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Biden's Timid Gaza Intervention Won't Count for Much But US Reaction Against Israel has Changed Significantly



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During the Israeli bombardment of Beirut in August 1982, President Ronald Reagan phoned Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to express his “shock” and “outrage” at Israeli airstrikes and artillery fire on the Lebanese capital, demanding that they be stopped immediately. He said that Israeli actions were causing “needless destruction and bloodshed” and had halted US-led negotiations to bring about an end to the crisis.

Reagan made his call from the Oval Office with his senior cabinet members nearby and reportedly shouted at Begin when he at first failed to promise to bring an end to the

bombing and shelling. In the prime minister's office in Israel, Begin is said to have quailed at Reagan's fury and agreed that the attacks would cease immediately.

Compare Reagan's anger and demand for immediate action with President Biden's timid request for an Israel-Gaza ceasefire during the latest of his three telephone conversations with Israeli Prime Benjamin Netanyahu. He did not even ask for an immediate halt to the eight days of Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rocket barrages that have left 200 dead, the great majority Palestinians.

At the same time, the US for the third time in a week blocked the adoption of a joint UN Security Council statement calling for an end to the violence between Israel and the Palestinians. Biden has refused to say that Israel is overreacting.

Biden and his Secretary of State Tony Blinken are doing very little compared to the proactive role of Washington in 1982 in bringing an end to the fighting. This reflects the degree to which the political balance of power has changed in favour of Israel over the past four decades.

During that period, it became hardwired into the minds of American politicians that automatic support for Israel would do them no harm and even tentative support for the Palestinian security and rights would do them no good.

Yet this calculation is not quite as true today, during the present crisis over Gaza, as it was in 2014 when some 2,000 Palestinians and 73 Israelis were killed in a 'war' over 67 days. Today there is significantly more criticism of Israeli actions from within the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and from powerful liberal-inclined media organisations like the New York Times and CNN.

The criticism is of two types. One takes the shape of a generalised revulsion against the violence and a feeling that the US should do more to stop it. More than 25 Democratic senators, led by newly elected Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff, has released a joint statement calling for an immediate ceasefire agreement in Israel and the Palestinian territories to "prevent further loss of life and further escalation of violence."

New and more significant in the present conflict is the emergence of a generation of progressive Democrat politicians who focus on the rights and security of Palestinians in Gaza, Israel, West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Mark Pocas, a Democrat Congressman from Wisconsin, who organised for the issue to be brought to the floor of the House, said: "Today, my colleagues and I stood up because no one should suffer the loss of life, liberty, or dignity that the Palestinian people have

suffered. If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley from Boston took up another theme that has seldom previously got an airing in Congress, saying: “We can’t stand idly by when the United States government sends \$3.8 billion of military aid to Israel that is used to demolish Palestinian homes, imprison Palestinian children and displace Palestinian families.”

There are several factors in play here that have produced political voices speaking not just against the bombing, but equating civil equality for Palestinians with the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. Secondly, the traumatic divisions created by President Donald Trump means that many anti-Trump Americans feel instant hostility to his close allies such as Netanyahu.

It is not merely that progressive Democrats are criticising Israel, but that they are getting plenty of sympathetic airtime and press coverage in a way that did not happen in the past. Will any of this make any difference to Netanyahu’s calculations about how long he should continue the bombardment of Gaza? The likelihood is that it will be a factor, because it was his expertise in dealing with American public opinion that started his political career when he was a diplomat at the Israeli embassy in Washington between 1982 and 1984. He acted as spokesman for Israel during the invasion of Lebanon and eloquently defended air attacks like the ones that so enraged Reagan and his administration.

From the Israeli point of view air and artillery attacks in Gaza today, as in Beirut in 1982, bring contradictory political returns. They are a powerful assertion of raw Israeli military superiority and the inability of the other side to strike back effectively. They are invariably justified by the excuse that they are aimed with pinpoint accuracy at the military facilities of the Palestinians (the targets in both 1982 and 2021 and many times in between).

Yet Hamas are not a regular army, but an ill-equipped paramilitary force that is not much weakened by such bombardments.

These are more in the nature of a collective punishment of the population under attack. Usually, graphic pictures of civilians killed far from any military objective creates a wave of international revulsion. In southern Lebanon, this happened twice in Qana within the space of ten years with 116 Lebanese civilians killed at a UN base in 1996 and 28 killed, including 16 children, in 2006.

Biden may not be as resolute as Reagan, and he is absorbed by his domestic agenda, but he cannot afford in the long run to be shown up as ineffectual and for his call for a ceasefire to be ignored.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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