

The Gaza War Calls Into Question the Moral Rectitude of Western Democracies

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The question is no longer if but when the United States will support a ceasefire in the Gaza war.

While the need for a ceasefire to halt Gaza's human carnage is self-evident, some drivers of the Biden administration's debate about the timing of a ceasefire raise questions about the moral underpinnings of Western democracies.

The debate suggests decisions are driven as much by perceived strategic and national interests as by perceptions of political fortunes and electoral calculations, even if that is at the expense of thousands of innocent lives.

To be fair, the Biden administration's balancing of support for Israel's war goals – destruction of Hamas and release of hostages – with the electoral fallout of a confrontation with Israel over a ceasefire works in favour of an earlier rather than a later end to the Gaza war, at least on the administration's timetable.

The United States last week vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate Gaza ceasefire. [Senior Israeli officials worry the US could abstain, or even vote in favour](#), of a similar resolution if, and when, one is again tabled in the coming weeks.

Already, the United States has [reportedly given Israel a three-week deadline](#) for ending the Gaza fighting. The White House denied giving Israel a ["firm deadline."](#)

This weekend, the United States fired a shot across Israel's bow by not stopping the adoption by the World Health Organisation's Executive Board of a resolution calling for the ["immediate, sustained and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief"](#) into Gaza.

In addition to signalling Israel that it cannot continue to count on unconditional support, the United States, a member of the WHO's 34-nation board, likely did not want to be seen opposing badly needed humanitarian aid.

Even so, the fact that limiting the sacrifice of innocent lives doesn't figure, at least not prominently, in US political calculations, particularly given the military and political alternatives available to Israel in responding to Hamas' brutal October 7 attack, calls into question the moral and ethical underpinnings of politics in Western democracies.

It also calls into question the integrity of democratic checks and balances that fail to distinguish between what is right and what is a political rather than a national interest.

The prioritization of political fortune is no truer than for Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu who prides himself on governing a Western democracy.

To be fair, Israeli democracy is likely to ensure that Mr. Netanyahu's political days are numbered once the guns fall silent.

Lack of moral rectitude is equally true for Hamas leaders, although they make no pretence to adhere to democratic and humanitarian norms.

Hamas, even if it survives the war with a political victory of kinds, wantonly sacrificed innocent Gazan lives and made no provisions for a modicum of security for the civilian population in times of war.

Like Israel, Hamas discarded alternatives at its disposal in the way it fights its battles.

To be sure, failure to distinguish between national and domestic political interests pervades national security discussions far beyond the Gaza war.

There may be no immediate or obvious formula for introducing a mechanism capable of making the distinction without taking domestic political interests into account.

Moreover, in a world of extreme polarization, fear, and rage, the survival of a leader, even if he or she lacks the moral rectitude to make preservation of life an imperative, may be perceived as a national interest.

Leaving aside whether President Joe Biden's support for Israel enhances or damages his election prospects, the choice between Mr. Biden and Donald J. Trump, who many perceive as authoritarian or a potentate, is a case in point in the run-up to next year's US presidential election.

Even so, the question remains whether Gaza's population that does not vote in the United States should be required to pay the price of US domestic politics.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict's role in undermining the moral backbone and pillars of democracy goes far beyond Western support for Israel in Gaza.

The war has magnified the successful, years-long Israeli campaign to prevent unfettered debate about the conflict by equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

To put the campaign in perspective, one equivalent would be to assert that criticism of sub-

Saharan nations amounts to anti-Black racism.

To be sure, the lines separating anti-Israel and anti-Zionist attitudes and anti-Semitism are often blurred. Critics of Israel and anti-Zionists have frequently failed to distance themselves from anti-Semitic expressions that, for example, surface at times on the margins of pro-Palestinian protests.

Nevertheless, Israel's successful effort, aided by Western politicians, to impose its narrative on public debate has undermined freedom of expression in democracies and elevated support of Israel to the status of loyalty to one's own country.

It turns on its head the anti-Semitic allegation that Jews cannot be trusted because they have double loyalties to their country of origin and Israel.

A [recent survey of 963 scholars](#), two thirds of whom are based in the United States, illustrated the impact of the Israeli effort.

Eighty-two per cent of all US-based respondents said they self-censor when they speak about the Israeli-Palestinian issue. That figure rose to 98 percent among more junior assistant professors.

Just over 81 per cent of those self-censoring said they primarily refrained from criticising Israel, while 11 percent said they held back from criticizing Palestinians.

Moreover, Israel has managed to enshrine the limiting or banning of criticism of the Jewish state and anti-Israeli activism in the laws and regulations of Western democracies.

Twenty-seven US states have [adopted laws or policies](#) that penalize businesses, organizations, or individuals that engage in or call for boycotts against Israel.

The German parliament [condemned as anti-Semitic the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#) that calls for economic pressure on Israel to end the occupation of Palestinian land, grant Arab citizens equal rights, and recognize Palestinian refugees' right of return.

Israel views the call for the right of return as a veiled quest for the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state because Jews would no longer be a majority.

While having merit in the past, the argument increasingly rings hollow with Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory threatening the viability of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Doubts about the feasibility of a two-state solution have revived debate about one state in which Jews and Palestinians would have equal rights.

Responding to the Israeli concern, the German state of Saxony-Anhalt decided by ministerial decree that [applicants for German citizenship must declare their support for Israel's right to exist](#). The Bundestag, the German parliament is considering making the requirement mandatory nationwide.

Although the German measures may be explained in part by what The New Yorker describes as the "[politics of memory](#)" of the Holocaust, they, like the steps taken by US states,

amount to an undefendable restriction on freedom of expression.

Moreover, criticism of anti-BDS moves does not by definition constitute support for a boycott of Israel. It is, first and foremost, a defense of freedom of choice, including the freedom to choose whose products one buys, with whom one does business, and what one invests in.

It is also a defence of democracy.

“The unprecedented carnage in Israel and Palestine is having repercussions in the United States, [testing pillars of democracy](#) including the fundamental human rights to free speech and assembly,” warned Human Rights Watch’s US program director Tanya Greene.

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