

Opinion **Israel-Hamas war**

Netanyahu is an albatross around Biden's neck

Israel's prime minister stands in the way of the two-state solution that is the US president's goal

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The problem with Joe Biden's bearhug strategy is that he has no veto on Benjamin Netanyahu's actions © Brendan Smialowski/AFP /Getty Images

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Lawyers are taught never to ask a witness a question to which they do not know the answer. That logic also applies to wartime alliances. Joe Biden has hitched his fortunes to a man — Benjamin Netanyahu — who is co-creator of the ghastly dilemma with which Israel is now faced. The problem with Biden's bearhug strategy is that he has no veto on the Israeli prime minister's actions. The tool Biden wields is influence. Everything about Netanyahu suggests that behind-the-scenes suasion is not a method that works.

Were it not for Israel's discredited leader, Biden's strategy would be reasonable. Israel feels wounded and threatened; public hectoring by its chief supporter in Washington would only deepen that sense of isolation; that in turn would raise the likelihood that Israel would take blind measures that would further damage its security. Unfortunately that is happening anyway. Biden's well-intentioned case is already being belied by Israel's actions.

White House officials say that Biden's pressure has led Israel to restore internet services to Gaza and permit a limited amount of humanitarian aid into the enclave. It is also possible that the Israel Defense Forces would have entered Gaza sooner and in a more heavy-handed way than is happening. Counterfactuals are hard to prove.

Biden's staff say his [approach](#) is working even though it will be hard to convince the world of that. But their rationale is deteriorating. The case for a sterner Biden approach is made by Netanyahu nearly every day. Last week, Netanyahu cited the prophecies of Isaiah in defence of the coming [war](#). This was a biblical reference to God's protection of the Jewish people. It also served as a dog whistle to Netanyahu's allies in America's evangelical movement. One of them, Mike Johnson, is now speaker of the US house of representatives.

Such talk from Israel's leader and America's de facto leader of the opposition deprives Hamas of its dark monopoly on theocracy. In a social media post since deleted, Netanyahu talked of a [war](#) between "the children of light and the children of darkness". From Biden's point of view, such imagery is disastrous. More than 3,000 Palestinian children are estimated to have died already and that toll is set to grow.

But in crisis there is opportunity. Biden has reiterated that America's goal remains the two-state solution. On the theory that it is darkest before dawn, Hamas's barbaric slaughter and Israel's retaliatory actions have reinforced the case that only a Palestinian state can guarantee Israel's security. The alternatives — a binational secular state, or the status quo — can respectively be dismissed as fantasy and unacceptable. Yet Netanyahu's life work has been about making the two-state solution impossible.

One of the reasons that Israel's security services were caught napping on October 7 is because the IDF's forces were focused on the occupied West Bank. Over the past two years the territory has endured its worst violence since the end of the second intifada in 2005, as Israeli troops have launched almost daily raids. So combustible is the situation in the West Bank that the IDF was nowhere to be found when Hamas unleashed its unspeakable terror. That negligence belongs to Netanyahu.

By some measure, Netanyahu is Israel's worst leader. But Biden does not have the luxury of waiting for history's verdict. Israel's military plan to remove Hamas has to be linked to the political settlement that will come afterwards. Netanyahu stands in the way of Biden's two-state goal. Assuming it is feasible, can eliminating Hamas be done in a way to increase Palestinian support for a non-violent alternative? Who will administer Gaza? The likelihood is that Israel's levelling of parts of Gaza, pressuring Egypt and other Arab states to take its 2.2mn people as refugees, and then retreating behind a more fortified garrison, will only increase Palestinian support for extremism. Israel's next battle front would then be the West Bank.

This is where Biden's approach could turn to disaster. Unless he can pressure

Netanyahu into an improbable change of heart, Israel is set to proceed with what will look to the world like collective punishment, even if it takes every precaution to minimise civilian deaths. Biden will be held responsible. Those who know Biden, rightly say that his approach is sincere. It is also effective politics against a Republican party that is urging biblical revenge on the Palestinians. But that does not make it wise. Like a good lawyer, Biden needs to control his witness. Yet Netanyahu answers to nobody but himself. While Netanyahu remains, Biden's presidency is hostage to a man who will never repay the favour.

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