

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Roundtable Discussion With Jewish Community Leaders
October 11, 2023

The President. Please, everybody, sit down.

Second Gentleman Douglas C. Emhoff. Thank you. Please be seated. Good afternoon. Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I want to start by just saying the Vice President and I are outraged at these horrific terrorist attacks in Israel perpetrated by Hamas. We are outraged. With our broken hearts, we are sending our love, our strength, and our unwavering support to the people of Israel.

I am honored to be with all of you today as an American, as a patriot who loves this country, but also as a Jew. And like all Jews, I feel a deep, visceral connection to Israel and its people.

We witnessed a mass murder of innocent civilians. It was a terrorist assault, and there is never any justification for terrorism. There are no two sides to this issue.

The images that we saw will be seared in our brains forever: rockets falling on cities, people dragged from their homes and shot dead, children sheltering from bullets, bodies lining the streets. And all the while, we see videos of these terrorists cheering on these atrocities.

The toll on Israel and the Jewish community is hard to imagine, but we can imagine it because it's happening. And I know many of you have sent texts and calls this weekend checking on loved ones. And I know too many of you received heartbreaking replies. And we know today that at least 22 Americans won't be coming home.

I know you're all hurting. The entire Jewish community is hurting. I'm hurting. We grieve with you. We stand with you.

But thank God we have the steady leadership of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris during this unthinkable time in our history. Their moral compass, their calm and empathy are what we need in this time of crisis. And we saw that yesterday when President Biden, with Vice President Harris and Secretary Blinken by his side, powerfully addressed the Nation and made clear to the world that Israel has the United States' unwavering support.

Our President and Vice President are making sure Israel has what it needs to defend itself. We are grateful for their leadership and support for Israel at this exceptionally difficult time.

We also acknowledge and address how these events will impact us as Jews, which is why we're here to have this discussion. And I know many of us feel a deep fear that these attacks will unfortunately and already have led to a rise in hate and anti-Semitism. We're already seeing it. And that's why this discussion and the work you and your organizations do is so vitally important.

Almost a year ago, I sat right in this spot in this very room, and many of you were here with me that day. And, then, we called attention to the epidemic of hate that we're facing. And following that meeting, we took action.

And in May, the Biden-Harris administration released the first-ever National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism. The plan includes over 100 meaningful actions we are taking right now to fight back against anti-Semitism and hate. And each of you played a role in crafting this strategy. We couldn't have done this without you. So thank you for the work that you've done, that you're continuing to do.

And, as we're going to discuss later, myself and the Biden-Harris administration officials are working with Federal, State, and local leaders to implement this plan across the country. We are going to continue to bring people together, and importantly, we're going to build coalitions to fight back against hate.

We cannot do this alone. The story of the Jewish people has always been one of perseverance and resilience. In dark times, we come together and we fight back, and we also seek to build a better world.

Last year, before my trip to Poland and Germany, President Biden took me into the Oval Office. He told me how his father had taught him about the horrors of the Holocaust and how he later traveled to Dachau with his children and grandchildren to teach them those same lessons.

So I know firsthand how important it is to President Biden to preserve our Jewish history and to make sure that hate has no safe harbor in America and the world. As an American Jew, I am so grateful that, in this moment of tumult and pain, we have Joe Biden as President and Kamala Harris as Vice President.

It is now my honor to introduce a true advocate for the Jewish community. Please join me in welcoming President Joe Biden.

The President. Thank you. Please. Please.

Folks, I came, first of all, to say thank you. Thank you to all of you in this room. You not only care, but you've—you've been breaking your neck over the last couple years to deal with this overall issue of anti-Semitism.

Now, I know many of you are personally impacted by what's happened in Israel. There are thousands of dual citizens. Maybe some of your relatives are there.

And, Doug, I want to thank you for all the work you've done on behalf of our administration to combat anti-Semitism.

[At this point, the President cleared his throat.]

And I apologize. I've been on the phone around the clock with our friends around the world, quite frankly, discussing what's going on in Israel.

And I want you to know that—I want to thank you as well for—all of you as well for working—the work you're doing to bring comfort and—in this moment of grief, for those of you who are grieving as well.

And you'll read this weekend in synagogue, the Torah teaches us that God made the stars to, quote, "Give light on the Earth . . . and separate light from darkness"—"give light on the Earth . . . and separate light from darkness."

You know, it's been hard to find that light during the darkness of these past few days, when terrorist groups like Hamas brought not only terror, but sheer evil—sheer evil—to the world. Evil that echoes the worst and matches—in some cases, exceeds—the worst atrocities of ISIS. More than 1,000 civilians slaughtered in Israel.

And by the way, I've been speaking with a number of Israeli leaders, a number of leaders around the world, leaders in the region as well. And you know, among those who have been victimized—this evil, who would—who have been killed are at least 22 American citizens.

This attack was a campaign of pure cruelty—not just hate, but pure cruelty—against the Jewish people. And I would argue it's the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust—the deadliest day since the Holocaust, one of the worst chapters in human history that reminded us all that—that expression I learned from my dad early on: "Silence is complicity."

I'm not—I mean, silence is complicity. It really is. And I want you to know—I think you've already figured it out—I refuse to be silent, and I know you refuse to be silent as well.

And you all—I know you're here with my senior staff. You all represent a voice that America has to hear. America is not—can't be silent.

You know, we not only reject terrorism, but it goes beyond that. It goes beyond rejecting terrorism.

You know, I spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu for—I don't know how many times this—but this—again this morning. And already we're surging additional military assistance to the Israeli Defense Force, including ammunition, interceptors to replenish the Iron Dome. And we have moved a U.S. carrier fleet to the Eastern Mediterranean, and we're sending more fighter jets there into that region and made it clear—made it clear—to the Iranians: "Be careful."

We want to make it real clear: We're working on every aspect of the hostage crisis in Israel, including deploying experts to advise and assist with recovery efforts.

Now, the press are going to shout to me—and many of you are—that, you know, "What are you doing to bring these—get these folks home?" If I told you, I wouldn't be able to get them home.

Folks, there's a lot we're doing—a lot we're doing. I have not given up hope on bringing these folks home. But the idea that I'm going to stand here before you and tell you what I'm doing is bizarre. So I hope you understand how bizarre I think it would be to try to answer that question.

In the days ahead, we're going to continue to work closely with our partners in Israel and around the world to ensure Israel has what it needs to defend its citizens, its cities, and to respond to these attacks.

As I said yesterday, my commitment to Israel's security and the safety of the Jewish people is unshakeable. The United States has Israel's back. And I have yours as well, both at home and abroad.

You know, you can see the pain in some your faces as I walked into this room. You okay, kiddo?

Well, your fear for family, friends back in Israel. You worry about kids being targeted in school about—about going about their daily lives. You're hurt by the downplaying of Hamas's atrocities and blaming Israel. This is unconscionable.

And I have asked members of my team, including Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas and Attorney General Garland, to work intensively with our Jewish community partners, so many of you here—to set up security around Jewish life in America, identify, prevent, and disrupt emerging threats that occur.

You know, we're also going to continue to condemn and combat anti-Semitism at every single turn—at every turn. You know, the past few days have been a solemn reminder that hate never goes away.

If you'll hold on a second, I used to—I used to think you could defeat hate, that you could make it—all it does is go underground. It just goes underground. It doesn't go away. It only hides until it's given a little oxygen—a little bit of oxygen.

And that's why I've secured the largest ever increase in funding for physical security for nonprofits—including synagogues, Jewish community centers, Jewish day schools—and in May, released the first-ever National Strategy To Counter Antisemitism with the input from many of you in this room. Many of you in this room helped write that.

It's the most ambitious, comprehensive effort to combat anti-Semitism in American history—in all of American history. And we're aggressively implementing it.

But—but—we must all do our part and forcefully speak out against anti-Semitism and push back against the attempts to deny or distort the facts. To make clear, there is no place for hate in America—not against Jews, not against Muslims, not against anybody.

And we mourn the act—an act that you and so many leaders have, across the country, been showing us what thousands of years of Jewish history has shown us: the enduring strength—and I mean this sincerely—the enduring strength and spirit of the Jewish community.

If you'll excuse a point of personal privilege—they used to say in the Senate—that's why I took my kids—every one, when they turned 14 years old, one at a time, I put them on a plane and took them to Dachau. I wanted them to see that you could not not know what was going on walking through those gates. You could not fail to understand as a country what was going on. And that's a fact.

It had a profound impact on my children and my grandchildren. Some thought taking a 14-year-old grandchild was a mistake, but I took them one at a time. I've got three more to go. And, folks, it's important.

You know, the miracle of Israel is Israel. It's Israel itself: the hope it inspires, the light it represents to the world.

And, folks, I was asked to—in one of my very frank conversations with Bibi and with Herzog. Said, "Why do I feel so deeply about this?" It's not about the region. I truly believe, were there no Israel, no Jew in the world would be ultimately safe. It's the only ultimate guarantee. The only ultimate guarantee. The only ultimate guarantee.

And, folks, because of you—and I mean this sincerely—because of you speaking up, because of the intensity and the intellect and the brilliance you bring to this cause, I think we have a chance to end this in a way that is—that makes it very difficult for it to be repeated.

I want to thank you for your leadership. And, as I said, there's a lot to talk about. And—but I'm really, quite frankly, concerned as to—it's hard to talk about this without detail. And it's contrary to our interests to let out the detail of what we're going on.

I mean, this is just around the clock, as you understand—you fully understand. But, you know, I've known Bibi for over 40 years in a very frank relationship. I know him well. And the one thing that I did say that it is really important that Israel, with all the anger and frustration and just—I don't know how to explain it—that exists is that they operate by the rules of war—the rules of war. And there are rules of war.

And I believe Israel is doing everything in its power to—to pull the country together, stay on the same page, and we're going to do everything in our power to make sure Israel succeeds and, God willing, to bring home those Americans who are in harm's way.

I'm going to let you all have the private conversation you've been having, which you should continue to have. But I just came to basically—I really mean it from the bottom of my heart; I give you my word as a Biden—thank you. Thank you for the intensity of your support. It matters. It matters that Americans see what's happening.

I mean, I've been doing this a long time. I never really thought that I would see and have confirmed pictures of terrorists beheading children. I never thought I'd ever—anyway. I——

But there are countries in the region that are trying to be of some help, including Arab nations that are trying to be of some help. So, anyway.

The President's Faith/Drawing Courage From Faith

Participant. Mr. President, where do you draw strength and inspiration in these troubling times?

The President. From my faith. From my faith—my faith that—that at the core of every human being is a spark of humanity and decency, and it's got to be touched. It's got to be spoken to. That's what you do. That's why you're here.

It's not about, you know, revenge. It's about—it's about decency, just basically decent—just basic decency. Treating people with a sense of—I don't know quite how to say it. But I know we can overcome this. I know we can overcome this.

Look, I don't know anything about the kind of loss that's talking—but I know a little bit of what it's like to feel loss, lose people you adore, get a phone call saying they're gone. I get that part. Not the same, but I get that part.

And what I've learned is that as we persevere, we can grow. And the day will come when the memory of that person or those persons will bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eye. It will happen. It will happen, but, God, it takes a long time sometimes.

And when it's borne out of something that has been anything from a mistake to a vicious, vicious intent, you know, it varies in degrees. I'm not saying I know the same, but I just—look, I mean, I'll never forget—well, I won't go into that.

Anyway, I just think that if we stay true to our values, pursue with every inch and every bit of our energy to get this right, we can bury this again and bring people back—bring people home and bring them together, I think we can—I think we can change the Middle East. But then again, I have been referred to as a congenital optimist.

And I'm not going to answer any questions from you guys right now, but my team here knows, when—when the press is gone, they'll talk more directly to you. But even then, they're not going to be able to tell you all that we're doing and all that's going on. So——

Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America Executive Director of Public Policy Nathan J. Diament. Not a question, sir, but we—may we please say thank you. Eighty years ago this week—eighty years ago this week, a group of 400 rabbis came to Washington hoping to meet with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and appeal to him to act to rescue the Jews who were being persecuted in Europe, and they were refused a meeting with President Roosevelt. They were refused entry to the White House.

And the fact that we are here today and you have spoken as the President of the United States so clearly in support of Israel, so clearly in support of the Jewish people, and so—and welcomed leaders and representatives of the Jewish community into the White House for this discussion shows what a dramatic distance we've traveled in these United States, how we as the Jewish community are blessed to live today in these United States. And we thank you for your leadership and your moral clarity.

The President. Thank you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:29 p.m. in the Indian Treaty Room of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to President Isaac Herzog of Israel. He also referred to his grandchildren Naomi K. Biden Neal, R. Hunter, Natalie, Finnegan, Maisy, and Beau Biden, and Navy Joan Roberts.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Jewish community leaders, roundtable discussion.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden Neal, Naomi K.; Biden, Ashley; Biden, Beau; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, R. Hunter; Biden, R. Hunter, II; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Diamant, Nathan J.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Garland, Merrick B.; Herzog, Isaac; Mayorkas, Alejandro N.; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Roberts, Navy Joan.

Subjects: Anti-Semitism; Attorney General; Counterterrorism and homeland security; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Hostages and U.S. nationals detained overseas, repatriation efforts; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization; Israel, attacks by Hamas; Israel, President; Israel, Prime Minister; Israel, relations with U.S.; Israel, security cooperation with U.S.; Jewish community leaders, meeting with President; Secretary of Homeland Security.

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