially taking action through inaction — holding off on approvals and other aspects of the weapons transfer process — to send a message to Israel.”
- On May 8, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [said](#) to the Senate Appropriations Committee’s defense subpanel, “we’re going to continue to do what’s necessary to ensure that Israel has the means to defend itself,” though “we are currently reviewing some near-term security assistance shipments in the context of unfolding events in Rafah.”
 - » Secretary Austin also testified that “we’ve been very clear ... that Israel shouldn’t launch a major attack into Rafah without accounting for and protecting the civilians that are in that battlespace ... and again as we have assessed the situation, we have paused one shipment of high-payload munitions.”

Why Is It Important?

- The Biden administration’s suspension of certain arms shipments to Israel, and threat to suspend all offensive weapons, comes at a particularly inopportune time, with Israel positioned to initiate major combat operations against Hamas’s last standing brigade in Rafah after beginning evacuations of civilians from the combat zones.
 - » Ironically, among the weapons whose shipments have been halted are precision-guided munitions—including Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) tailkits, and Small Diameter Bombs—that enable Israel’s precision targeting to mitigate civilian harm.
 - » Withholding critical munitions from Israel, for any amount of time, is counterproductive to U.S. interests as well as those of Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Weapons the United States is Reportedly Withholding From Israel		JINSA
Weapon System	Quantity or Value Withheld	Source
120 mm tank ammunition	\$700 million	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>
120 mm mortar rounds	~\$100 million	
Tactical vehicles	\$500 million	
500-pound bombs	1,700	<i>New York Times</i>
2,000-pound bombs	1,800	
Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs)	Unknown	<i>Politico</i>
Small Diameter Bombs	Unknown	

- Though administration officials have cited professed concern for the well-being of Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip, their decision to suspend critical weapons deliveries to Israel will prove counter-productive—only prolonging the conflict and exacerbating humanitarian suffering.
 - » There is widespread public, political, and military agreement in Israel about the necessity of a ground incursion in Rafah in order to dismantle the remaining Hamas battalions there. The operation will likely progress with or without U.S. weapons.
 - » However, IDF operations in Rafah are likely to be more effective, efficient, and precise with U.S.-supplied PGMs—all factors contributing to a reduction in risk to civilians.
 - The IDF’s use of PGMs enable it to, as JINSA’s President and CEO Michael Makovsky and two members of Congress have [written](#), “strike only its intended target with as little collateral damage as possible.”
 - » Israel failing to receive the armaments it needs to prosecute the war effectively is likely only to protract warfighting unnecessarily and provide further opportunities for Iranian-backed terrorist groups to [jeopardize](#) Palestinians’ safety.
 - Hamas has cynically exploited Israel’s humanitarian measures in Rafah to embed itself among civilians and launch rocket attacks.
 - On May 5, Hamas operatives [fired](#) rockets and mortars from Rafah at the Kerem Shalom border crossing, killing several IDF soldiers. Kerem Shalom is one of the main arteries through which humanitarian aid currently enters Gaza, demonstrating Hamas’s indifference to Gaza’s civilians.
 - » The only alternative to an IDF ground incursion into Rafah is the survival—and therefore victory—of Hamas.
- Suspending delivery of munitions, particularly PGMs, will also have strategic repercussions throughout the Middle East, far beyond Gaza—particularly in Iran and Hezbollah.

- » The IDF's precision ability to target and strike targets in Lebanon, Syria, and perhaps even Iran, has been a significant factor in deterring increased Iranian and Hezbollah aggression since October 7. So, too, has been President Joe Biden's "ironclad" commitment to Israel's security.
- » The decision by the Biden administration to suspend arms deliveries, however, threatens both these legs of deterrence.
 - If Iran and Hezbollah believe that Israel lacks, or is running low, on munitions to use in targeting its fighters, commanders, weapons depots, and other infrastructure, they might grow emboldened to escalate attacks against Israel or even further advance Iran's nuclear program.
 - Similarly, if "ironclad" U.S. support for Israel is seen as melting into thin air, that will encourage these adversaries to believe that they can attack Israel with impunity.
- U.S. leaders' apparent approach of trying to compel Israel to forego a major operation in Rafah is self-defeating. An Israeli victory over Hamas, including its Rafah-based battalions, is a vital U.S. strategic interest.
 - » As JINSA has noted, Israel's war against Hamas is merely one aspect of a broader, highly consequential geopolitical conflict between Iran, its proxies, and its Russian and Chinese backers, and the United States and its partners and allies.
 - JINSA's Charles & Randi Wax Senior Fellow John Hannah [stated](#) in a recent JINSA webinar, "this, ultimately, is a war ... between two major alliances. This is an Iranian alliance fighting to determine the future order of the Middle East, and an American alliance. And behind the Iranian alliance [are] the Russians and the Chinese."
 - Hannah also noted that "Israel's victory over Hamas will be a victory over this Iranian alliance ... Israel is, in fact, fighting on the front lines for America."
 - » Iran's proxies have [directly attacked](#) U.S. forces and personnel roughly [200 times](#) since October, including one incident in which an Iran-backed terrorist organization killed three U.S. servicemembers stationed in Jordan with an [Iranian-made](#) drone.
 - » Another key U.S. interest, stability in the Middle East, also relies on Israeli military strength. The United States and Israel's interwoven ability to counter and credibly deter the gamut of Iranian proxies, and Iran itself, is vital to regional stability.
 - As JINSA's Distinguished Fellow IDF MG (ret.) Amikam Norkin [said](#) recently, "strong Israeli capabilities mean [a] stable Middle East."
- Feeding narratives of growing daylight between the United States and Israel, particularly over Israel's defense needs and the U.S. role in enabling them, only emboldens Tehran and Hamas's political leadership operating abroad in Qatar, and potentially risks the safety of U.S. hostages.
 - » Measures that embolden Hamas, such as holding back weapon shipments to Israel, only embolden Hamas to hold out or make more maximalist demands in hostage and cease-fire negotiations, believing that U.S. pressure will force Israel to cave.
 - » In addition, given their longstanding close bilateral relationship, impressions that the United States is any way curtailing military aid to Israel sends green-light signals to adversaries across the world.
 - As Makovsky has [noted](#), U.S. allies and adversaries alike "look at the bilateral U.S.-Israel relationship as an important barometer for how America stands by its friends."

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should immediately lift all holds it has placed on weapons shipments to Israel and forego any future restrictions of military aid.
- The United States should work to rapidly provide Israel with any munitions Israel has requested to successfully prosecute its war against Hamas and deter and counter other Iran-backed threats, including Hezbollah, and Iran itself.
- U.S. leaders should publicly commit to a “[no daylight](#)” strategy of supporting Israel’s efforts to defend itself against Iranian-backed aggression and eliminate Hamas’s military capabilities.