

## The Inexcusable Omission in Biden's Big Israel Speech-Ceasefire

Alex Shepard, October 19, 2023

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Much of the coverage of Joe Biden's speech in Israel on Wednesday has understandably focused on a warning. "Justice must be done," Biden said, hours after arriving in Tel Aviv. "I caution this: While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it. After 9/11, we were enraged in the U.S. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes."

It was an evocative and apt word of caution. The devastating attacks on civilians perpetrated by Hamas on October 7 recall the brutality of the September 11 attacks. But it's also highly reminiscent of the errors in judgment that can be made in the hot haze of retribution, specifically the lack of concern for civilian deaths in retaliatory strikes and, relatedly, the apparent lack of concern for the potential short and long-term consequences of retaliatory actions in general. Israel, much like the United States did in response to 9/11, has adopted an abstract, possibly unfulfillable goal that justifies endless war: in this case, the eradication of Hamas...

The message was hardly subtle, even if Biden didn't exactly spell it out. After 9/11, the U.S. blundered into two wars that each lasted longer than a decade, destabilized an entire region, and permanently tarnished its reputation. In related remarks, Biden called on Israelis to recognize the humanity of Palestinians, millions of whom are currently trapped in Gaza, with limited access to food, water, and electricity. "The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas," Biden said. "Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people."

... [Parallels to 9/11/2001] are clear. Israel, bent on vengeance, has already killed thousands of Palestinian civilians in retaliation. The conflict is already spiraling out of control, and there is a very real

possibility that it could touch off a regional conflict with profound, devastating, and unknown consequences. Israel may get a feeling of retribution, as America did after 9/11. But in doing so it may unleash a metric ton of devastation, also as America did after 9/11.

By invoking the September 11 attacks, Biden made it clear that he and his administration understand the potential, and indeed likely, risks of Israel's profoundly dehumanizing and destructive response to Hamas's heinous attacks. The problem was that the rest of the speech, in which Biden, in no uncertain terms, made it clear that his administration will continue to back those attacks for as long as possible, undercut the virtuous recollection of September 11. And there was one particular omission that stood out in its grave absence—the one word that could halt this deadly misery: *ceasefire*...

...Biden's speech mostly gave [far-right Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] the political cover to continue striking Gaza with impunity. Thousands of missiles have struck Gaza over the last week, killing more than 3,000 Palestinians... [Biden] went on to say that his administration would be seeking an "unprecedented support package for Israel's defense," to the tune of \$10 billion.

It's impossible to square this gargantuan sum that Biden proposes to hand over to Netanyahu with his other admonitions, which call to mind the small fortunes that were lost to sinkholes in Iraq and Afghanistan. The administration is trying to do two equally impossible things at once. It is urging Israel, as Biden has said, to use restraint and avoid civilian casualties. At the same time, it is pledging to underwrite, to the tune of billions of dollars, weapons that will undoubtedly lead to vastly more civilian deaths.

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