

Biden urges help for Israel and Ukraine in high-stakes Oval Office speech

President links the two conflicts as he makes a sweeping argument for America's global role

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The Washington Post

President Biden delivered an impassioned Oval Office speech Thursday urging Americans to stand by Israel and Ukraine as they face ruthless but very different adversaries, asserting that the world is at “an inflection point in history” and making the case for billions in aid to both countries at a time when such assistance is under attack from a variety of quarters.

“ Hamas and [Russian President Vladimir] Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common: They both want to completely annihilate a neighboring democracy,” Biden said.

“American leadership is what holds the world together,” he added. “American values are what make us a partner that other nations want to work with. To put all that at risk if we walk away from Ukraine, if we turn our backs on Israel, it’s just not worth it.”

Biden said he planned to send a request to Congress on Friday for aid to Israel and Ukraine. White House officials have been considering a package that could cost as much as \$100 billion, although that figure remains in flux, according to people briefed on the matter.

Thursday’s address marked a striking effort by Biden to link two global crises that have consumed much of his presidency, and he made a broad moral and practical argument about America’s critical role in the world.

“History has taught us that when terrorists don’t pay a price for their terror — when dictators don’t pay a price for their aggression — they cause more chaos and death and more destruction,” Biden said. “And the cost and the threats to America and the world keep rising.”

The speech culminated an extraordinary week for Biden, who set aside his schedule for a whirlwind trip into a war zone to appear alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The trip is likely to stand out as a signature moment of his presidency, though the outcome is far from certain as the Middle East remains engulfed in violent turmoil.

The immediate political question for Biden after Thursday's address, however, is whether he can successfully link a terrorist assault in the Middle East with a slogging ground war in Eastern Europe, keeping up public support for both efforts. Republicans have grown increasingly wary of sending more aid to Ukraine, even while they enthusiastically back assistance for Israel.

The president said sending aid to Israel and Ukraine is a "smart investment that's going to pay dividends for American security for generations." Biden argued that helping both countries win their respective wars would make the United States safer without putting American troops in harm's way.

While emphasizing the steadfast U.S. support of Israel, Biden reiterated his warning against being driven by fury. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, he said, "We made mistakes. So I caution the government of Israel not to be blinded by rage. And here in America, let us not forget who we are."

Biden also stressed the humanity of the Palestinian people and again distinguished them from Hamas. He said the United States needed to provide humanitarian assistance in Gaza, where Israel's aerial counterattack and siege of the densely populated enclave have led to rapidly deteriorating conditions and a humanitarian crisis.

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres on Thursday urged "rapid, unimpeded access for humanitarian aid" to the Palestinian enclave, citing an "ever-mounting toll" on civilians who have lacked water, food, fuel and electricity for more than a week. Hospitals in Gaza are being overrun with casualties from Israeli airstrikes, with patients sleeping on floors and some facilities turning off lights off to save energy, according to Palestinian health authorities.

During Biden's lightning trip to Tel Aviv on Wednesday, he announced a deal with Israeli officials to allow humanitarian aid to reach the more than 2 million Gazans, though parts of that deal remained uncertain on Thursday.

“We can’t ignore the humanity of innocent Palestinians who only want to live in peace and have an opportunity,” Biden said. “The people of Gaza urgently need food, water and medicine. ... We’re going to provide an opening for sustained delivery of lifesaving humanitarian assistance for Palestinians.”

The president warned against antisemitism and Islamophobia, citing the death of a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy in Chicago this week who was stabbed to death by his landlord in an incident being investigated as a hate crime. In recent days, both Jewish and Muslim groups in the United States have reported an increase in attacks.

“We must, without equivocation, denounce antisemitism,” Biden said. “We must also, without equivocation, denounce Islamophobia.”

In the hours before the speech Thursday, Biden called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to reassure him that Kyiv would continue to receive America’s backing.

The portion of the aid package going to Israel would be aimed at strengthening the country’s Iron Dome air defense system, Biden said. The United States has already positioned two aircraft carriers and their escort ships near Israel and sent thousands of soldiers and Marines to staff them, driven by concern that the conflict could flare into a broader regional war.

Biden’s effort to link the two conflicts is likely to face immediate challenges.

He will have to overcome resistance from a significant number of House Republicans who have been agitating to slash aid to Ukraine — in some cases, to nothing. America, they argue, has little at stake in a faraway war between two remote countries, and the money would be better spent on such uses as securing America’s southern border.

Those lawmakers, many of them among the chamber’s most conservative, have wielded increased influence in recent months while pushing out Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) as House speaker and seeking to install a leader more friendly to their agenda.

Any Biden request to Congress will now encounter a House in disarray as Republicans struggle to unite behind a new speaker. GOP leaders had considered a proposal to expand the powers of interim speaker Patrick T. McHenry (R-N.C.) so

the chamber can resume functioning. But that proposal lacked majority support, and for now the House lacks a mechanism to pass any legislation.

Public support for Ukraine is also slipping. A Washington Post-ABC poll last month found 41 percent of Americans said the United States was doing too much to support Ukraine, while 50 percent said it was doing about the right amount or too little. Among Republicans, however, 59 percent said the United States was doing too much to aid Kyiv.

Reflecting that dynamic, Biden spent a good portion of his address warning about the risks of abandoning Ukraine to Putin's aggression. He recalled the secretive trip he made to Kyiv in February with only a handful of security agents accompanying him, a visit that in some ways was similar to his trip Wednesday to Israel while it was in a state of war.

He recounted taking a special train from Poland to Ukraine. "When I exited that train and met President Zelensky, I didn't feel alone," Biden said. "I was bringing with me the idea of America, the promise of America, to the people who are today fighting for the same things we fought for 250 years ago."

Support for Israel has received greater bipartisan backing. But a handful of liberal Democratic members of Congress have called for a cease-fire without publicly supporting Israel, prompting Jean-Pierre to criticize their statements as "disgraceful."

Biden's appeal comes against the backdrop of an Israel-Gaza war that is very much ongoing. Israeli airstrikes continued Thursday, including in so-called safe zones in the south, such as Khan Younis, where Israeli leaders urged Palestinians to head in advance of the invasion.

At least 1,400 people in Israel have been killed and more than 4,500 injured since the unprecedented cross-border Hamas attack on Oct. 7, Israeli authorities have said, when militants hunted down and attacked civilians. Palestinian officials have said that 3,785 people in Gaza have been killed and more than 12,400 wounded in the airstrikes that Israel has launched in response.

Biden is not the only world leader seeking to balance support of Israel with efforts to relieve Gaza's humanitarian crisis and head off a wider spread of the war. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak traveled to Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia this

week. “We will work together to ensure regional stability and prevent a dangerous escalation,” Sunak said Thursday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The White House is calculating that a single aid package that includes both Israel and Ukraine would be harder for members of Congress to vote against, especially Republicans whose skepticism on funding Ukraine might be overcome by their urgent desire to send aid to Israel.

The linkage is also a way for Biden to make a sweeping argument that the United States has a duty to stand by democracies wherever they may be — in opposition to the “America First” approach of his leading Republican challenger, former president Donald Trump.

Biden has made the argument for a fraternity of democracies in recent days as he urges Israel to minimize civilian casualties in its response to the Hamas killings.

“What sets us apart from the terrorists is we believe in the fundamental dignity of every human life — Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Jew, Muslim, Christian — everyone,” Biden said during his brief trip to Israel. “You can’t give up what makes you who you are. If you give that up, then the terrorists win. And we can never let them win.”