**Headline:** What Does Arming Israel Cost Us?

**Teaser:** To end U.S. support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza, cold, hard calculations about war spending versus domestic programs could have greater resonance in an election year.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

What will it take to end Israel’s genocide in Gaza? That’s the question confounding people of conscience all over the world since last October. After Israeli citizens, tax-paying residents of the United States have the most leverage over the perpetrators of genocide given that the U.S. is Israel’s [biggest weapons supplier](https://www.reuters.com/world/who-are-israels-main-weapons-suppliers-who-has-halted-exports-2024-05-09/). What if our taxes were spent on the things we need rather than on the deadly weapons Israel is thirsting for?

For months, a majority of the U.S. public has [disapproved](https://news.gallup.com/poll/642695/majority-disapprove-israeli-action-gaza.aspx) of Israel’s relentless mass killings. College students organized dramatic [encampments](https://students4gaza.directory/) to demand divestment from Israel. Protesters [confronted](https://apnews.com/article/israel-netanyahu-gaza-war-congress-joint-session-9a7885972989b2397b49e5b971ffe0e0) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his recent visit.

Yet, President Joe Biden has [done little](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/30/politics/joe-biden-red-line-israel/index.html) beyond paying lip service to address the public rage over Israel’s murderous assault. Now, his proxy, Vice President Kamala Harris, faces a similar calculus in running for the presidency: pull back U.S. weapons from fueling genocide, as [United Nations experts](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/states-and-companies-must-end-arms-transfers-israel-immediately-or-risk) have urged, or risk [losing voters](https://www.axios.com/local/detroit/2024/07/25/michigans-pro-palestine-delegates-kamala-needs-us-to-win) in a critical election.

Unfortunately for Palestinians and their allies, Harris appears to be taking a similar approach to Biden’s: using strong terms to [uplift Palestinian suffering](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/07/25/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-following-meeting-with-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-of-israel/), while [affirming](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/25/readout-of-vice-president-harriss-meeting-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel/) “her longstanding and unwavering commitment to the security of the State of Israel and the people of Israel.”

When Biden was the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, he resolutely [refused to budge on funding Israel](https://slguardian.org/why-wont-biden-wave-the-magic-wand-in-his-hand-to-stop-israel/), even if it meant he might lose the election. Harris may truly believe Palestinian suffering needs to end, but between now and November, she faces a critical choice: to pledge allegiance to Israel or to adhere to basic standards of morality that value human life.

But, given the stranglehold that Israel and its [powerful lobby](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2024-02-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/aipac-explained-the-inside-story-of-americas-powerful-and-divisive-pro-israel-lobby/0000018d-e4ac-d972-a5bf-efaf96c60000) have on the U.S. political system, Harris and her party may feel they [risk more](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/03/aipac-israel-spending-democratic-primaries-00144552) by alienating Israel than curbing its genocide.

And, given that Harris’s main election opponent will be no better (or [possibly worse](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/23/trump-would-be-the-worst-palestinians-react-to-us-presidential-race)) than Biden on Gaza, is there any significant leverage left to end Palestinian suffering?

Can the roughly [700,000 “uncommitted” Democratic voters](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/26/uncommitted-voters-harris-israel-gaza) who have threatened to withhold their ballots over Gaza be loud and strong enough to sway Harris to do the right thing? Perhaps. But she might call their bluff, weighing the aforementioned political risks and touting the dangers of a Donald Trump presidency on the domestic front.

The sad truth is that while Democrats and Republicans have had distinct domestic platforms, they have tended to be relatively [united on foreign policy](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/surprising-bipartisanship-us-foreign-policy) for decades. Democrats have often [backed the same wars](https://theintercept.com/2019/01/11/as-democratic-elites-reunite-with-neocons-the-partys-voters-are-becoming-far-more-militaristic-and-pro-war-than-republicans/) as their Republican opponents in the Middle East and antiwar organizers have struggled to stop wars even where U.S. soldiers were directly involved in killing civilians, let alone proxy wars such as Israel’s Gaza genocide.

In 2007, then-Senator Barack Obama distinguished himself in the 2008 election as an “[antiwar candidate](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/26/us/politics/26obama.html)” with respect to U.S. involvement in Iraq. But he remained a [pro-war candidate](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-washington-dc-the-war-we-need-win) over the war in Afghanistan begun in 2001.

Still, Obama’s talking points on Iraq offer a tantalizing way forward on Gaza in 2024. In combating his opponent Senator John McCain, Obama [said](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-says-wars-cost-too-high/), “For a fraction of what we’re spending each year in Iraq, we could be giving our teachers more pay and more support, rebuilding our crumbling schools, and offering a tax credit to put a college degree within reach for anyone who wants one.”

McCain’s response was to call Obama “[irresponsible](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-says-wars-cost-too-high/),” saying his ideas would jeopardize the U.S.’s national security. It didn’t work. In 2008 Americans were tired of the two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and if they couldn’t put an end to both, they would pick the candidate promising to end at least one and chose Obama. It wasn’t until 2021 that the U.S. war in Afghanistan finally ended when Biden [pulled all troops out](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/).

There is a direct line between the [issue Americans care most about](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/02/29/americans-top-policy-priority-for-2024-strengthening-the-economy/) in this election and the Palestinian right to exist: the U.S. economy. One of the most compelling arguments that could move the average American voter—who might be struggling far too much in their day-to-day life to care about Palestinians being massacred on the other side of the planet—is to remind ourselves of the cost of backing Israel’s devastating pogroms.

Americans spend [billions](https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts) each year to arm Israel. Since its founding, Israel has received more than $300 billion in aid from U.S. taxpayers.

The U.S. spent more tax dollars on Israel in the past year—[$12.5 billion](https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts)—than it did to fund a critically important federal agency such as the Environmental Protection Agency, whose [$9.2 billion budget](https://www.eenews.net/articles/epa-faces-difficult-choices-with-budget-cut/) for fiscal 2024 was cut by nearly $1 billion from the year before.

Last year alone, taxpayers spent more on arming Israeli genocide than the annual funding shortfall for [Pell Grants](https://www.crfb.org/blogs/pell-grants-face-big-shortfall).

The federal government spent many times more money on Israel than the budget cuts facing the [Department of Education](https://www.k12dive.com/news/fy-24-budget-proposal-education-department-cut/711098/).

Every year, Republicans use budgetary concerns to extract domestic spending cuts from the federal government on social programs that help Americans. Democrats could counter those demands by cutting Israel funding to pay for the things we are told we can’t afford.

Palestinian suffering cannot be allowed to continue. If making cold, hard calculations comparing the cost of carrying out their annihilation versus the cost of funding American needs will help to move the needle away from Israel’s genocide, then so be it.

Think tanks such as the National Priorities Project have, for years, made direct links between war spending and domestic social programs, saying “[Funding for Militarism Compromises Our Welfare](https://www.nationalpriorities.org/analysis/2023/warfare-state-how-funding-militarism-compromises-our-welfare/).”

Senator Bernie Sanders has often questioned the size of military budgets compared to social spending, [saying in April 2024](https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/prepared-remarks-sanders-on-ending-unfettered-military-aid-to-israel-and-restoring-unrwa-funding/) that $95 billion in supplemental military spending was “a lot of money—especially at a time when many Americans are unable to afford their rent or pay their mortgages, pay their bills, afford healthcare, [and] are struggling with student debt or many other needs.”

U.S. politicians have been able to undercut such logic by touting vague notions of “national security” in response. But that excuse won’t work with respect to Israel. Let Israel worry about its “national security” while Americans focus on funding our needs.

Not only could antiwar and pro-Palestinian activists center the financial costs of gifting weapons to Israel as an election issue, but Harris could use it as political cover for doing the morally right thing.

Such an approach could have more resonance in an election year than hoping enough American voters will care about the fate of Palestinians to withhold votes from a liberal Democrat—especially when faced with the prospect of a fascist authoritarian.