

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on the Situations in Israel and Gaza and an Exchange With Reporters at Ramstein Air Base, Germany

October 18, 2023

The President. Hey, guys.

Q. Hi, sir.

Q. It's good to see you.

The President. I wanted to bring you up to date. I just got off the phone with——

Q. Hold on, sir. Hold on. Hold on.

The President. ——with President Sisi of Egypt.

When we took off, my goal was multifold, but basically to get humanitarian aid into Gaza and to get as many Americans out who wanted to get out—could get out as possible.

And so, we got a commitment, as you know, from the Israelis, including their unanimous vote of their war cabinet and the Prime Minister.

And the second thing was that I wanted to make sure there was a vehicle, a mechanism, that this could happen quickly.

And so I have been on the phone for the last—I don't know. We've been on the ground a while. That's why we haven't taken off——

Q. About an hour.

The President. ——with Elsis. I don't think I was on that long. It was about probably half an hour. And both—my team here was with me.

And he agreed that what he would do is open the gate on—to do two things: one, let up to 20 trucks through to begin with.

Satterfield, my Ambassador, is down there in—not down there—in Cairo now. He's going to coordinate this. He has my authority to do what is needed to get it done.

They're going to patch the road. They have to fill in potholes to get these trucks through. And that's going to occur; they expect it will take about 8 hours tomorrow. So there may be nothing rolling through until—what's today? I'm losing track of days.

Q. Wednesday.

The President. Thursday? Wednesday? Probably until Friday.

Gaza/Humanitarian Situation

Q. Is this the Rafah Crossing you're talking about?

The President. Yes.

Q. Okay. So Sisi agreed to open that up?

The President. Yes. For this purpose. For this purpose. Not to allow a lot of people out, but to open it up for this purpose.

Humanitarian Assistance for Gaza

Q. For humanitarian assistance?

The President. For the humanitarian—for the trucks to be able to get through.

Q. And is that just——

Q. Twenty trucks?

The President. Well, look, what I—you guys are such a pain in the neck. You know?
[Laughter]

Q. Sorry, sir.

The President. But I—here's the deal: up to 20 trucks. This has been a very blunt negotiation I've had. And so we want to get as many of the trucks out as possible. There's, I guess, 150 or something there. Not all of them will go the first tranche. If there's a second tranche—see how it goes.

The commitment is, if in fact they cross the border, the U.N. is going to be on the other side distributing this material—offloading it and then distributing it, which is going to take a little time to set up, probably.

But the point being that if the—if Hamas confiscates it or doesn't let it get through or just confiscates it, then it's going to end, because we're not going to be sending any humanitarian aid to Hamas if they're going to be confiscating it. That's the commitment that I've made.

And so the bottom line is that Elsisi deserves some real credit because he was very accommodating and, quite frankly, as everyone that I've spoken to thus far since this trip began.

And I—but the Admiral is going to stick here and other team—answer any real hard questions. And I'm going to get the hell out of here before you start asking about the House of Representatives. [Laughter] Okay?

The President's Travel Schedule/The President's Regional Diplomatic Efforts

Q. Are you disappointed that you had to cancel the stop in Jordan?

The President. No. [Laughter] Disappointed? Look, I came to get something done. I got it done. If it—if I didn't—if I did—wasn't able to make it into the—into Israel, I got it done—I'd get it done. This is—as you guys know, this was a—let me choose my words here.

Not many people thought we could get this done, and not many people want to be associated with failure. And there was, quite frankly, a lengthy—lengthy, hour or more discussion about whether to go. Because had we gone and this failed, then, you know, the United States failed, Biden's Presidency failed, et cetera, which would be a legitimate criticism.

And right now I have a very good relationship with the Jordanian King. It's close. I know him well, and I also spent time on the telephone in the past with the Palestinian Authority leadership. But they're all in a tough spot——

Jordan-U.S. Relations/Palestinian Authority

Q. That was today?

The President. No, no, no. Just over the last 5 years—10 years.

And—but they—we're putting all of them in a tough situation if we didn't get this done. And so, it had to be, in my view, we either—either took all the blame or—and not have put anybody else on the spot of being put on the spot—or get it done. And I thought it was worth taking the chance to get it done.

Q. We were told you were going to ask——

President AbdelFattah Said ElSisi of Egypt/Hamas Attacks in Israel/Middle East Peace Efforts/Regional Integration

Q. So, you talked to Sisi for quite a—quite a long time to work this out. Was he reluctant to—to do this?

The President. Not at all. He was completely cooperative.

Q. Okay.

The President. I've had a decent relationship with him. He's got his own problems on other issues. He's got—his entire border is—there's wars going on on every side of his country. [Laughter] And so he was—I've known him a while. He was, fair to say, very cooperative.

I mean, there was no—I thought I'd have to spend more time trying to convince him on the timing, but he was—he stepped up. And—as did Bibi. And I was, as you—well, they probably told you, I was very blunt with the Israelis.

And—because, look, Israel has been badly victimized, but you know, the truth is that if they have an opportunity to relieve suffering of people who are—have nowhere to go, they're going to be—it's what they should do. And if they don't, they'll be held accountable in ways that may be unfair, but that's what we—and my point to everyone is, look, if you have an opportunity to alleviate the pain, you should do it. Period. And if you don't, you're going to lose credibility worldwide. And I think everyone understands that.

Humanitarian Corridors for Gazan Refugees

Q. What about getting people out? [Inaudible]—people evacuate?

National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John F. Kirby. Guys, we've got to—we've got to let the President get back——

The President. The answer is, we're going to get people out, but I'm not going to go into any detail with you now.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. All right. We've got to wrap up guys. We've got to wrap it up.

Q. Anything more about the hospital, sir?

Humanitarian Assistance for Gaza

Q. You said you were very blunt with the Israelis on the need to get humanitarian aid to Gaza, or what exactly?

The President. On everything. [Laughter] We—no, I was very blunt about the need to support getting humanitarian aid to Gaza—get it to Gaza and do it quickly. And——

Press Secretary Jean-Pierre. All right.

The President. And that——

Press Secretary Jean-Pierre. Sorry, sir. I don't want to step on you.

Q. Any more about the hospital, sir?

The President. Well, don't. Okay? [Laughter]

Potential U.S. Involvement in Israeli Military Operations

Q. May I ask you about—there's a report in the Times of Israel that says "Biden officials have indicated to Israel in recent days that if Hizballah initiates a war against Israel, the U.S. military will join the IDF in fighting the terrorist group."

The President. Not true.

Q. Not true?

The President. That was never said.

Israeli Military Operations

Q. Do you think there's a lesser chance now that Israel won't go in and—into Gaza and that can be averted?

The President. We had a long talk about that and what alternatives there are. Our military is talking with their military about what the alternatives are, but I'm not going to go into that either.

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza

Q. Did you find Bibi receptive to the humanitarian argument you made and——

The President. Yes.

Q. Was there any pushback from him, or you felt that——

The President. No.

Q. ——you were able to get across that——

The President. But we've had a number of discussions on this. It's not new. Look, I don't know what you picked up in Israel, but I got no pushback. Virtually none. Let me say it again: I got no pushback.

Q. From the Israelis or from every——

The President. From——

Q. ——all the partners here?

The President. All the partners. Virtually none. And this is—look, it's—at any rate.

But I'm hopeful we can get some Americans out as well of Gaza, and I'm—hopefully, we will continue to work towards getting other Americans out through other means as well.

The President's Meeting With Israelis Impacted by or Involved in the Response to the Hamas Attacks Against Israel

Q. Can you talk about the impact of meeting survivors and the first responders?

The President. That's all personal. Look, I—I spent an hour and a half, about, with 17 or 18 before—I spent with them and—I don't know how to say this.

Virtually every mass shooting, every circumstance where a large number of people have been victimized and lost, I've spoken with them. I learned a long time ago, which you've all learned in your life as well, when someone is going through something that is beyond their comprehension that they never thought they'd have to go through, if they see someone who they think understands or maybe been through something—not the same, but similar—it gives them some sense of hope.

And I always get criticized sometimes by my staff because when I go to these events, I stay for 3 or 4 hours and answer all their questions. But it matters. It matters a lot.

And look, I'm talking—some of you have gone through a hell of a lot more than I've gone through and a lot more than other people have gone through, and you understand.

So it's just—it's just a—people are looking for just something to grab, something that gives them some sense of hope. And that's—if I can do a little bit of that, then it's—you know, it's worth doing. It was done for me, so——

Okay?

Q. You said that the hospital, sir——

Q. Do you think it was necessary for you to come here to get this deal done? Was the in-person diplomacy aspect really important here?

Israel-U.S. Relations

The President. What do you think? I'll let you answer that.

Speaker of the House of Representatives Selection Process

Q. You joked about the House. Do you have any view of Jim Jordan and his predicament at the moment?

The President. Do I have any what?

Q. Do you have a view of Jim Jordan's current predicament, unable to secure the Speakership?

The President. I ache for him. No. No. [*Laughter*] Zero. None. None.

Q. Mr. President——

Explosion at the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, Palestinian Territories

Q. How about the hospital, sir? People all over the region are upset about the hospital and don't necessarily believe you or the Israelis that they didn't have anything to with it. Do you have a message to the people in the streets right now?

The President. Well, I can understand why, in this circumstance, they wouldn't believe. I can understand that.

And—but I would not—you'll notice I don't say things like that unless I have faith in the source from which I've gotten it. Our Defense Department says it's highly unlikely that it was the Israelis. It would have had a different footprint. And they've intercepted some—anyway.

They—and so that's why, if you notice, I didn't say it at first. I didn't—I wanted to make sure that I knew.

And look—and I'm not suggesting that Hamas deliberately did it either. It's that old thing: You've got to learn how to shoot straight. You know, and it's not the first time Hamas has launched something that didn't function very well.

So I don't know all the detail, but I do know the people at the Defense Department, who I respect, and the intelligence community that I respect, and it's highly improbable that Israel did that.

Q. Mr. President, is—are the Israelis operating within the rules of war that you talked about last week being so important?

The President. It's been good talking to you all. [*Laughter*]

Q. Thank you, sir.

Strategic Communications Coordinator Kirby. Thanks, everybody. Thanks, guys. Thank you.

Q. Thank you, sir.

Q. Appreciate it.

Q. John, do we have more?

Strategic Communications Coordinator Kirby. Do you have more questions?

[*At this point, Strategic Communications Coordinator Kirby continued the gaggle.*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:19 p.m. in the press cabin aboard Air Force One. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel; U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues David M. Satterfield; and King Abdullah II of Jordan. A reporter referred to Rep. James D. Jordan. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the full remarks of Strategic Communications Coordinator Kirby.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Israel and Gaza situations, remarks at Ramstein Air Base, Germany; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

Locations: Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

Names: Abdullah II, King; Elsis, Abdelfattah Said; Jean-Pierre, Karine; Jordan, James D.; Kirby, John F.; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Satterfield, David M.

Subjects: Egypt, President; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Gaza, explosion at Al Ahli Arab hospital; Gaza, humanitarian situation; Gaza, international assistance; Germany, President Biden's visit; Germany, Ramstein Air Base; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Israel, attacks by Hamas; Israel, Prime Minister; Israel, relations with U.S.; Jordan, King; National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications; Palestinian Authority, relations with U.S.; U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues; White House Press Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300916.