



[When Members of Congress Back a Foreign Government Against Their Own President](#)

This week, President Biden declared that the United States would stop supplying Israel with bombs and other munitions if it proceeds with launching a military offensive into the southern Gaza city of Rafah. The decision comes as Israeli officials appear defiant to initiate an assault, despite repeated warnings not to do so from the U.S. and the international community at-large due to the fact that around 1.5 million Palestinian civilians have sought refuge there in the densely-packed city. In Biden's interview during which he made the remarks, the president also acknowledged that U.S. weapons had been used by Israel to kill civilians in Gaza, and stated that he had told Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that Israel would not receive U.S. support if they entered the population centers in Rafah. As a result of growing criticism regarding American weapons sales to Israel, the Biden administration had recently already put a weapons shipment which included several thousand bombs on hold over concern about Israel's plans to attack Rafah.

In the aftermath of Biden's announcement about the potential further halt in weapons shipments, human rights activists and some lawmakers expressed their support. U.S. Representative Mark Pocan (D-WI) tweeted "No offensive weapons in Rafah. Good!" while pointing to the fact that the decision could save tens of thousands of innocent civilian lives. U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) commented that the move "makes clear that the United States will not be complicit in this suffering and follows through on repeated warnings to the Netanyahu government" and U.S. Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) called the decision "wise" adding that "weapons that are likely to lead to more civilian casualties are something it's time to pause."

Meanwhile, on the other hand, various Republicans and pro-Israel Democrats criticized Biden's pledge. All of this despite the fact that humanitarian officials, lawyers, and other impartial experts have continued to document how Israel has used the weapons to commit egregious war crimes and human rights abuses in Gaza. It is especially disheartening and upsetting that these staunch Israel defenders try to label anyone who justifiably criticizes the Israeli government's actions as "terrorist sympathizers" or "antisemitic" for merely seeking to draw attention to overwhelming evidence of these humanitarian violations which should logically warrant a suspension of weapons shipments. Additionally, some were quick to point out the hypocrisy and unfairness of the criticism from many GOP lawmakers, since Biden is not the first U.S. president to cut off weapons to Israel. In the 1980s, President Reagan also used the leverage of American arms multiple times by delaying or withholding in an effort to influence Israeli war policy. Yet despite this, several Republican senators held a press conference yesterday accusing Biden of "abandoning Israel" with U.S. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) even going as far as to say that withholding the weapons would "be grounds for impeachment." Other senators in attendance called Biden the "greatest friend" to terrorists and a "useful pawn" for them. The group of GOP senators failed to acknowledge the aforementioned historical precedent for such a move, and the fact that the decision was made on the basis of a mass of gathered evidence outlining the disturbing scale of Israeli war crimes and human rights violations in Gaza. In light of this, as an article from The New York Times alluded to, "If it was reasonable for the Republican presidential icon to limit arms to impose his will on Israel, (supporters of Biden's decision argue that) it should be acceptable for the current Democratic president to do the same." It is bad enough to recklessly ignore independently-verified evidence of war crimes, and now on top of this, the reaction from these GOP lawmakers to Biden's pledge is the height of hypocrisy and a clear double standard.

Due to the abundance of evidence that Israel is committing gross human rights abuses and war crimes in Gaza, for months many have been urging the United States to abide by its own Leahy Law – a federal statute which is intended to prohibit military assistance to actors engaged in these types of serious violations. The idea behind this is to prevent U.S. weapons from being used to commit these abuses. Thus, both the Biden administration's recent weapons shipment hold and the president's pledge to halt additional ones to Israel if it proceeds with an assault on Rafah have been welcomed as positive developments in this regard. Observers have pointed out that for U.S. officials, the major concern which has prompted these actions seems to be how the munitions could be used to inflict mass destruction in dense civilian areas of Rafah – hence the hinging of certain weapons shipments on Israel's military operation there.

The Biden administration's decision to pause a weapons shipment and the pledge to potentially halt further ones are both noteworthy. Not only do they demonstrate an acknowledgement of the growing criticism towards U.S. weapons transfers to Israel because of substantive documented evidence of egregious human rights violations, they also indicate that the United States is attempting to positively exert its leverage over Israel in a manner in which it has not previously done before. Former U.S. State Department officials and experts have consistently expressed that weapons sales to Israel violate legal limits as they are in breach of the United States' own binding mechanisms for ensuring that these are not used in an unlawful or abusive manner. While Israeli officials seem to still be defiant despite the recent Biden remarks regarding Rafah, at least the U.S. is doing more to try and deter what entities across the board say would be a catastrophic military assault there.