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Guidance for officers deployed to Israel appears to show the U.S. military providing intelligence for airstrikes in Gaza.

Targeting intelligence — the information used to conduct airstrikes and fire long-range artillery weapons — has played a central role in Israel’s siege of Gaza. A document obtained through the Freedom of Information Act suggests that the U.S. Air Force sent officers specializing in this exact form of intelligence to Israel in late November.

Since the start of Israel’s bombardment in retaliation for Hamas’s strike on October 7, Israel has dropped more than 29,000 bombs on the tiny Gaza Strip, according to a [U.S. intelligence report](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) last month. And for the [first time](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) in U.S. history, the Biden administration has been flying surveillance drone missions over Gaza since at least early November, ostensibly for [hostage recovery](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) by special forces. At the time the drones were revealed, U.S. Gen. Pat Ryder [insisted](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) that the special operations forces deployed to Israel to advise on hostage rescue were “not participating in [Israel Defense Forces] target development.”

“I’ve directed my team to share intelligence and deploy additional experts from across the United States government to consult with and advise the Israeli counterparts on hostage recovery efforts,” [said](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) President Joe Biden three days after the Hamas attack.

But several weeks later, on November 21, the U.S. Air Force [issued deployment guidelines](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) for officers, including intelligence engagement officers, headed to Israel. Experts say that a team of targeting officers like this would be used to provide satellite intelligence to the Israelis for the purpose of offensive targeting.

“They’re probably targeting people, targeting officers,” Lawrence Cline, who served as an intelligence engagement officer in Iraq before [retirement](#) [Opens in a new tab](#), told The Intercept. Targeting intelligence refers to the identification and characterization of enemy activities including missile and artillery launches, location of leadership and command and control centers, and key facilities. “What I can see is we’ve got a lot of global assets in terms of satellites and the like and the Israelis have a lot in terms of more localized radar coverage.”

The deployment guidelines were issued by the Pentagon’s Air Force component command for the Middle East, Air Forces Central, on November 21. The document provides deployment instructions to air personnel sent to the country, including an “Air Defense Liaison Team” as well as “airmen assigned as the Intelligence Engagement Officer (IEO).”

Intelligence engagement officers, Cline explained, coordinate intelligence between the U.S. and partner militaries. When deployed in Iraq, Cline, who now works as an instructor for the Defense Department Counterterrorism Fellowship Program, recalled that he and other IEOs comprised a small team who spent “probably three quarters of our time working with the Iraqis, the other quarter checking in with headquarters,” adding that “it was sort of half and half a liaison and advising.”

Asked about the airmen’s mission, the Defense Intelligence Agency referred questions to the Air Forces Central, which did not respond to a request for comment. Neither the Office of the Secretary of Defense nor Central Command responded to requests for comment.

The intelligence engagement process provides a low-profile mechanism through which the U.S. can coordinate with the Israeli military, a valuable tool amid the political sensitivity of the conflict.

A U.S. Army [primer Opens in a new tab](#) defines intelligence engagement as a “powerful” tool that is useful “especially when U.S. policy might restrict our interaction,” as it “often does not require large budgets or footprints.” Experts say that may be the case here.

Tyler McBrien, managing editor of Lawfare, a website specializing in national security law, said that there seems to be an “Israel exception” to the U.S. rules around military assistance.

Past presidents have issued [several executive orders Opens in a new tab](#) banning the U.S. government from carrying out or sponsoring assassinations abroad. This ban has been interpreted to include wartime targeting of civilians, according to a [recent Foreign Affairs article Opens in a new tab](#)

by Brian Finucane, a former legal adviser for the State Department who now works for Crisis Group.

And the so-called Leahy law, a set of budget amendments named for Sen. Patrick Leahy, requires the U.S. government to vet foreign military units for “gross violations of human rights” when providing training or aid to those units. Several progressive members of Congress have [raised concerns Opens in a new tab](#) that U.S. aid to Israel — both before and during the present war — violates that requirement.

“For air advisory missions, which I imagine involve intelligence sharing and training, specific domestic legal restrictions such as the Leahy law and the assassination ban would likely come into play,” McBrien said. But the Leahy vetting process is “reversed” for Israel; rather than vetting Israeli military units beforehand, the U.S. State Department sends aid and then waits for reports of violations, according to a [recent article Opens in a new tab](#) by Josh Paul, who resigned from his post as a State Department political-military officer over his concerns with U.S. support for Israel.

“As a general matter, U.S. officials who are providing support to another country during armed conflict would want to make sure they are not aiding and abetting war crimes,” Finucane told The Intercept. He emphasized that the same principle applies to weapons transfers and intelligence sharing.

The Israeli military intentionally strikes Palestinian civilian infrastructure, known as “[power targets](#) [Opens in a new tab](#),” in order to “create a shock,” according to an investigation by the Israeli news website +972 Magazine. Targets are generated using an artificial intelligence system known as “Habsora,” Hebrew for “gospel.”

“Nothing happens by accident,” an Israeli military intelligence source told +972 Magazine. “When a 3-year-old girl is killed in a home in Gaza, it’s because someone in the army decided it wasn’t a big deal for her to be killed — that it was a price worth paying in order to hit [another] target. We are not Hamas. These are not random rockets. Everything is intentional. We know exactly how much collateral damage there is in every home.”

The Biden administration has gone to great lengths to conceal the nature of its support for the Israeli military. The Pentagon quietly tapped a so-called Tiger Team to facilitate weapons assistance to Israel, as [The Intercept has previously reported](#) . The administration has also declined to reveal which weapons systems it’s providing Israel and at which quantities, insisting that the secrecy is necessary for security reasons.

“We’re being careful not to quantify or get into too much detail about what they’re getting — for their own operational security purposes, of course,” White House spokesperson John Kirby told reporters during a [press briefing](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) in October.

This [contrasts with its support for Ukraine](#) , about which it has been far more transparent. The administration has provided an [itemized list](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) of its weapons assistance to Ukraine, a country facing at least as much of a threat amid the invasion of Russia. The White House has never addressed the incongruity. Past administrations have also provided [detailed public information](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) about U.S. targeting support for the Saudi and Emirati military campaigns in Yemen, which U.S. officials claim was meant to [reduce civilian casualties](#) [Opens in a new tab](#) .

The secrecy “may reflect the fact that the U.S. has interests that are in tension, the Biden administration has interests that are in tension,” Finucane said. “On the one hand, they want to publicly embrace Israel and support Israel, providing what seems to be unconditional support. On the other hand, they don’t want to be perceived as taking the country into another war in the Middle East.”