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Opinion – America's Strategic Maneuver on Gaza at the United Nations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/12/23/opinion-americas-strategic-maneuver-on-gaza-at-the-united-nations/>

ALI BALCI, DEC 23 2023

As a staunch supporter of Israel, the US has often risked its international reputation to defend Israel's unlawful occupation of Palestinian territories and alleged war crimes against civilians. Washington has exercised its veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on draft resolutions concerning Israel a total of 46 times since the early 1970s. These drafts sought to condemn Israel's actions, such as the invasion of southern Lebanon and the annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. They also aimed to lay a framework for peace in the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict, including appeals for self-determination and Palestinian statehood, calls for Israel to adhere to international law, and denunciations of the displacement of Palestinians or the construction of settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. It was a rarity for the US to refrain from using its veto power, allowing resolutions critical of Israel to pass. For instance, in late December 2016, Arab countries prepared a draft resolution urging Israel to halt settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This draft was timely as the Obama administration had indicated that the United States would not use its veto and would instead abstain, allowing the proposal to pass in the UNSC as its term neared its end. On December 23, 2016, with the US abstention, the UNSC adopted the resolution (S/RES/2334) with 14 members voting in favor, demanding an end to Israeli settlement building in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Unlike Obama, Biden's personal lifelong attachment to the Jewish state is far stronger. Biden often references his 1973 encounter with Prime Minister Golda Meir as a defining moment that solidified his view of Israel as essential for Jewish survival. Since the onset of the Gaza war, the Biden administration has leveraged the US's influential position in international institutions to unwaveringly support Israel. The US exercised its veto power twice in the UN Security Council to block resolutions calling for a ceasefire, on October 18 and December 8, respectively. In the UN General Assembly, Washington cast no vote on resolutions critical of Israel, despite their extremely broad international support. However, the Biden administration altered its stance on December 22, 2023, despite intense pressure from Israel to maintain its previously unconditional support. During the vote on the draft resolution authored by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States abstained, which contributed to the adoption of the resolution with 13 votes in favor (S/RES/2720). How can we explain this shift in the US government's stance within the most critical international body, the UN Security Council? I propose that four key dynamics contributed to this change: global isolation, distancing among allies, domestic pressure, and compromises in the wording of the draft resolution. The compromise on wording, unlike the first three factors, diminishes the significance of this policy shift.

On December 12, 2023, the UN General Assembly called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. In this emergency vote, 153 out of the 193 member states backed the resolution, with only 10, including the US and Israel, voting against, and 23 abstaining. This contrasts with a previous General Assembly vote on a similar issue, which resulted in 120 votes in favor, 14 against, and 45 abstentions on October 27. There was an increased consensus on the need to halt Israel's relentless attacks on Gaza. Additionally, statements from the Global South further isolated the US's stance towards Israel. The scale of disillusionment in the Global South has grown over the US's perceived hypocrisy in condemning Russian war crimes in Ukraine, while finding excuses to justify the large-scale killings of Palestinians. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, for example, accused "countries that promote democracy and human rights" of being hypocritical in dealing with "humanitarian issues".

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As a result, the US faced a situation similar to what Russia experienced over a year ago. On October 12, 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution denouncing the referendums held in the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, and their subsequent annexation by Russia, as invalid and illegal under international law. The resolution was adopted with 143 countries voting in favor, 5 against, and 35 abstaining, leading to Russia's widespread isolation.

The increasing isolation of the United States from the Global South has been further solidified by shifting positions among its traditional allies. Other traditional US allies, including Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Japan, and Australia, altered their stance from abstention to support in two UN General Assembly resolutions. Remaining in the abstention camp in the General Assembly, the United Kingdom moved from abstention to a vote in favor of the UNSC draft resolution proposed by the UAE. On December 16, 2023, the UK Foreign Secretary, alongside German Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock, penned a joint article calling for a "sustainable" ceasefire in the Gaza conflict and highlighting the excessive civilian casualties caused by Israel. This marked a significant shift in the UK government's tone. Therefore, the UK, the key global partner of the US, signaled to vote in favor of the proposed resolution. Considering that the UK had abstained during both US vetoes on October 18 and December 8, this shift in the UK's vote could isolate the US further, opposing 14 affirmative votes, potentially damaging its international reputation even more.

As the war in Gaza enters its second month, leading to thousands of Palestinian children and women's deaths, the US government has found itself increasingly divided. In mid-November, twenty-four Democratic members of Congress, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, and Betty McCollum of Minnesota, urged President Joe Biden to end the "grave violations of children's rights" by advocating for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. In a letter to the President, the representatives expressed deep concern about the escalating conflict in Gaza, particularly the severe impact on children. Governing institutions have shown division in their approach to the war in Gaza, with the White House adopting a more pro-Israel stance than the State Department. Even within the White House, a split has emerged between Biden's senior, long-time aides and a cadre of younger staff members of diverse backgrounds, the latter advocating for a more balanced position. A New York Times/Siena College poll published on December 19, 2023, found that 57 percent of Americans disapproved of the US government's handling of the war. Notably, among voters aged 18 to 29—a traditionally heavily Democratic demographic—nearly three-quarters disapprove of the Biden administration's approach to the conflict in Gaza.

When initially distributed to the members of the UN Security Council on December 8, the draft resolution, penned by the United Arab Emirates, contained language that was significantly more critical of Israel. It required "all parties involved in the conflict" to adhere to international law and protect civilian lives. The draft called for "an urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities," insisted on unimpeded "flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza through land, sea, and air," and assigned the UN the responsibility of monitoring "all aid that enters through these routes." To avoid a US veto, the resolution's authors delayed the voting session multiple times, refining the draft's language during these postponements. The US and its allies required the inclusion of a demand for the "immediate and unconditional release of all hostages." The stipulations for UN aid monitoring and the "urgent" halt of hostilities were two significant hurdles to the US agreeing to compromise on its veto power.

The initial draft resolution called for a definitive end to the hostilities, but subsequent versions softened this language to a "suspension" of fighting. Ultimately, the final draft appealed to the involved parties to "create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities." This phrasing allows for broad interpretation and does not compel Israel to cease its military actions in Gaza. Consequently, Russia proposed an amendment to the council just before the voting, aiming to revert the wording to "immediate cessation of hostilities." The US vetoed this proposal. Considering that Resolution 2720 did not call for a suspension of hostilities, which the US and Israel opposed, it is debatable whether the US move from a veto to an abstention constitutes a concession. Through diplomatic negotiations, the US managed to satisfy its key ally by omitting the demand for a cessation of hostilities from the draft while simultaneously avoiding the negative implications of another veto.

By agreeing to modify the wording of the draft resolutions, the authors of the resolution alleviated immediate external and domestic pressures on the US. Therefore, Resolution 2720 does not signify a surrender by the US but rather a

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strategic maneuver to preserve its global reputation.

About the author:

Ali Balci is Professor of International Relations in Sakarya University, Turkey. He obtained his MA and PhD degrees from the Department of International Relations at Sakarya University. He is the author of *Turkey's Foreign Policy: Principles, Actors, Practices* [in Turkish] (Alfa, 2021), *The PKK-Kurdistan's Workers Party's Regional Politics During and After the Cold War* (Palgrave, 2017), and others. He is now working on Ottoman international order, UN Security Council and diplomatic visits of Middle Eastern leaders.