



U.S. Abstention at the UN Undermines Support for Israel—And Stated U.S. Policy

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Since October 7, the United States has firmly backed Israel at the United Nations amid mounting international demands for a ceasefire by repeatedly vetoing resolutions that did not mention the hostages or condition a ceasefire on their release. This week, the Biden administration broke with that policy, seemingly choosing consensus at the United Nations Security Council over support for its partner. The U.S. decision to abstain from voting on, rather than veto, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2728 enabled the resolution to pass. UNSCR 2728 called both for a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of the hostages but did not condemn Hamas or specifically condition the ceasefire on the release of hostages. Hamas has already seized on the resolution's passage as it seeks to leverage the mounting international criticism against Israel to achieve its objectives.

What Happened?

- On March 25, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) [voted](#) to pass [UNSC Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2728](#) that “demands an immediate ceasefire for the month of Ramadan respected by all parties leading to a lasting sustainable ceasefire, and also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, as well as ensuring humanitarian access to address their medical and other humanitarian needs, and further demands that the parties comply with their obligations under international law in relation to all persons they detain.”
 - » The United States abstained from the vote, allowing it to pass, and all other 14 UNSC countries voted in favor of it.
- After the UNSC vote, on March 25, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [canceled](#) a previously-scheduled delegation visit to Washington led by Israel's National Security Council head Tzachi Hanegbi and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer.
 - » Netanyahu had [warned](#) earlier that day that he would cancel the trip if the United States did not veto any resolution calling for a ceasefire without conditioning it on the release of the hostages.
- Following the vote, Hamas released a [statement](#) supporting the resolution and emphasizing its previous negotiating posture on issues that Israel had deemed to be nonstarters. In response, Israel recalled its negotiators from ceasefire and hostage talks in Doha, Qatar.
 - » On March 26, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh [claimed](#) at a press conference in Iran that Israel has been facing “unprecedented political isolation.” He added, “although this resolution came late and there may be some gaps that need to be filled, the resolution itself indicates that the Israeli occupation is experiencing unprecedented political isolation.”

Why Is It Important?

- By allowing the resolution to pass, the U.S. abstention failed to support U.S. policy that a ceasefire must be conditioned on the release of hostages and potentially enabled Israel's international critics to leverage a vague, consensus-driven resolution to pressure Israel to accept a ceasefire that prevents it from defeating Hamas and ensuring the return of the hostages.
 - » When the United States abstained on UNSCR 2728, as opposed to vetoing the resolution as it had done on previous occasions, it implicitly conveyed that U.S. diplomacy prized UNSC consensus and achieving an UNSCR over signaling steadfast support for Israel. The abstention was also a de facto reversal of the stated U.S. policy to pursue the release of hostages as part of any ceasefire deal.
 - White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [argued](#), “it’s a nonbinding resolution. So, there’s no impact at all on Israel and Israel’s ability to continue to go after Hamas.”
 - » State Department Spokesperson Mathew Miller [emphasized](#), “we don’t believe it delinks them. You see in the same paragraph it—the resolution calling for both a ceasefire and the release of hostages. It’s not the exact language that we would have put forward, obviously, because the language that we would put forward is the language that we did put forward last week, but it is language that is consistent with our policy to call for both a ceasefire and the release of hostages, and that’s why we did not exercise a veto today.”
- The Biden administration had previously [proposed](#) a resolution that was more consistent with its policy, which U.S. Ambassador to the UN Thomas-Greenfield claimed sought “to secure an immediate and sustained cease-fire as part of a deal that leads to the release of all hostages that will allow much more humanitarian aid to get into Gaza.”
 - » On March 22, eleven UNSC members [voted](#) for a U.S.-proposed resolution, but three nations voted against it, including Russia and China, who have veto power as permanent members. Algeria also voted against the resolution, and Guyana abstained.
 - » Thomas-Greenfield argued that Russia and China vetoed the resolution because they have not wanted to condemn Hamas and “simply did not want to vote for a resolution that was penned by the United States because it would rather see us fail than to see this Council succeed.”
- Furthermore, the United States had vetoed three previous UNSC resolutions that did not sufficiently support U.S. policy by demanding a ceasefire under conditions that would have rewarded Hamas for its heinous violence and abduction of hostages on October 7 without imposing conditions upon it.
 - » On February 20, the United States [vetoed](#) an Algerian-introduced UNSCR that called for an immediate ceasefire.
 - U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield [said](#) following the veto that “proceeding with a vote today was wishful and irresponsible...We cannot support a resolution that would put sensitive negotiations in jeopardy.”
 - Reuters [reported](#) on February 19 that it viewed a U.S.-authored rival draft resolution to the resolution introduced by Algeria, which reportedly [conveyed](#) the UNSC’s “support for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza as soon as practicable.”

- » On December 8, the United States [vetoed](#) a United Arab Emirates-proposed resolution that called for an immediate ceasefire. The vote was 13 to 1, with the United States casting the lone vote against and the United Kingdom abstaining.
 - Alternate Representative of the United States for Special Political Affairs in the United Nations Robert A. Wood argued after the vote that the resolution “was not only unrealistic, but dangerous—it would simply leave Hamas in place, able to re-group and repeat what it did on Oct. 7.”
- » On October 18, less than two weeks after the war began, the United States vetoed [Brazil-proposed](#) UNSCR that condemned the attacks, called for humanitarian access and protection for civilians in Gaza, and demanded the immediate release of hostages.
 - France, China, and the remaining 10 members supported the resolution. The United States was the only no vote, exercising its veto power. Russia and Britain abstained.
 - Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the American ambassador to the United Nations, said the United States couldn’t support the resolution without a mention of Israel’s right to self-defense.
- However, the United States had already muddled its support for Israel by [abstaining](#) from United Arab Emirates-proposed UNSCR 2720 on December 22.
 - » The resolution did not recognize Hamas’s role in the conflict, and it implied that Israel is targeting “UN facilities and their surroundings” by reaffirming that such places are protected under international humanitarian law.
 - The resolution called on “all parties” to avoid striking “hospitals, medical facilities, schools, [and] places of worship” without condemning Hamas’s blatant violation of international law by [operating](#) from such facilities.
 - It also suggested that Israel is responsible for “forced displacement” of the population in Gaza, as it called for “all parties” to follow their “obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, notably with regard to the protection of civilians,” implying a moral equivalency between Israel and Hamas.
 - » One senior U.S. diplomat [explained](#) to *CNN*, “we would love to see a condemnation of Hamas... We don’t understand why the council can’t just explain exactly how we got to where we are. But at the end of the day, that’s what diplomacy is all about.”
- In statements about why the United States did not vote in favor of the resolution, administration officials have tacitly admitted that UNSCR 2728 was a reversal of stated U.S. policy even while insisting the contrary.
 - » White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [explained](#), “we wanted to get to a place where we could support this resolution. But because the final text does not have key language that we think is essential, such as condemning Hamas, we couldn’t support it.”
 - Kirby claimed that “it does not represent a change at all in our policy. It’s very consistent with everything that we’ve been saying we want to get done here.”
 - » State Department Spokesperson Mathew Miller [emphasized](#), “it’s not the exact language that we would have put forward, obviously, because the language that we would put forward is the language that we did put forward last week.”
 - According to Miller, “we don’t believe it delinks them. You see in the same paragraph it—the resolution calling for both a ceasefire and the release of hostages... it is

language that is consistent with our policy to call for both a ceasefire and the release of hostages...”

- But those same officials could not produce a meaningful explanation of why—if the resolution did not have the exact language that expresses the U.S. position—the administration decided to allow this resolution to pass.
 - » Kirby argued that “because it does fairly reflect our view that a ceasefire and the release of hostages come together, we abstained.”
 - » But he also pointed out that “it’s a nonbinding resolution,” which only raises the question of why the administration thought it important to allow a resolution that did not reflect its preferences to pass.
 - » Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield [noted](#) that the United States abstained because the resolution did not condemn Hamas but did not explain why then the United States did not vote against it.
- As evidenced by Hamas leader Haniyeh’s response in Iran on March 26, the UNSCR has further emboldened Hamas and supported its belief that it can leverage the international community’s pressure on Israel to achieve its objectives.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should strongly and clearly support Israel at the United Nations. Amid growing pressure on Israel for a ceasefire, the United States should robustly defend Israel from resolutions at the UN that unfairly target Israel and undermine the prospects of reaching a ceasefire and hostage deal.
 - » This should include vetoing—not abstaining from—any UN action that would undermine Israeli security by coercing it to adopt a ceasefire that rewards Hamas for its terrorism without imposing costs upon the terrorist group, fails to condition a ceasefire on the release of hostages, or precludes Israel’s ability to continue pursuing its objective of neutralizing Hamas in Gaza.