

Weekly Commentary 5 – 5th Commentary for 2024

Israel, the Houthis, the ICJ and the End of Empire

Over the past few days, there were geopolitical developments which should change how America would behave in the world. But it may not.

The first of this is the failure of the US to stop the Houthis of Yemen from attacking ships sailing under their noses in the Red Sea.

The US and the UK first combined their air forces to conduct strikes against the Houthis earlier in the month. As a matter of fact, it tried to pull in other countries to protect the traffic in the Red Sea against attacks but it received luke-warm support from other western countries. A few of them committed some non-combatant personnel but nobody wanted to fight the latest version of a Middle Eastern war. It was clear to all countries that it wasn't the Houthis who started it. One thing had led to another – first there was an attack on Israel by Hamas on Oct 7, then the Israelis retaliated with such force that it is now accused (and judged by the world's highest court) of having committed genocide, and 90 percent of the planet have asked Israel to dial back its military actions and move in the direction of a settlement of the Palestinian question, long festering since the founding of Israel. The Houthis are the only Arabs who have been totally supportive of the Palestinians and first said it would attack Israeli shipping in the Red Sea. The Americans, being mesmerised by their own unwavering support of Israel, announced it would stop the Houthis, long known to have the backing of Iran, by escorting its own ships with its navy. Backed by airstrikes on Yemen. Only its vassal state, the UK, agreed to join in,

I have always thought that it was an inadequate and impossible military solution. Unless the Americans are prepared to put boots on the ground in Yemen, a naval and air campaign against a land-based guerilla force would be futile. I said so. And attributed the lack of logic in this plan to hubris in Washington that they can walk and chew gum at the same time, which they meant was a military capability that can engage in multiple wars simultaneously. Nah, that phase of the American empire and military power is over.

Specifically in the Red Sea, the Houthis have tactical advantage. They can hide out in the high ground above the waters below, and rain drone and ballistic missiles on passing ships which are visible to the naked eye. The Saudis had also fought the Houthis for many years, and they did not overcome them, in spite of superior weaponry and of course, unlimited money. And with their hands-off approach, without a serious commitment to the mission by putting soldiers into the fray, the ships of the US navy can do very little. The combined air

forces of the US and the UK were not much better off, when all they could do was to shoot, at a pop, \$4 million missiles at the Houthis, holed up on land, and firing inexpensive \$10,000 (if that) weapons that can blow up passing ships. It was an unequal contest between a guerilla force operating on the cheap and the best that empire could throw at these rebels. The edge laid with the shadowy Houthis.

On Thursday, two Maersk cargo ships, chartered by the US government, and allegedly carrying weapons destined for Israel, were attacked by the Houthis. These two ships were escorted by several US warships in a formidable convoy 20 vessel strong. If there was a deterrent, one would imagine this could have done it. During the Houthi attack, the American destroyers could offer no protection. The Maersk ships eventually chickened out and scooted from the scene. And Maersk then announced that it will not sail through the Red Sea and risk getting sunk in a future affront.

And this is a complete embarrassment for the Biden White House and Rishi Sunak as well.

The Financial Times elaborated with this report.

Robert Wright, FT, 26 Jan 2024

Houthi rebels in Yemen on Friday fired a missile that set fire to a ship carrying Russian refined oil for the commodities trader Trafigura, as the Iran-backed militants stepped up their attacks on commercial and military vessels in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

The Houthi attack on the Marlin Luanda, a petroleum products tanker in the Gulf of Aden, was the first to hit a commercial vessel since the US and UK combined on a second set of strikes against the militants, who have caused major disruption to global trade by targeting a critical route.

The Houthis earlier on Friday fired an anti-ship ballistic missile at the USS Carney, a US navy vessel in the Gulf of Aden. US Central Command said the Carney had successfully shot the missile down. A statement by Yahya Saree, the Houthis' spokesman, said the group had targeted the Marlin Luanda, which it described as a "British oil ship".

While the vessel was operating on behalf of Trafigura, its registered owner is Oceanix Services, a company based in the City of London. The attack appears to have been the most damaging so far of the 30-plus attempted by the Houthis against commercial ships since November. Most have caused only minor damage or small, quickly extinguished fires.

Trafigura, a leading commodities trader, said the Marlin Luanda had been “struck by a missile”. “Firefighting equipment on board is being deployed to suppress and control the fire caused in one cargo tank on the starboard side,” the Singapore-based company said.

“We remain in contact with the vessel and are monitoring the situation carefully. Military ships in the region are under way to provide assistance.”

The company added that the vessel was carrying “Russian origin” Naphtha, an oil product, which it said had been purchased below the price cap on the country’s oil set by international sanctions.

The UK Maritime Trade Operations office said that five hours after the incident, which happened at 4.42pm London time, the vessel remained on fire. “Coalition warships are in attendance and supporting the vessel,” the organisation added. “All crew are reported safe.” The Houthis say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza after Israel in October declared war on Hamas, the militant group which controlled the enclave.

The Yemeni rebels originally said they were only targeting vessels linked to Israel, although many of those affected had no apparent link to the Jewish state. The Houthis have since extended their target list to include ships linked to the US and UK.

Many shipping industry executives had assumed, based on a Houthi promise not to attack Russian and Chinese ships, that vessels carrying cargo heading to or from Russia or China would enjoy some degree of immunity.

Attacks on vessels off Yemen’s coast have prompted many shipping companies to flee the region. Arrivals of container ships in the area in recent weeks have been 90 per cent down on levels in early November, according to Clarksons, a shipping services group.

‘Opportunistic’ Chinese lines send ships to serve Red Sea ports. Most are instead taking a longer route round the Cape of Good Hope, which has significantly increased journey times and costs.

Over time, this would cause inflation in global supply chains detrimental to the interests of the collective west who depend on these.

Then on Wednesday, the Houthis fired at least three missiles towards two US-flagged container ships, the Maersk Detroit and Maersk Chesapeake, as they were heading through the Bab-el-Mandeb, at the mouth of the Red Sea. The vessels, part of a fleet of 20 US-flagged vessels carrying almost exclusively US government cargo (allegedly weapons destined for

Israel), were accompanied by the USS Gravelly, a US naval ship. The imagery and rhetoric are of the Atlantic convoys that were successful against German U-boats during WW2. But it didn't work this time.

The Gravelly shot down two of the missiles, while another fell into the sea. Maersk, the world's second largest container shipping line, had enough and said it would no longer send its US-flagged fleet through the area.

The Copenhagen-based company's other vessels have been travelling via the Cape of Good Hope since December. The combined US and UK attacks on Monday against the Houthis were aimed at curtailing the group's efforts to disrupt shipping through the Red Sea, and involved hitting eight locations in Yemen.

A follow-up article in the FT carried the background on and motivations of the Houthis and the prospects for peaceful reconciliation of all parties in the conflict:

Raya Jalabi in Beirut 26 Jan 2024.

"We thank God for the Houthis," wrote one Iraqi commenter in a viral Instagram post, a sentiment echoed by hundreds of others. "They're the only Arabs helping Palestine."

Not all of the supporters of Palestine are Houthis, but some of the viral videos published by these folks have helped to raise the profile of the Iran-linked militant movement that controls much of Yemen, racking up as many as 25 million views on apps such as TikTok.

The Houthis have been gaining new fans across the Arab world, many of whom know little about the Islamist group's history or increasingly repressive tactics in their home country. Their popularity, which seems to transcend religious divisions, has surged since the war between Israel and Hamas erupted in October, and the movement began its brazen missile and drone attacks on ships traversing the Red Sea.

While the Houthis' campaign has caused little physical damage to vessels so far, it has disrupted global trade and cemented their reputation as one of the most active factions in Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance.

The group has drawn the US and UK into combat, although the strikes that began this month have done little to dispel the Houthi attacks. "Among all of my friends, there's a completely positive perception of the Houthis," said a 28-year-old Jordanian man living in the UK. "No one has a critical thing to say about them right now."

The comments reflect rising public anger across the Arab and Muslim worlds over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. More than 25,000 Palestinians have been killed in the enclave, according to Palestinian officials; the vast majority of its 2.3mn inhabitants have been displaced by the war triggered by Hamas's shock October 7 attack on Israel.

At least 1,200 Israelis were killed in the assault, according to Israeli figures. With footage of deadly bombardments and hungry children livestreamed into Arab homes, the outrage has focused on the perceived double standards and the reluctance of the west to hold Israel to account — not just for this war, but also for its treatment of the Palestinians over the past 75 years. Much of that rage is directed at the US for its support of Israel.

This has only sharpened since the American and British strikes on the Houthis. “These countries want us to believe they are moral when really they are hypocrites,” said Bushra Hind, 27, an accountant in Kuwait. “They have done nothing to stop the atrocities in Gaza,” Hind said. “But the minute global trade and shipping were threatened, then suddenly they spring into action.”

The Yemeni movement, also known as Ansar Allah, was initially led by members of the Houthi tribe who belong to the Zaydi Shia sect. It turned into a scrappy force in the early 2000s that fought to overthrow Yemen's autocratic government. Their slogan is “Death to America, Death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews”.

While the Houthis have ties to Iran, they are not as ideologically aligned with Tehran as other militants in the region. But they have moved closer to the Islamic republic, which helped them fight a nine-year war against a Saudi-led coalition that intervened in Yemen's civil conflict in 2015.

Hundreds of thousands of Yemenis were killed either by fighting or by the famine and disease that took hold in its wake. But the Houthis endured, a shaky truce with Riyadh was agreed and the rebels held on to much of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a.

Ibrahim Jalal, a Yemeni scholar at the Middle East Institute and a partner at Horizon Insights, said the Houthis had long shown themselves to be “masterful” at propaganda, and the way they aligned themselves with Gaza was “no exception”. “By framing themselves as defenders of the Palestinian cause, they've leveraged their attacks and emerged as disruptive and very popular actors,” Jalal said.

He said the Houthis were contrasting themselves with the Arab states who had turned to diplomacy rather than wield military might.

A poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research conducted in late 2023 found that residents of Gaza and the occupied West Bank ranked Yemen's response to the Israel-Hamas war as the most satisfying among regional actors.

“Our only supporter is Yemen,” said Sadeen, a Palestinian student living in Jerusalem who said she had not heard of the Houthis before she saw footage of their dramatic Red Sea strikes. “For the first time, I felt someone supported us with actions, not just words.” In Yemen, where many loathe the Houthis, praise for the group is at an all-time high, even among their arch-rivals who have called the strikes on shipping targets “righteous”. “Personally, I’ve never liked the Houthis: they’re a police state, they’ve sentenced many people to death unfairly, including their political opponents,” said a 35-year-old Yemeni man living in a part of south Yemen not controlled by the Houthis.

“But what they’re doing now for Palestine: it’s a good deed. And I’ll support anyone who’s making life harder for those who oppress the Palestinians, especially when they’re Yemeni like me.” The increase in public support has alarmed many Yemenis and rights groups, who say the Houthis have become even more repressive as they have consolidated power at home.

Who are the Houthis?

“The international rise in support for the Houthis is giving them cover to commit more human rights abuses against their own people,” said Niku Jafarnia, a Yemen researcher for Human Rights Watch. The group has documented how the Houthis have weaponised humanitarian aid, recruited and deployed thousands of child soldiers and cracked down on freedom of expression and the women’s movement.

The UK-based Jordanian added: “As an Arab whose main priority is to stop the bloodshed in Gaza, anything that’s good for Palestine, and you’ll probably look the other way.”

The Houthis seem to be at the right place at the right time, to be able to carry out their guerilla war against the US and the UK (and Israel) given their vantage position over a critical shipping lane. And given that they are making headway, or shall I say, the empire’s military has done nothing effective to stop them, it is turning out to be a nightmare for anybody willing to fight the Houthis. And the empire will find it difficult to win. Worse still, there is no off-ramp from this part of the ongoing Middle East wars. Since the empire may get a new Caesar in Donald Trump by November, the whole approach on how to deal with the Muslim world as well as the Middle East will change. As a matter of fact, the current process of losing to the Houthis will propel the ascent of the Trump to his second term. Biden (and Sunak) who boasted several weeks ago that their military can control the Red Sea with their missiles, just saw their own re-election hopes diminished, when the

Maersk ships turned around. This will change the dynamics of power relationships in the Middle East.

And for the Taiwanese and China, the American claim to superior military power in the S China sea has clearly to be revisited. The Red Sea was a small naval engagement in which the two NATO countries were supremely confident to overcoming a ragged land-based guerilla force with no navy and air force. In spite of overwhelming superiority in military terms, neither Washington nor London could prevail. Now imagine a more equal contest in the Taiwan Straits, 9000 km away from the US mainland and just 100km away from China. It would take a lot of imagination, hubris and undeserved self confidence to think that the US can defeat a rival with near parity in military power.

And diplomatically, Jake Sullivan is known to have made an appointment to see Wang Yi in Bangkok on the latter's pre-arranged visit to the kingdom. In these matters, it is usual for two equal powers to meet halfway. In this case, Sullivan is coming to see Wang, and that is an indication he has something to ask China for help. What can this be? Some pundits think Sullivan is going to ask for help with the Houthis. Seek an off ramp via the good auspices of China perhaps? Whatever it is, the China will get reciprocal favours in return – such as a toning down of pro Taiwan rhetoric?

And this standoff with the Houthis is also historic. Never before has an impoverished group of people, the Houthis, changed the balance of power in a military confrontation whereby cheap and good technology has bested the expensive weaponry of the western empire. As I have previously written, it is unsustainable for the US and UK to hurl \$4m missiles at the Houthis holed up on commanding heights around shipping lanes when all they need to use are \$10,000 hand held weapons. This must lead to more such groups adopting such technology resisting the dominance of the west, and the western powers concurrently understand the limits of their own militaries. This is a fundamental change in balance of power in the world.

Besides this failure of its military in naval and air power, the last two years have also seen the entire NATO coming up short on performance in their vaunted ability to defeat Russia in Ukraine. At this time, the Kyiv government is on the point of military collapse, when news of its shooting down a Russian transport plane carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war on a flight to a prisoner exchange near Belgorod came out just hours before the Maersk ships turned tail. Right now, this tragic mistake by Kyiv is all over social media. And for killing its own soldiers by mistake, Zelensky not only has blood on his hands, but it again makes him look incompetent and ineffective, as leader of a country fighting the most powerful foe that NATO has chosen to poke in the eye. Coming on the back of the failed summer counter offensive, Kyiv has got nothing to show for the \$120 plus billion given to it; and its failure has revealed that NATO weapons systems and supply chains are not better than Russian ones, when it cannot even produce enough shells to supply to Ukraine. And just look at the kill ratio – it's well known that 7 Ukrainian soldiers die for every Russian. Is that a stalemate or is that the calamitous loss before the eventual collapse?

Here is a report on the downing of the Russian transport from Politico Europe:

JANUARY 26, 2024 9:06 PM CET

BY SERGEY GORYASHKO

Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Kyiv for the crash of a military transport plane this week that Moscow claims killed dozens of people, mostly Ukrainian prisoners of war.

“The Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Armed Forces knew that we were taking military personnel there ... and, knowing this, struck this plane,” Putin said on Friday, in his first remarks on the crash of the Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft near Belgorod on Wednesday.

“I don’t know whether they did it intentionally or by mistake,” Putin stressed. **(Either way, Zelensky will have to take the blame)**

He claimed the Russian army detected two missile launches from Ukraine-controlled areas that hit the plane.

“Most likely, it was American Patriot systems or European, probably French,” Putin said. POLITICO could not independently verify his claims.

Putin refuted theories of “friendly fire” for the downing of the aircraft. “There are friend-or-foe systems, and no matter how many times the operator presses the button, our air defense systems would not have engaged,” Putin said.

“We only regret about our pilots,” he added.

Russia’s Investigative Committee reported collecting the remains and documents of deceased Ukrainian servicemen. Russia has sole access to the crash site.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday called for an international investigation into the crash. Kyiv said it couldn’t confirm the plane carried Ukrainian POWs. Ukrainian media initially reported that the Ukrainian Armed Forces downed the plane.

Ukraine's Defense Intelligence Directorate confirmed a scheduled prisoner exchange on the day of the crash but said it didn't occur. (Yup, they were slaughtered by their own side)

Ukraine denied prior warning from Russia of a plane with POWs over Belgorod.

At a U.N. Security Council meeting on Thursday, convened at the request of Moscow, Russian and Ukrainian representatives maintained their governments' stances. Ukraine's deputy U.N. representative, Khrystyna Hayovyshyn, said Kyiv was not informed about the means of transportation of the captives. Russia's Dmitry Polyanskiy labeled the incident a "calculated crime by Kyiv."

Rosemary DiCarlo, the U.N. undersecretary-general for political and peace-building affairs, said the U.N. couldn't verify the presence of POWs on the downed plane.

Here is my interpretation of events. I think there is no doubt that the Ukrainians shot down the IL72 plane. What we cannot know for a fact right now is that the dead passengers were mostly Ukrainian POWs. If this was not the case, the Russians can be accused of telling a lie. So what?? But, more importantly, if it were true, the political pressure on Zelensky will be tremendous. This is not a small number of people; it is 65 dudes due to go home. The truth will be known soon enough, since there are hundreds of families and friends who are acquainted with the POWs going down with the plane. In other words, there is no upside to the Ukrainian lie, if it is indeed one. Given the already massive casualties on the Ukrainian side (at least 500,000 KIA and possibly another 500,000 wounded, this will not go down well with the population. The POWs were coming home in a day, and then Kyiv shoots them down. This is truly an incompetent regime in Kyiv.

All in all, the Americans and Brits have in recent months backed the wrong sides in every conflict. If we accept that Ukraine can indeed claim to have sovereignty to join NATO, the fact that the western powers backed an idiot, a clown who never admits his mistakes and other incompetent leaders in Kyiv, illustrates the weakness of the process of trying to pick winners after a regime change. And even now, there would be heavy political costs to pay. As I see it, the collapse in Ukraine will happen soon enough, as aid for Ukraine is drying up. Zelensky will have to take his ill-gotten gains to get out of Kyiv before the local thugs get to him when things turn ugly. And when local populations in the collective west find out what poor arrangements and outcomes their own governments have made to champion their anti-Russia proxy war, when the enemy become more powerful rather than enfeebled, why would they support the Bidens, Sunaks, Macrons and Scholzs when they have alternatives in Trump, Stammer, Le Penn or the revitalized German right. As such, the geopolitical mistakes of the current crop of political leaders in the collective west will lead to changes in governments soon enough. NATO, even without Trump 2.0, will break up.

Then there is the diplomatic, moral and geopolitical damage caused by the International Court of Justice, the highest international judiciary in the world.

On Friday, after a short deliberation, and either unanimously or by wide majorities on most counts, the ICJ announced its findings on a petition put up a few weeks ago by South Africa about Israel committing genocide in the Gaza. This is extremely damning to Israel and to all the western powers that have supported it militarily, morally and given it diplomatic cover.

The FT again:

Top UN court orders Israel to comply with international law on genocide

ICJ findings come as UN Palestinian relief agency dismisses several employees over alleged involvement in Hamas attack

The politically explosive case brought by South Africa alleges Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians in its war in Gaza

James Shotter in Jerusalem 15 HOURS AGO

The UN's top court has ordered Israel to comply with international law on genocide in a politically explosive case that raises pressure on the conduct of its war in Gaza. The International Court of Justice said Israel should limit harm to Palestinians in Gaza, but stopped short of calling for an immediate end to the military offensive.

Its interim ruling on Friday came shortly before the UN's Palestinian relief agency said it had dismissed several employees over their alleged involvement in the Hamas attack that triggered the war.

UNRWA said it had ordered a probe after receiving information from Israel, while the US, which said it was halting aid to the agency, added the allegations concerned 12 UN employees "who may have been involved" in the October 7 attack.

The ICJ case had been brought by South Africa, which accused Israel of genocide in the Gaza Strip, allegations the country denies.

In a blow to the Israeli government, the 17-strong panel of judges declined to throw the case out. **In fact one of the 17 was previously a Chief Justice of Israel.**

“The court is acutely aware of the extent of the human tragedy that is unfolding in the region and is deeply concerned about the continuing loss of life and human suffering,” said Joan Donoghue, the president of The Hague-based tribunal.

The case — which has left a western-backed democracy facing allegations of committing the highest international crime — has already made waves around the world.

After the order, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to continue the military campaign while doing “our utmost to keep civilians out of harm’s way”. Describing the allegation of genocide as “false and outrageous”, he depicted the court’s decision not to call for a ceasefire as a victory for Israel.

“Like every country, Israel has an inherent right to defend itself,” he said. “The vile attempt to deny Israel this fundamental right is blatant discrimination against the Jewish state, and it was justly rejected.”

But South Africa hailed the ruling, watched live by President Cyril Ramaphosa alongside Palestinian officials, as a “decisive victory for the international rule of law”. Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki said the decision “should serve as a wake-up call for Israel and actors who enabled its entrenched impunity”.

The US said it had “consistently made clear” to Israel the need to minimise civilian harm, but dismissed allegations of genocide as “unfounded”. The State Department noted the court had called for the unconditional release immediately of all hostages held by Hamas. The EU said it expected “full, immediate and effective implementation” of all ICJ orders.

South Africa, which brought the case under the 1948 Genocide Convention, said at the ICJ this month that Israel’s assault had killed 1 per cent of Gaza’s population and injured one in four Gazans. It said that Israel had a “genocidal intent” that was “evident from the way in which [its] military attack is being conducted”.

Israel said such claims were “profoundly distorted” and that its forces in Gaza were complying with international law. Israel declared war after the October 7 attack, in which 1,200 people were killed and a further 250 taken hostage, according to Israeli officials. Israel’s retaliatory assault on Gaza has killed more than 26,000 people, according to Palestinian officials, as well as displacing 1.7mn of the enclave’s 2.3mn inhabitants, and reducing huge swaths of the territory to uninhabitable rubble.

A final ruling in the case will probably take years and Friday’s decision relates only to South Africa’s request for emergency measures while the case is heard. South Africa had requested

nine emergency measures. The court ordered six, including instructions for Israel to preserve evidence relating to the case and to submit a report to the tribunal within one month on the measures it is taking to comply.

The court's decisions on emergency measures are legally binding, but it cannot enforce them itself.

Additional reporting by Mehul Srivastava, Felicia Schwartz, Rob Rose and Mai Khaled

It would be remiss of this writer not to inform readers that Netanyahu will probably NOT carry out the ICJ's ruling and end the genocide of the Palestinians. The ICJ does not have its own execution powers. So Israel can continue to do what it wants. But the judgment is clearly a massive step in the right direction. All the western politicians who support Israel's genocide will be embarrassed internationally, and domestically they will have to suffer defeat at their own polls before they will take action. Israel itself is so rabidly anti-Palestinian that they will not react. But through the actions of other countries pressured domestically not to deal with Israel commercially or diplomatically, there may be a chance that the Israelis will be forced to act. In other words, all other countries in the UN will have to adopt non-military means that have parallels to what have been done by the Houthis.

Moreover, the western media will be hard put to continue to decry the compliants of genocide, when they try to adhere to White House policy. In short, Israel and the US have lost at least the propaganda war.

The political fallout may also be quite widespread. In the United States, the BBC is predicting that Biden will suffer in his bid for term 2.0. Here is a BBC assessment, before the ICJ ruling on Friday:

Biden facing growing internal dissent over Israel's Gaza campaign

17 November 2023

By Barbara Plett Usher

BBC State Department correspondent

US President Joe Biden is under growing pressure to rein in Israel's military campaign against Hamas in Gaza.

The thousands of civilian casualties and desperate humanitarian conditions have alarmed Arab allies, but also stirred an extraordinary level of criticism from within his own administration.

"I'm stunned by the intensity," said Aaron David Miller, who worked as an adviser on Arab-Israeli relations during a 25 year tenure at the US State Department.

"I've never seen anything quite like this."

Several internal memos have been sent to Secretary of State Antony Blinken through a channel, established after the Vietnam war, which allows employees to register disapproval of policy.

An open letter is also said to be circulating at the Agency for International Development (USAID). Another has been dispatched to the White House by political appointees and staff members representing dozens of government agencies. Another to members of Congress by staffers on Capitol Hill.

Much of this dissent is private, and the signatures are often anonymous out of concerns the protest might affect jobs, so the full scale of it is not clear. But according to leaks cited by multiple reports, hundreds of people have signed on to the wave of opposition.

An administration official has told the BBC that these concerns are very real and there are active discussions about them.

At a minimum, the letters are asking that President Biden demand an immediate ceasefire, and push Israel much harder to allow for more humanitarian aid to enter Gaza.

In some cases, the language is stronger, echoing the rhetoric of young political activists and apparently reflecting to some degree a generational divide that is more critical of Israel and sympathetic to Palestinians.

The letters condemn the atrocities carried out by Hamas during its surprise 7 October attack that killed around 1,200 people, mostly Israeli civilians.

More than 12,000 have been killed in Gaza by Israel since that attack, according to the latest figure from the territory's Hamas-run health ministry. Israel has said it is trying to minimise civilian casualties in the war in Gaza but has not been successful, blaming this on Hamas.

The high number of Palestinian deaths is a "font of the dismay" in the administration, according to Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, a former US diplomat who is now president of the Middle East Policy Council.

The administration's support for the Israeli military operation appears for many "far too much of a one-sided position for the US government", she said.

Ms Abercrombie-Winstanley signed dissent cables during her career and has been consulted by current employees about whether they should do so now. These memos feel like they have a "broader reach" than others, she said, drawing in people who are not necessarily working on the specific issue at hand.

How Biden is responding

Ms Abercrombie-Winstanley believes the chorus of dismay has contributed to significant shifts in US language and approach, since the days immediately after the Hamas attack when President Biden pledged unwavering support for Israel in an emotional address. Propelled by the destruction in Gaza and growing anger in the Arab world, the administration's rhetoric on protecting civilians has become more insistent. "Far too many Palestinians have been killed" in Gaza, Mr Blinken said recently.

He and other senior officials are now treating humanitarian assistance as not only a moral imperative, but a strategic one too.

This is something Mr Blinken highlights when meeting frustrated employees in listening sessions, according to State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller. He makes clear that "it is the United States of America, not any other country, that was able to secure an agreement to get humanitarian assistance into Gaza" and "to get humanitarian pauses".

The secretary of state is aware of the disquiet simmering in his building and has made a point of addressing it.

"We're listening," he wrote after returning from his recent trip to the Middle East, in an email obtained by the BBC. "What you share is informing our policy and our messages."

But it has not changed core policy approaches, nor appeared to have had significant influence on Israel's military campaign.

The Biden administration has become more open about airing its growing divergences with Israel. Mr Blinken has deliberately set out principles of Palestinian governance and statehood for the "day after" in Gaza, that Israel's right-wing government rejects.

The president is frequently on the phone to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and senior officials keep up a steady drumbeat of visits to the region, pressing Israel to follow the laws of war.

But there's no suggestion the Biden administration is considering using its main leverage, putting conditions on its massive military assistance to Israel, which was ramped up even further after the Hamas attack.

And Biden signalled this week that the US had not given Israel a deadline for its military campaign to end.

It will end when Hamas "no longer maintains the capacity to murder, abuse and just do horrific things" to Israel, the president said.

The bottom line is that the US and Israel have the same goal, according to Mr Miller, the former adviser at the State Department. Both want to destroy Hamas's capacity as a military organisation so it can never mount a 7 October-style attack again.

With that aim in mind, he said, a full ceasefire that ends hostilities in pursuit of peace does not make operational or political sense. It only delays war, Mr Miller said, "because you're not going to get a negotiated ending to this... The tactics may differ, but the objective remains the same".

So what exactly would force President Biden to change course?

Most likely not his internal opposition. For all its ferment, the dissent in the administration is not yet a revolt. Only one State Department official has publicly resigned.

Mr Miller suggests it would more likely take an external event, such as the unconditional release of all the hostages held by Hamas, or a single Israeli operation that results in mass Palestinian casualties, although the bar has been set quite high.

There are also political risks for Mr Biden. His solidarity with Israel is shared by Republicans and centrist Democrats, but concerns within the younger and more left-wing elements of the Democratic Party are growing.

His former election campaign staffers have sent their own letter to the president calling for a ceasefire.

Gwen Schroeder, who worked on Mr Biden's digital team during the 2020 election, was one of the signatories.

She said Israel's "disproportionate response" in Gaza showed that Palestinian lives "mean less than those of our Israeli allies".

"I'm not ashamed of getting Biden elected," she said, but added: "I grapple with this every day, you know, is this the administration that I fought so hard for?"

It is too early to say how these sentiments might affect Mr Biden's bid for re-election next year, but it does underline the tightrope that he is walking.

He has been telling Israeli leaders that the way they fight this war will determine what is possible after it ends. How much he is able to influence that is important, because he will be linked with whatever the outcome.

And there were Anthony Blinken and Lord Cameron, who represent the US and the UK at the highest levels of foreign policy, and before the verdict by the ICJ, called the South African case "meritless" (Blinken) and "nonsense" (Cameron). What would they say now? The verdict really puts these fools to shame.

Here is a deeper analysis by an American media source, the Arab News:

'We won't forget': Has Biden's support for Israel lost him the Arab American vote?

Brooke Anderson

Washington, D.C.

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In-depth: Arab and Muslim voters played a key role in securing a Democratic victory in 2020. But the US President's unfettered support for Israel's deadly war on Gaza has triggered widespread outrage that could risk the 2024 election.

In the pivotal United States election of 2020, Arabs and Muslims were instrumental in [getting out the vote for Joe Biden](#) and the Democratic Party.

Now, in November 2023, a month into [Israel's deadly war on Gaza](#), this small but growing bloc of American voters might not be as reliable for the Democratic Party as they were three years ago, with a [recent poll](#) showing Arab American support of Biden has dropped to 17 percent.

After Hamas's surprise attack on Israel on 7 October, in which more than 1,400 Israelis were killed, it was largely expected that the Biden administration would respond with firm support for Israel.

However, as the days and weeks wore on and Israel's relentless bombing and stifling siege on Gaza continued, many Americans, particularly Arabs and Muslims, believe Biden should be doing much more to pressure the Israeli government to curb its attacks.

"Though Arabs and Muslims constitute a relatively small bloc of voters... their votes do have the potential to impact elections"

A spike in outrage over Gaza, a decline in support for Biden

Though there have been many episodes of Israeli violence towards Palestinians over the years, this one seems to have stirred an international public outcry unlike others. More than 10,000 Palestinians, including over 4,400 children, have been killed so far.

"It was the heartache and the heartbreak, not just among Palestinians, but of people across the board. This is big. It hurts. This is something we've not seen before," James Zogby, a veteran pollster and founder of the Arab American Institute (AAI), told *The New Arab (TNA)*.

Noting other conflicts in the region, such as Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its war with Lebanon in 2006, he said, "This one somehow seemed unique because of the way that people were reacting to it, the things people were saying, and the people making statements about what they were going to do in 2024."

It was this widespread condemnation of Israel's bombardment of Gaza pushed Zogby to conduct a poll to assess the sense of the community's frustration in numbers. Though he expected to see some drop in support, what he didn't expect was how much it had fallen.

Just 17 percent of Arab Americans polled said they would vote for Biden in 2024, down from 59 percent in 2020, a 42 percent drop.

Biden's foreign policy failure in the Middle East

"I was very much surprised. I'd never seen a decline like that," Zogby said.

Emgage, a Muslim voting advocacy group, found an even starker drop in support, with just over 5 percent of Muslims voters saying they would vote for Biden, down from 80 percent in the previous election.

"We needed to put numbers to those sentiments. The data captured that feeling of betrayal," Mohamed Gula, national organising director for Emgage, told *TNA*.

He explained that this sense of betrayal comes after Muslims organised to get out the vote for Biden, making them feel like they were part of the political process. Unlike former President Donald Trump, who had enacted what was known as the Muslim ban, Biden gave the impression that he would address their concerns.

"It was like a friend or family member had betrayed you."

Sabiha Khan, a longtime Democratic voter in southern California, told *TNA* that she, along with her friends and family, will not be voting for Biden again. "He took us for granted," she said.

In swing states, Arab and Muslim votes are crucial

Though Arabs and Muslims constitute a relatively small bloc of voters - 3.5 million and 3.45 million respectively - in the state-by-state electoral college, their votes do have the potential to impact elections.

In Michigan, Trump won by 10,000 votes in 2016, and Biden beat him by 154,000 votes in 2020. There are 220,000 registered Muslim voters in the state.

One thing that significantly helped Biden in 2020 was the grassroots campaigning of Rashida Tlaib, whose congressional campaign brought out Arabs and Muslims to the polls in numbers that hadn't been seen before. In 2020, more than 80,000 Muslim voters cast their ballots in Michigan, four times as many as in 2016, according to Emgage.

But now, Tlaib has accused Biden of supporting genocide in Gaza, and has been censored by the House of Representatives for her comments on Israel. It's unclear how, or even if, she will rally her constituents behind Biden and the Democratic Party in 2024.

My sense is that ICJ ruling would be the straw that breaks the camel's back. If Biden sticks to its guns, we will hopefully see a better man in the White House.

But one thing is for sure. The winds of change are blowing across the empire...

By:

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