

Biden's Bungles Over Gaza

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*The main press stable was keen to see the scrappy benefits of the 31-hour visit to Israel by US **President Joe Biden**. On National Public Radio (NPR), Scott Neuman [expressed the view](#) that the "largely symbolic" visit did yield a few "concrete accomplishments" including an announcement of \$100 million in Palestinian aid, convincing Israel to permit humanitarian aid into Gaza and persuade Egypt's strongman president **Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi** to open up an access route via land into southern Gaza. If these were seen as achievements, one dare not look at the picture of bright success.*

On an individual level, sharing the same stage with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was always going to be an awkward exercise. A figure reviled and loathed for attacking the judicial system in his own country, and one self-touted as "Mr Security", things looked rather shoddy. Given that Israel's own security was premised on a de facto encirclement and suffocation of Gaza, the occupation of the West Bank, and a virtual hibernation of talks about Palestinian sovereignty - the Israeli PM's competence has been irreparably damaged.

To that, can be added the entire Israeli approach to Hamas, which was dubbed, in a [research brief](#) by the RAND Corporation from 2017 as "mowing the grass" - a less than grand strategy which accepted Israel's "inability to permanently solve the problem and instead repeatedly targeting the leadership of Palestinian militant organizations to keep violence manageable."

Biden was there to serve as prop and stay for a war that is moving into a phase of unceasing slaughter. Slipping into hopeless locker room argot, he whispered his view that the "other team" (to be clear, not Team Israel) had been responsible for the attack on the al-Ahli Arab Hospital that killed hundreds. This is from the same world leader who has made it a habit [to use cue cards](#) when conducting business. (That business is made particularly easier at press conferences, where Biden is seemingly [receiving questions](#) in advance from reporters.)

Things were also made that more interesting by a [casual observation](#) made at Ramstein Air Base en route back to Washington that, while he did not necessarily thumb Hamas as responsible for the intentional bombing of the hospital, “It’s that old thing: got to learn how to shoot straight.”

There was, however, [a note of warning](#) from the President, delivered while in Tel Aviv. Remarking on comparisons of the Hamas attacks on Israel as the country’s own version of 9/11, Biden accepted that,

“Justice must be done. But I caution this: While you feel that rage, don’t be consumed by it. After 9/11 we were enraged in the United States. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.”

Given that these mistakes involved a two-decade war in Afghanistan and a disastrous, destabilising invasion of Iraq that constituted a crime against peace while releasing the monster of sectarianism, the remark must surely win an award for understatement.

Biden’s Israel gambit also lends itself to the prospect for further mistakes. To take the position that Israel is essentially above reproach, certainly publicly, is to flirt with a power potentially engaged in acts of genocide. The line between rogue state and ennobled avenger becomes blurry.

While international law is exacting about the bar on what constitutes genocide (there can be no other inference, essentially, of an [intent to destroy](#), in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group), statements made by Israeli officials, the chilling dehumanising rhetoric towards Palestinians, the collective punishment of the siege, and the evacuation orders of over a million Gaza residents do not auger well for the historical record.

That record is already bulking, aided by suggestions that the Gaza Strip we emptied. *Calcalist*, an Israeli business daily, [was first to report](#) on a plan from Israeli **Intelligence Minister Gila Gamliel** to forcibly transfer Gazans into the Sinai Peninsula. Doing so would “yield positive and long-term strategic results”. While the paper cautions readers about the influence Gamliel exerts in the government, the idea of relocating and ensuring a “final settlement of the entire Gaza population,” is something the Misgav institute for National Security & Zionist Strategy [finds entirely palatable](#).

In an [emergency briefing paper](#) published this month expert lawyers of the US-based Center for Constitutional Rights asserted that there was a “plausible and credible case, based on factual evidence, that Israel is attempting to commit, if not actively committing, the crime of genocide in the occupied Palestinian territory, and specifically against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.”

The authors also warned that the US “is not only failing to uphold its obligation to prevent the commission of genocide, but there is a plausible and credible case to be made that the United States’ actions to further the Israeli military operation, closure and campaign against the Palestinian population in Gaza, rise to the level of complicity in the crime under international law.”

These policies have all been subsumed under the elastic netting of “self-defence”, a term that solidly binds Israel and the United States to an expansive use of retaliatory force. It has assumed the standing of holy writ in US foreign policy, shielding Israel from its more

exuberant uses of violence. On October 18, for instance, the US rejected a Brazil-sponsored resolution calling for a “humanitarian pause” as it, [in the words](#) of US Ambassador to the UN **Linda Thomas-Greenfield**, “made no mention of Israel’s right of self-defence.” Every nation of the world had “the inherent right to self-defence, as reflected in Article 51 of the UN Charter.” If so inherent, why expressly mention it?

On October 25, sharing the podium with his Australian counterpart, **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese** in the Rose Garden, Biden [reiterated the position](#) that Israel not only had the right but a “responsibility to respond to the slaughter of their people. And we will ensure Israel has what it needs to defend itself against these terrorists. That’s a guarantee.”

Sophistically, he sought to separate Hamas from the Palestinian people, a chaff-from-wheat exercise that Israeli politicians and a number of security personnel have distinctly refused to do. “Hamas is hiding behind Palestinian civilians, and it’s despicable and, not surprisingly, cowardly as well.” The task for Israel, then, was positively Sisyphean: “to do everything in its power, as difficult as it is, to protect civilians.”

With such a gulf between rhetoric and reality, the world’s most powerful cue card reader also made sure he would partake in the finest traditions of the IDF public relations effort, disputing the casualty lists released by the Hamas-run health ministry. “I have no notion that Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed. I’m sure innocents have been killed, and it’s the price of waging a war.” At a tag of over 7,000 dead and rising, that’s a considerable amount of expended innocence.

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Featured image: President Joe Biden participates in a restricted bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Hotel Kempinski in Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday, October 18, 2023. (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith)

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