

In Tel Aviv, Biden's Embrace of Israel Came With a Gentle Warning

SEO HEADLINE **Biden Tells Israel that Gaza Hospital Blast Appears to Be 'Done By the Other Team'**

In a rare wartime visit, President Biden paired his support for Israel with a plea not to let overwhelming grief or anger drive the country to go too far.



By Peter Baker

Traveling with President Biden in Tel Aviv

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As President Biden slowly made his way around a hotel conference room, each of the survivors or relatives of victims of the devastating Hamas attacks in Israel told him their story of tragedy or defiance. One by one, he gave each of them a hug and talked about his own experiences with loss.

In a way, Mr. Biden flew to Israel on Wednesday to give the whole country a hug, to say how much America grieves with Israel and stands by Israel and has Israel's back. But with the hug came a whisper in the ear as well, a gentle warning not to give in to the "primal feeling," not to let overwhelming grief or overpowering anger drive the country to go too far, as he believes America did after Sept. 11, 2001.

"Shock, pain, rage — an all-consuming rage," Mr. Biden said later in a speech to the Israeli nation. "I understand and many Americans understand. You can't look at what has happened here to your mothers, your fathers, your grandparents, sons, daughters, children, even babies and not scream out for justice. 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."



Mr. Biden did not elaborate, but he presumably was referring to the invasion of Iraq, which he voted for as a senator and later came to regret. Nor did he explain what he meant in Israel's case, but the meaning was clear enough. As Israel seeks to destroy Hamas, which killed more than 1,400 people and took nearly 200 hostages, his message was that it should not give in to excesses that cause unnecessary loss of innocent life — and in the process, squander the world's sympathy the way the United States eventually did two decades ago.

The president announced \$100 million in aid to help civilians in Gaza and the West Bank. It is not clear how much he got through to Israel's leaders as they pound Gaza with punishing airstrikes and prepare for a possible treacherous ground invasion. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel clearly heard and welcomed the notes of solidarity; he made no mention of the recommendations of restraint.

Mr. Biden also said his administration planned to request from Congress an “unprecedented” package of aid for Israel. Aides familiar with the plan said about \$10 billion in mostly military assistance for Israel would be part of a roughly \$100 billion request for emergency funds that would also help Ukraine and Taiwan and fortify the U.S.-Mexico border.

The president said he had convinced Egypt to allow 20 trucks of humanitarian aid into Gaza, where the health ministry has said more than 3,000 people have died since Oct. 7.

“If Hamas confiscates them or doesn't let it get through,” then the aid will be cut off, he said, adding that President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt “deserves a lot of credit.”

No American president has ever visited Israel during a war, and Mr. Biden came to its defense on Wednesday not just by offering his symbolically potent presence but by backing its denial of responsibility for the catastrophic explosion that struck a hospital in Gaza. The health ministry in Gaza said hundreds of people were killed.



With the region convulsing with anger and protests after the blast, the president rejected Palestinian claims that the hospital was hit by an Israeli airstrike and instead endorsed the government's insistence that it was an errant rocket fired by Islamic Jihad, an extremist group aligned with Hamas.

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“Based on what I’ve seen, it appears as though it was done by the other team, not you,” Mr. Biden said unprompted as he sat in a Tel Aviv hotel next to Mr. Netanyahu.

“But there’s a lot of people out there not sure,” he said, referring to skepticism in the Arab world. “So we’ve got a lot, we’ve got to overcome a lot of things.”

American officials later said they had multiple strands of intelligence — including infrared satellite data — indicating that the deadly blast was caused by Palestinian armed groups.

The timing of the president’s audacious visit to a nation at war could hardly have been more precarious politically. After an all-night flight from Washington, Mr. Biden arrived in a country traumatized by terrorism and girding for a protracted war against Hamas and put himself at the center of a volatile conflict as rockets and recriminations volleyed back and forth with no end in sight. Air Force One landed at Ben-Gurion International Airport, within range of Hamas rockets from Gaza and abandoned by many international carriers fearful for their security.

As he would for the victims later in the day, Mr. Biden offered warm hugs to Mr. Netanyahu and President Isaac Herzog on the airport tarmac, but his subsequent meetings with the Israeli war cabinet came as broken bodies were being pulled from the rubble of the hospital in Gaza City. It seemed unlikely that an American exoneration of Israel for the hospital blast would convince many in the Arab world, where furious demonstrations have broken out in capitals around the region.



The Lebanese authorities used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesters near the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, and the Israeli-occupied West Bank was on high alert after protests erupted within hours of the blast. In Bahrain, protesters took to the streets in unusually large demonstrations, chanting “death to Israel” and carrying images of Mr. Biden’s face labeled with the word “war criminal,” according to videos shared by Bahraini activists.

Nonetheless, Mr. Biden was determined to allow no daylight between him and Israel in public. “I want you to know you’re not alone,” the president said with the cameras on. “You’re not alone. As I emphasized earlier, we will continue to have Israel’s back.”

Still, the whisper in the ear was there for those who wanted to hear it. “The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas,” Mr. Biden said in his remarks. “Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people.”

At least some appeared to hear. Even before Mr. Biden landed, the newspaper Yediot Aharonot referred to the president’s embrace in a headline as a “bear hug” — a phrase that in Hebrew, the Jewish Insider newsletter noted, “refers to holding someone close in order to restrain him, not just to show love.”

The Israeli prime minister preferred his own definition, recounting for Mr. Biden the horrors of the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, describing women being raped, soldiers being beheaded and children hunted down in hiding places in their homes. “Just imagine, Mr. President, the fear and the panic of those little children in their last moments as the monsters discovered and found out their hiding places,” Mr. Netanyahu said.

Mr. Biden heard some of those stories firsthand when he met with survivors and relatives. Several cried as they related their experiences and thanked him effusively for coming.

Among them was Rachel Edri, a retired grandmother who was held at gunpoint in her home for 20 hours and used food and conversation to keep her captors calm and stall them until she could be rescued. Her son, Evatar Edri, is a policeman who

helped free his parents.

Another survivor was Amir Tibon, who huddled in the dark with his wife and two daughters for 10 hours as his kibbutz was attacked by Hamas gunmen until his father, Noam Tibon, a retired general, rushed to his rescue armed only with a handgun.

Rarely has an overseas presidential expedition been so uncertain even in its itinerary at the time of takeoff, and so freighted with jeopardy both political and physical. By making such a high-profile personal visit as Israel exacts its retribution, Mr. Biden effectively risked taking some ownership of Mr. Netanyahu's actions.

The trip began unraveling even before Mr. Biden left Washington, as a planned second stop in Amman, Jordan, for a four-way summit meeting with Arab leaders was abruptly canceled by King Abdullah II after the hospital explosion. Aides said Mr. Biden would instead speak by telephone during his flight home with two of the Arab leaders he was supposed to meet in Amman: President el-Sisi of Egypt and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority.

Some of Mr. Biden's senior aides learned only during the motorcade ride to Joint Base Andrews outside Washington that the Jordan stop was being scrapped, and they rushed to confirm it before Air Force One took off.

John F. Kirby, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council, played down the rupture, saying that Mr. Abbas felt compelled to leave Amman to return to the West Bank to observe three days of mourning for the hundreds killed at the hospital.

"He absolutely had to go home," Mr. Kirby said. "We understand that." He cited the mourning explanation repeatedly to undercut any impression that it was a snub by Mr. Abbas.

A foreign trip by an American commander in chief is normally a highly choreographed affair, mapped out to the minute with predictable and scripted results. Likewise, presidents are not typically brought into conflict zones where

their security is uncertain.

When Mr. Biden's predecessors visited Iraq and Afghanistan, they did so in secret, with no announcement until they had safely landed. Even then, they were kept within the confines of American military bases. When Mr. Biden made a clandestine trip into war-torn Ukraine earlier this year, that too was kept hidden until he arrived in the capital, Kyiv.

By contrast, Mr. Biden's trip on Wednesday was announced in advance, stunning even some administration officials. Israeli officials, perhaps more accustomed to a certain degree of risk, even publicly disclosed the president's arrival time and the location of his planned meetings with the prime minister and war cabinet as if it were all routine.

Never mind that the visiting Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken had to be rushed along with Mr. Netanyahu to a bunker at Israeli military headquarters in Tel Aviv when air raid sirens sounded on Monday, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany had to be rushed off his plane at Ben-Gurion airport during a visit on Tuesday.

Security was tight as the president made his way into Tel Aviv, with roads flanked by soldiers armed with assault rifles. But while air raid sirens sounded elsewhere in the country during his stay, the president made it through more than seven and a half hours on the ground without hearing any himself.

He raced back to the airport in his motorcade at top speed and then offered the Israelis on the tarmac one last Biden embrace, in this case a more restrained set of handshakes and arm grabs. Then he disappeared into Air Force One and took off for home.

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent for The Times. He has covered the last five presidents and sometimes writes analytical pieces that place presidents and their administrations in a larger context and historical framework. [More about Peter Baker](#)

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