

Biden decries 'evil' Hamas attack, says Americans being held hostage

The president vows to stand by Israel, saying it has a 'duty' to respond to terrorist assault

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The Washington Post**

President Biden said Tuesday that Americans were among the hostages being held by Hamas, in addition to 14 U.S. citizens who have been killed, and he vowed that the United States would stand by Israel as it responds forcefully to the surprise attack on its soil.

Keeping up with politics is easy with The 5-Minute Fix Newsletter, in your inbox weekdays. Biden, who did not provide a number of U.S. hostages, added that Israel has not only a right but a “duty” to respond to the onslaught by Hamas, which has left hundreds dead. His speech was the first official confirmation that Americans were being held captive, although officials had earlier suggested that was likely to be the case.

“As president, I have no higher priority than the safety of Americans being held hostage around the world,” Biden said. “Like every nation in the world, Israel has the right to respond and indeed has a duty to respond to these vicious attacks.”

Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said that the administration could not confirm the number of hostages but that at least 20 Americans were missing. Sullivan stressed that did not necessarily mean there were 20 or more U.S. hostages.

Overall, between 100 and 150 people are being held in Gaza, according to an Israeli official, and Hamas has threatened to execute civilian hostages if Israeli airstrikes continue.

Biden, delivering remarks from the State Dining Room in the White House, flanked by Vice President Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, spoke in unusually vivid terms about the assault itself.

“There are moments in this life when pure, unadulterated evil is unleashed in this world,” he said, referring to “stomach-turning reports of babies being killed” and “women raped, assaulted, paraded as trophies.”

The president's remarks came three days after Palestinian gunmen from Hamas infiltrated Israel and launched the deadliest attack in the country since the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The surprise attack, during which Hamas gunmen hunted civilians in their homes and cars, killed at least 900 people and wounded 2,700 in Israel. It was a severe psychological shock to a country that prides itself on its intelligence apparatus and military readiness.

The onslaught sparked a major retaliatory bombing campaign by Israel in the Gaza Strip that has killed more than 750 people, Palestinian authorities said.

Israel said Tuesday that it had regained control of its border with Gaza and was preparing to launch a full-scale military initiative. Brig. Gen. Dan Goldfuss of the Israeli 98th Division said that the military is now "moving into the offensive ... to change the reality within Gaza to prevent such a thing from happening again."

That suggests a multiday assault, potentially the first full-scale Israeli ground invasion of the Gaza Strip in almost a decade. While Israel's stated goal is to cripple Hamas, civilians in Gaza are almost certain to find themselves in harm's way. Israeli airstrikes in the past few days have killed an unknown number of civilians, including children, according to Palestinian health officials.

Israeli officials have made several requests to Washington in response to the Hamas attack, including a replenishment of Iron Dome ground-to-air missile interceptors, small-diameter bombs, ammunition for machine guns and heightened cooperation on intelligence-sharing, particularly in southern Lebanon, according to U.S. officials familiar with the requests, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss military strategy.

Israel's request for Iron Dome interceptors is a precautionary step in anticipation of future bombardments, not an indication that it is running low on a missile defense tool that has been key to shielding Israelis from incoming rocket fire, officials said. Military operations could last several weeks, and Israel made the request in case other regional actors join in, according to officials familiar with the request.

Biden said his administration has already surged some military assistance to Israel, including ammunition and the missile interceptors. But congressional approval would be required to replenish those stocks.

The State Department announced Tuesday that Blinken would be flying to Israel on Wednesday in a significant show of support for the reeling country.

He is expected to meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials to receive an update on the security situation and ask what else the United States can provide to Israel as it works to free hostages and destroy Hamas's operational capacity.

In his White House remarks, Biden said he would ask Congress to quickly approve a military aid package for Israel when lawmakers return to Washington. The Senate is scheduled to reconvene next week, while the House is struggling to choose a new speaker after the ouster of Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).

It is not clear whether the chamber can take official actions, such as approving military aid, until a new speaker is selected. GOP Reps. Steve Scalise (La.) and Jim Jordan (Ohio) are vying for the job, but neither appears to have secured the near-unanimous support from House Republicans that would be required to claim the speakership.

White House officials said that they do not need congressional approval to begin providing aid but that they will need Congress to replenish stocks.

Rep. Jason Crow (D-Colo.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, told reporters after a classified briefing about the Israel-Gaza crisis that not having a speaker was impeding the chamber's ability to respond to the fast-moving events.

"Americans should see that without a functioning House and without a speaker of the House, when you have a crisis like this, we are handicapping our ability to respond," Crow said. "We should be taking up the bipartisan resolution today. We should be moving forward a security supplemental today."

Complicating matters further, the White House is considering inserting aid for Ukraine, which is fighting an invasion by Russia, into its emergency spending package for Israel. Officials hope that such a pairing would enable Ukraine funding to slip through despite the opposition of some Republicans.

Several GOP lawmakers have already expressed disapproval of the idea, saying they should not be forced to vote for Ukraine aid, which they oppose, simply because it is tied to funding for Israel, which they overwhelmingly support.

"If we get a speaker tomorrow, I think we could move on an Israel aid package almost immediately and not link all these things," Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.) said following a classified meeting between the House Intelligence Committee and administration officials.

Gallagher, who favors providing aid to Ukraine, said lawmakers are more supportive of Israel because they have a more personal connection to that country than to Ukraine, noting that Israel is America's closest ally in the Middle East.

In his remarks Tuesday, Biden sought to draw a distinction between Hamas as a terrorist organization and ordinary Palestinians who are seeking an independent state. Hamas "does not stand for the Palestinian people's right to dignity, self-determination," he said. "Its stated purpose is the annihilation of the state of Israel and the murder of Jewish people."

Biden added: "They use Palestinian civilians as human shields. Hamas offers nothing but terror and bloodshed with no regard to who pays the price." He compared Hamas's tactics to those of the Islamic State, the terrorist group that has launched brazen attacks in the Middle East and Europe and beheaded captives.

At the same time, Biden seemed to signal Israel that it should take care to minimize civilian casualties during the expected incursion into Gaza.

The president said he told Netanyahu in a phone call earlier Tuesday that Israel's response to the attacks should be "swift, decisive and overwhelming." But he said the two leaders also agreed that democracies like Israel and the United States uphold the laws of war and do not target civilians.

"Terrorists purposely target civilians," Biden said. "It matters. There's a difference."

Human rights groups have said it is often impossible for civilians in the crowded, urban Gaza Strip to identify what locations might be safe from Israeli bombardment. Israel's blockade and airstrikes, which have shut down Gaza's sole exit into Egypt, mean Gazans cannot leave the territory.

U.S. officials are working to head off the chance that the violence could escalate into a wider war in the Middle East, and the president warned other actors in the region not to see this as an opportunity to jump into the conflict. In particular, officials worry that Hezbollah, a militant group based in Lebanon, could launch its own attacks or that Iran could find a way to turn up the pressure on Israel.

"For anyone thinking of taking advantage of the situation, I have one word: Don't. Don't," the president said. "Our hearts may be broken, but our resolve is clear."

Israel earlier this week announced a "full siege" of Gaza, cutting off supplies of food, electricity and fuel to the densely populated enclave of 2 million people, where conditions are already difficult because of a years-long Israeli blockade.

The U.N. high commissioner for human rights warned Tuesday that such a comprehensive siege would be a violation of international law and warned of Palestinian civilians being subjected to “collective punishment.”

Biden and Harris met with their national security teams Tuesday, the White House said, and both were on the call with Netanyahu. Biden said he had spoken to Netanyahu three times since Saturday.

Biden has been a strong supporter of Israel throughout his political career, even as other Democrats have become more critical of the Jewish state and supportive of the Palestinians. Biden often recounts, as he did again Tuesday, how he met Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir 50 years ago as a young senator around the time of the Yom Kippur War.

Biden’s relationship with Netanyahu, however, as at times been chilly.

Netanyahu has not shied away from signaling a marked preference for Republicans when it comes to American electoral politics, and Biden has criticized the prime minister’s planned overhaul of his country’s judicial system, a potential change that has prompted massive demonstrations by Israelis who consider it anti-democratic.

But in the weeks before the Hamas attacks, Biden extended a long-awaited invitation to Netanyahu to meet with him at the White House, suggesting a potential thaw. And the crisis seems to have drawn the two leaders closer.

“In this moment we must be crystal clear,” Biden said. “We stand with Israel.”