

Opinion **Israel-Hamas war**

Biden, Netanyahu and America's choice

The temptation is to offer Israel's leader unconditional support but it would be wiser to try to break the cycle of violence

EDWARD LUCE



Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu in New York last month. The US president has more space than his predecessors to play the role of honest broker in the conflict © Avi Ohayon (GPO)/Handout/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

There is no contradiction between reviling terrorism and tackling its roots. Both the following statements are true: Hamas has plumbed new depths of bestial cruelty; Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel has starved non-violent Palestinian alternatives. Joe Biden movingly expressed his anger at the first on Tuesday. He has not publicly acknowledged the second. The world must hope — but cannot assume — that he also made it clear to Netanyahu that he will strongly oppose the collective punishment of Palestinians.

The danger to America in [Israel's response](#) is acute. Besides the risk of a Middle East conflagration, the US will be blamed around the world for any excesses by the Israel Defense Forces. For years, Washington has turned a blind eye to Netanyahu's serial breaking of the Oslo accords. New settlements in the occupied territories, expansion of old ones and the undercutting of the Palestinian Authority have humiliated moderate Palestinians and exposed Washington as a one-sided broker.

The last time America took a stab at two-state negotiations was in Barack Obama's presidency. This was a halfhearted effort up to half a generation ago. When Netanyahu called Obama's bluff he folded. Donald Trump played cheerleader to Netanyahu's increasingly open contempt for [the two-state process](#). Biden has acted as though the Palestinian problem no longer exists. Given his other geopolitical

though the Palestinian problem no longer exists. Given his other geopolitical challenges, Biden's wishful thinking may have been understandable. It has now come back to bite him. America can no longer afford to turn a blind eye.

Two things have changed since Obama's failed attempt to revive peace talks. First, Netanyahu has alienated the large majority of Jewish Americans. The days when Israel could rely on automatic Jewish-American support have gone. For this, the Israeli prime minister is almost single-handedly responsible. In 2015 he broke all protocol when he [opposed Obama's signature Iran nuclear deal](#) in a speech to Congress. Since most Jewish Americans are Democratic, and since the US right has increasingly flirted with antisemitic tropes, this was a reckless gamble. Supporting Netanyahu's Israel became a Republican thing.

Second, Israel has the most hard-right government in the democratic world. Netanyahu has borrowed antisemitic imagery about George Soros from the likes of Trump and Hungary's Viktor Orbán. His logic is that Jews can only be safe in Israel, which gives him a warped affinity for nativist groups across the west. To most non-Israeli Jews, and roughly half of Israel, Netanyahu's ideological bedfellows are repugnant. Yet he is the most moderate member of the government he leads.

Israel-Hamas war

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Netanyahu's alliance with the Trumpian wing of US politics gives Biden more space than his predecessors to play the role of honest broker. Every pore in Biden's body will resist doing that. For almost all of his political career, backing Israel has made bipartisan commonsense. Exactly half a century ago — just nine months after Biden became a US senator — Egypt attacked Israeli forces in the Yom Kippur war. Like today, Israel was caught napping. Unlike today, Israel was the underdog. The safest space for an ambitious Democrat in the following years was to support Israel in all seasons. That is now a contentious position — and a particularly

dangerous one for Biden.

Last weekend's massacres were designed to provoke retaliatory Israeli atrocities in the Gaza Strip, which would validate Hamas's Manichean worldview and its claim to be the chief legitimate voice of the Palestinian people. It would further undercut Fatah's

control of the occupied West Bank and fan extremism in Israel. Each of these knock-on effects would harm America's standing and further undermine Israel's security. The emotional temptation is to offer Netanyahu's government unconditional support. It is hard to hear stories of slaughtered infants and not succumb to blind vengeance. The rational position is to reject the playbook that Hamas wants.

Biden's immediate priority will be to secure the release of American hostages. He has sent an aircraft carrier group to the region. But his overriding goal must be to break the cycle of escalating violence. Last Saturday's killing was horrific, yet should come as no surprise. Gaza, as others have remarked, is the world's largest open-air prison. Netanyahu has deprived Palestinians of hope for the future and peaceful outlets to express their frustrations. John F Kennedy, Biden's original hero, said: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable." Israelis and Palestinians are on the brink of writing an even darker chapter in their history. Biden has the means to hijack that script. It is the most pro-Israeli thing he could do.

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This article has been updated to clarify the details of the 1973 attack

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