



Biden's Rhetoric on the Israel-Hamas War and the 2024 Election

by Jayden Fogel

BESA Intern Insights No. 1, July 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With the 2024 US Presidential election quickly approaching, President Joe Biden's response regarding the Israel-Hamas war was under intense scrutiny. Throughout his political career, President Biden has maintained a firm pro-Israel stance, yet he faced a divided Democratic party with both strong pro-Israel and vocal pro-Palestinian factions during his re-election campaign. In his State of the Union address in March 2024, President Biden underscored Israel's right to defend itself while simultaneously emphasizing the need to protect Palestinian civilians, an attempt to appeal to diverse voter demographics. Strategic initiatives including the Gaza Pier and signing H.R.815 display his support for both Palestinian humanitarian aid and Israeli security. Nonetheless, President Biden's sporadic threats to withhold military support to Israel and the perceived oversight and neglect of American hostages have fueled criticism and debate and have raised concerns about the impact of an election on the US-Israel relationship. It begs the question of how President Biden's conflicting rhetoric will impact Vice President Kamala Harris's approach to the Israel-Hamas war, especially in relation to her impending candidacy nomination.

With the 2024 United States Presidential election only four months away, every action matters for candidates Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump. As of July 20, 2024, President Joe Biden was the incumbent and unofficial Democratic nominee. During his re-election campaign, he had to navigate responding to the Israel-Hamas war, which has continued to headline the news since October 7th, influencing foreign policy and the candidates' positions on this controversial matter. President Biden has continued to support Israel throughout his presidency. He attempted to win over a Democratic party that appears to be split; many American Jews align with the Democratic party, yet a vocal, pro-Palestinian minority do as well. President Biden was struggling to appeal to a large, divided voter population. While many Americans view this war as Israel vs Hamas, an Iranian backed terrorist group, others view it as Israel vs Palestinians. President Biden's rhetoric and actions regarding the conflict shifted with the upcoming election as he tried to retain and gain voters.

President Biden spoke to United States citizens during his State of the Union address on March 7, 2024. He stated firmly that "Israel has a right to go after Hamas" and that "Israel has an added burden because Hamas hides and operates among the civilian population." President Biden continued by saying, "But Israel also has a fundamental responsibility to protect innocent civilians in Gaza." When making a positive comment about Israel, the President often includes a comment relating to the conditions for Palestinians in Gaza. He knows he cannot leave out either perspective and he will receive disapproval from both sides for not being outwardly supportive enough. Notably, he never mentioned antisemitism in the State of the Union, which drew criticism from American Jewish organizations.

Furthermore, during his speech, President Biden announced the Gaza Pier, an initiative to supply humanitarian aid to Gaza civilians. He said, "Tonight, I'm directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters. No US boots will be on the ground." The temporary pier was intended to increase the amount of aid brought into Gaza daily. This pier posed a threat to Hamas as they aim to control essential supplies. Hamas's control over humanitarian aid creates dependency from the Palestinian citizens that reinforces its governing power. The floating pier was constructed near Gaza City in

late April and allowed millions of kilograms of food to enter Gaza. As of late June, the pier has been moved to Ashdod due to weather concerns; it is unclear if the floating pier will be returned to Gaza City.

President Biden's attempt to appeal to both sides continued during the State of the Union. President Biden said, "I pledge to all the families that we will not rest until we bring their loved one's home." While his general statements have been supportive of bringing the hostages home, the five Americans held hostage in Gaza do not seem to be prioritized. It appears President Biden is treating the American hostages as Israeli citizens instead of American citizens. It is essential to bring home all remaining hostages from Gaza as soon as possible, but as Chief Diplomat, it is President Biden's role to emphasize the need to bring the Americans home. He could have sent a strong message to Hamas during the week following October 7th to demand the release of the American hostages immediately; that never happened. At this point, nine-and-a-half months later, his lack of an iron-fisted response could be attributed to not prioritizing working with international partners to secure their release.

On the contrary, President Biden tweeted on July 20, 2024, "From the very first day of my Administration, I have been committed to seeking the release and safe return of all Americans wrongfully detained and held hostage abroad." The second paragraph of the tweet read, "I won't rest until Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan are in the arms of their families." President Biden named two men being held in Russia with no mention of the American hostages in Gaza. This tweet could be perceived as insensitive to the American Jewish community and demonstrates a further lack of prioritization on President Biden's part.

Moreover, on April 24, 2024, President Biden signed H.R.815 into law, which included the Israel Security Supplemental Appropriations Act, Hamas and Other Palestinian Terrorist Groups International Financing Prevention Act, Strengthening Tools to Counter the Use of Human Shields Act, and End Financing for Hamas and State Sponsors of Terrorism Act. H.R.815 supplied Israel with funding to defend itself, mentioned Congressional briefings about the hostages, provided humanitarian aid for Gaza, and outlined sanctioning those involved with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. All verbiage related to Israel was supportive, noting that arms and training would be provided. Referring to H.R.815, President Biden said, "I

strongly support this package to get critical support to Israel and Ukraine [and] provide desperately needed humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza.”

President Biden’s support for Israel continued to be inconsistent when in early May, he threatened to withhold these arms from Israel. The President told a CNN reporter, “I made it clear that if they go into Rafah... I’m not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities – that deal with that problem.” He proceeded with, “we’re going to continue to make sure Israel is secure in terms of Iron Dome and their ability to respond to attacks that came out of the Middle East recently... But it’s, it’s just wrong. We’re not going to...supply the weapons and artillery shells.” These statements were highly controversial, and many believe that this backfired amongst American Jewish voters. However, regardless of his statements, President Biden still sent Israel the arms he signed into law through H.R.815. This rhetoric may be interpreted as an attempt to appeal to anti-Israel voters. Any inconsistent comments that President Biden makes has a negative effect on the stability and unification of the American people.

Throughout the duration of the war, President Biden has played an essential role in working toward a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. He maintains that Hamas is the party at fault for not agreeing to a ceasefire, while simultaneously expressing his disagreements with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. President Biden was also the first US President to visit Israel during wartime, demonstrating that he continues to strive for a balanced approach to the war while condemning Hamas’s terrorism. His rhetoric towards the conflict may have been tempered at times to increase voters, but his actions continue to support Israel, even if they are not as strong as people may like. Looking towards the November election and future elections, it is concerning that the US-Israel relationship has become extremely politicized for electoral gain in both the Democratic and Republican parties. This is creating further polarization within the US and is undermining constructive dialogue and solutions. It will be interesting to watch any shifts in President Biden’s approach to the Israel-Hamas war as he transitions to endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris for President.

Because President Biden and Vice President Harris still work in tandem under the Biden Administration, President Biden’s policies remain significant and may trickle down to how Vice President Harris approaches the issue as she navigates a

presidential campaign. While Vice President Harris supports Israel and its right to defend itself, like President Biden, she has expressed some conflicting rhetoric. In the past, Vice President Harris has said that “international humanitarian law must be respected,” implying that Israel might not be adhering to these laws. Yet, in a statement from the White House in December 2023, Vice President Harris explains, “When this conflict ends, Hamas cannot control Gaza, and Israel must be secure. Palestinians need a hopeful political horizon, economic opportunity, and freedom. And the region, more broadly, must be integrated and prosperous. And we must — we must work toward that vision.” Vice President Harris follows a similar pattern to President Biden, while staying more moderate and consistent. Nevertheless, we must now watch closely while the US navigates its relationship and support for Israel during this time as the 2024 election approaches.

Jayden Fogel is a rising third year at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. She is double majoring in Political Science and Spanish with a minor in Legal Studies. Previously, Fogel interned for US Senator Tammy Duckworth in Washington, D.C.; the Education Justice Project in Champaign, IL; and the Jewish United Fund in Chicago, IL.