

What Is Biden Telling Bibi? Seymour Hersh

The US President travels to Israel while Gaza City is razed to the ground.

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The White House and the Central Intelligence Agency are once again at loggerheads, as they were during Ukraine's losing war against Russia, over the facts on the ground after President Joe Biden suddenly decided to fly to Israel again, reportedly at the request of Benjamin Netanyahu, the beleaguered Israeli prime minister.

Biden showed that, as he put it, he would have Israel's back by moving two American carrier battle groups into the region, along with thousands of U.S. troops. It would have been better if he had done what America has often done: announced that his administration would begin transporting water and food to the hundreds of thousands of Gaza citizens who were driven out of the north by Israel and landed at a border gate with Egypt that Netanyahu and his colleagues had to know would not be opened.

Biden's trip comes at a time of international outrage after the main hospital in Gaza City was destroyed by an Israeli bomb or a misguided Islamic Jihad rocket, killing hundreds. The President said he was primarily delivering a message of restraint. If so, the President was completely in the dark about Israel's intentions.

In an interview Sunday with 60 Minutes, Biden was asked if it was time for a ceasefire in Gaza. Biden ignored the question and said the Israelis "have to move against Hamas. Hamas are cowards...They move their headquarters to where there are civilians and buildings...but the Israelis will do everything in their power to avoid killing innocent civilians." He said he was discussing the possibility of a safe zone – a humanitarian corridor – for Gaza City residents who fled after being told that Israel was determined to destroy everything in the city. Asked if Hamas "has to be completely eliminated," Biden answered in the affirmative, adding that there must be a "path to a Palestinian state."

A Palestinian state is not on Israel's agenda

There are intelligence analysts in Washington who estimate that Netanyahu, who is emerging as the strongman in Israel's new emergency government, has no intention of letting any member of Hamas survive. They believe he is indifferent to what has happened to Gaza City residents who have fled south to Egypt and now find themselves without food or water and faced with the reality that economically beleaguered Egypt has no interest in opening its border to a million or more refugees in need of food, shelter and medical care.

Netanyahu's stance, I was told, amounts to "wiping out" Hamas, according to intelligence analysts. One knowledgeable official told me that "Gaza City is about to be turned into a Hiroshima without the use of nuclear weapons." Later, he said, American bombs from the Israeli arsenal, including so-called "bunker busters," could be directed at the underground tunnel systems where Hamas was manufacturing weapons and planning attacks in southern Israel on Oct. 7. The daily Israeli bombardment of Gaza City has led many in the Middle East and Europe to conclude that it was an Israeli bomb that hit the Gaza City hospital.

According to Israeli plans, there would be no need for a massive ground invasion, but I was told by the official that Israeli troops would be needed to locate those Hamas members underground who decide to surrender. The instructions, the official said, were to "shoot on sight." Surrender would not be an option. The official told me that the Hamas soldiers who came out of the tunnels desperate for food were viewed by the Israelis as starving rats who would be confronted with poisoned food. The fate of the nearly two hundred hostages, most of whom are Israeli but include some Americans, went unsaid.

From the perspective of U.S. intelligence, the Hamas raid failed in every respect.

"Hamas believed," I was told by the official, "that the success of their raid, which was planned over two years, would win the Arab world to their cause. They thought that Hezbollah," the powerful Lebanese party controlled by Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, "and the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] in the West Bank would support them."

The U.S. assessment is that the Hamas leadership began planning the attack two years ago and "now," the official said, "was the right time." He explained that the Hamas leadership was "absolutely terrified" that the ongoing talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia would lead to further isolation of groups that oppose Israel.

The main supporter of the Hamas raid, I was told, was the Iranian government, whose leadership in Tehran was directly involved in providing money and materials for the Oct. 7 attacks.

"The Iranians," the official said sarcastically, "want to attack Israel with every Palestinian they can find." But "Iran did not realize how many civilians would be killed. Hamas was drenched in blood."

Arab scholar Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan, recently published an essay in the Telegraph outlining four ways in which the Hamas raid violated Islamic law. Hamas killed innocents, including women and children; it destroyed a city; it did not give fair warning; and it took civilians hostage. Cole quoted the Prophet Muhammad:

“Do not kill weak old men, small children, or women.”

There were similar reactions from Hezbollah and in Damascus. Despite Western fears, I was told, there is no evidence that Hamas’ uprising served as inspiration for Israel’s enemies.

“In the Great Game,” the official said, “it was a chess game in which Hamas was a pawn.”

Netanyahu’s plan, the official told me, called for the Israeli army to kill any Hamas members it could find, destroy the tunnel system-perhaps using American bombs that can penetrate dozens of feet underground before exploding-and then seal off the southern part of what was once Gaza City. Israeli soldiers would be tasked with searching block by block in the destroyed city for survivors. Care would be taken to ensure that no Hamas survivors escape into the Mediterranean Sea.

In recent days, the Biden administration has deployed two U.S. aircraft carrier groups with squadrons of F-15, F-16 and A-10 fighter jets, more than 10,000 Navy personnel and 2,000 Marines to the region to assist Israel.

“All the American services are jumping on it,” the official told me, “but Israel says, ‘Go back. We don’t want your help.’” He continued, “There are no better pilots today than those in the Israeli Air Force. Bibi has the situation under control, and no Israeli will worry about the fate of Gaza’s citizens.”

So the official asked,

“Why is Biden knocking on the door? Is the president going to tell Bibi, ‘You can’t do this’? Leave the Gaza refugees at the border with Egypt.”

The official did not answer his rhetorical question. But he asked if one reason for the president’s sudden trip “might not be to keep the Ukraine war out of the headlines?”

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Featured image: President Joe Biden participates in a restricted bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Hotel Kempinski in Tel Aviv, Israel, Wednesday, October 18, 2023. (Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith)

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