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Peter Berkowitz

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COMMENTARY

On Oct. 10 in an address to the nation, President Joe Biden pledged unequivocal U.S. support for Israel. Hamas had perpetrated an “atrocious on an appalling scale,” said the president. “We stand with Israel,” he declared, and reiterated in closing, “Let there be no doubt, the United States has Israel’s back.”

Biden promised to “make sure Israel has what it needs to take care of its citizens, defend itself, and respond to this attack.” He indicated that he had encouraged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to proceed in a manner that was “swift, decisive, and overwhelming.” America’s commander in chief stressed that his administration was “surging additional military assistance, including ammunition and interceptors to replenish Iron Dome” and was “going to make sure that Israel does not run out of these critical assets to defend its cities and its citizens.”

Painfully aware that Americans were among those kidnapped by the terrorists, the president said that he had advised his team to cooperate closely with Israeli counterparts on hostage recovery efforts.

Joe Biden rose to the grim occasion. Many difficult days lie ahead for Israel in coming to grips with the origins and horror of the 10/7 attacks, defeating the jihadists, and handling the daunting geopolitical ramifications.

On the Jewish Sabbath, the last day of Sukkot, and almost exactly 50 years to the day of Egypt’s surprise attack in what came to be known as the Yom Kippur War, Iran-financed Hamas jihadists launched a surprise attack that inflicted the greatest single-day loss of civilian life in Israel’s history. The first-day death toll now exceeds 1,000; it includes 260 young people gunned down by the terrorists in the early morning light at an all-night music fest in the desert near Gaza and the execution of babies, some of whom were beheaded. More than 2,000 were wounded during that awful day. In the first 24 hours, Hamas savages also seized and transported to Gaza at least 100 hostages and perhaps considerably more – children, teenagers, young adults, and senior citizens – while raping women and desecrating corpses.

Hamas' 10/7 attacks on Israel have been compared to al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the United States. Considered proportionally, the devastation in Israel is much greater. In a nation less than 1/30 the size of the United States – which on 9/11 suffered approximately 3,000 deaths at the hands of al-Qaeda jihadists, relatively few wounded, and no hostages – that amounts to the equivalent of more than 30,000 people murdered in cold blood by Hamas jihadists, more than 60,000 wounded, and more than 3,000 taken hostage. In a country situated in a vastly more hostile neighborhood than the United States, Hamas' rampage through Israel's southern border towns, moshavim, and kibbutzim in pursuit of civilians to humiliate, rape, murder, and kidnap and the organization's bombardment of south and central Israel with thousands of rockets have provoked a swifter, and likely more devastating reaction from Israel than America's initial rout of the Taliban in Afghanistan and eventual removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Hours after Hamas killers glided over and broke through Israel's security barrier – and sought, unsuccessfully thanks to Israel's navy, to invade Israel by sea – Netanyahu put Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in a new category. The four previous rounds of armed conflict with Hamas since 2005 – when Israel withdrew every soldier and civilian from Gaza – had been limited operations designed primarily to suppress rocket fire on civilians. This conflict was different. "Citizens of Israel, we are at war, not in an operation or in rounds of conflict, but at war," he stated. "I have ordered an extensive mobilization of reservists and that we return fire of a magnitude that the enemy has not known."

Later in the evening in formal remarks to the nation, Netanyahu effectively scrapped his longstanding policy, which has been to contain Hamas and even work with Gaza's Islamist rulers to maintain the status quo. Israel's new aim is to drastically alter the status quo. "What happened today has not been seen in Israel," the prime minister proclaimed. Netanyahu used unprecedented language to promise an unprecedented response to the unprecedented invasion and massacre of civilians: "The IDF [Israel Defense Forces] will immediately activate all its power to annihilate Hamas' capabilities. We will strike them to the point of utter destruction, and we will powerfully exact revenge for this dark day that they brought down on Israel and its citizens."

In brief remarks, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant echoed the prime minister's unsparing assessment and stern resolve. In its monstrous and indiscriminate attack on Israel's civilian population, Gallant said, Hamas committed a "grave error" for which "it will pay the price." Unlike "in the past," Israel "will act with full strength" to "change the face of reality in the Gaza Strip 50 years forward."

Oscillating between heartbreak and rage, Israelis across the political spectrum support the government's war aims.

Following the intelligence failures that permitted hundreds of Hamas killers to break into Israel, the slowness of Israel's initial military response, the heroism of Israeli civilians, and the courageous and painstaking efforts by security forces to rescue the communities under siege in southern Israel and track down the remaining terrorists, Israel is taking the offensive. The IDF is gearing up for a major military campaign. Since the morning of Oct. 7, waves of Israeli airstrikes have hit hundreds of Hamas targets in Gaza. The government mobilized 300,000 reservists in 48 hours; another 60,000 were called up by the war's fourth day. Tanks and other weapons have flowed into the south. Meanwhile, by mid-week, U.S. supplies of munitions and military equipment had reached Israel, an American carrier strike group had arrived in the eastern Mediterranean, and the United States had increased its fighter aircrafts in the region.

The military offensive that Netanyahu and Gallant promised is bound to be extended and costly. As Israel prosecutes its just war of self-defense against Hamas barbarism, three considerations should be kept in mind.

First, the real cause of the Oct. 7 attacks is the jihad that Hamas was founded to undertake against Israel. Yes, Israel has been embroiled with internal strife since January and, yes, Iran funds Hamas and apparently helped plan the assault on Israel. Those realities form part of a full account of the 10/7 attacks and of the failures of Israel intelligence and deterrence. But they acquire their meaning within Hamas' Islamist religious war against Israel. As Andrew McCarthy has explained time and again, jihad "is not a personal struggle but a collective one, the obligation to wage a holy war to impose the sharia system on the world, and especially to impose it on territory, such as Israel, that Muslims consider to be Islamic."

Accordingly, the 1988 Hamas Covenant states: "The Islamic Resistance Movement is a distinguished Palestinian movement, whose allegiance is to Allah, and whose way of life is Islam. It strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine, for under the wing of Islam followers of all religions can coexist in security and safety where their lives, possessions and rights are concerned." Hamas does not seek to liberate Gaza but to conquer Israel. Notwithstanding the pretty words about religious coexistence in Hamas's charter, Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities have been persecuted and killed everywhere jihadists have raised Allah's banner.

Second, Hamas has grotesquely violated the international laws of war, and Israel has every right under those laws to disarm Hamas, dismantle its terrorist networks, and destroy its capacity to wage war against the Jewish state. Hebrew University Law School professor Yuval Shany observed that "Hamas has committed a long list of crimes in this attack" that "have been documented, including the killing of civilians, taking civilians captive, and abusing the bodies of civilians and soldiers." That observation does not go nearly far enough. Hamas also commits war crimes with the thousands of rockets that it showers on Israel's civilian population. And Hamas commits war crimes by positioning its offices, armaments, and operations in civilian areas in Gaza. Consequently, the injuries to and deaths of Gaza

Palestinians resulting from Israel's air strikes aimed at Hamas targets – and from the coming ground campaign intended to vanquish Hamas – stem as a legal matter from Hamas' war crimes and are Hamas' responsibility.

Third, the United States has a vital national security interest for Israel, as President Biden told Prime Minister Netanyahu, to defeat Hamas swiftly, decisively, and overwhelmingly. This would deal a major blow to Iran's quest to impose its brand of Islamic theocracy on the whole of the Middle East. It would encourage the Saudis to expand cooperation with Israel and the United States. And, with the Chinese Communist Party closely monitoring events, it would advance the interests of freedom and democracy in the region and show that in a moment of great danger friends and partners can count on America.

Biden's pledge of unequivocal U.S. support for Israel is just and necessary because Israel's cause is just and because America's interests are advanced by Israel's achieving a crushing victory over the savage Hamas jihadists and their nefarious Iranian paymasters.

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