

He believed that so long as Hamas was a going concern, he could slow momentum toward a two-state solution.

Yet now Prime Minister Netanyahu wants to claim that implementing a plan for a two-state solution with the Palestinian Authority would be a “reward” or “gift” for Hamas.

This is a con game. Everybody knows that Hamas’s aim has been to destroy Israel in order to establish an Islamic State in its place. Indeed, the split between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority has been over the PA’s recognition of Israel’s right to exist and its commitment to peaceful means to achieve a two-state solution versus Hamas’s goal of one state and its use of violence to pursue those goals.

So Prime Minister Netanyahu has it exactly backward. A real two-state solution, especially coupled with a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia, as President Biden has proposed, would be a strategic defeat for Hamas; it would be a victory for Israel’s long-term security; and it would be an important signal to the overwhelming majority of Palestinians who have nothing to do with Hamas and who have pursued a peaceful but still unfulfilled path toward self-determination.

It is true that a two-state solution would not only be a defeat for Hamas, it would also be a defeat for Ben Gvir, Smotrich, and Netanyahu—all of those who pursue maximalist one-state positions. It would be a defeat for all those who seek to claim all the land between the river and the sea for themselves.

Let’s be clear: Prime Minister Netanyahu may use different language and tactics, but he has shown that his goal is no different than the extremist allies he brought into his coalition. In fact, he recently boasted about his strong opposition to former Prime Minister Rabin’s decision to enter into the Oslo Accords, which were designed to lead to a two-state solution.

We should remember that Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated by a rightwing Israeli who saw peace as a threat because he wanted Israel to have all of the land and opposed Rabin’s decision.

Given Prime Minister Netanyahu’s misplaced belief that he was successfully managing Hamas prior to October 7, it is no wonder he doesn’t want to meet face-to-face with the Israeli families who lost loved ones, whom I spoke to on Friday. Instead, he wants to come to the United States to convince Israelis that the United States stands with him personally and supports his words and actions. He repeatedly tells his fellow Israelis that he knows best how to handle America in an attempt to boost his very low popularity ratings in Israel.

But the reality is that the actions, words, and policies of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his extremist partners have weakened the U.S.-Israel relationship, and we in the U.S. Congress should not be complicit in his ongoing political deception.

Let me just say that much of Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech here will likely focus on the very real dangers posed by Iran and its proxies to Israel and others in the region.

President Biden and the United States understand full well Iran’s malevolent role in the region. We have been working for years to contain Iranian proxy militias in Iraq.

President Biden deployed our naval vessels to secure shipping lanes in the Red Sea as the Houthis have launched attacks since the start of the war in Gaza.

President Biden has deployed aircraft carriers in the early days of the war to deter escalation by Hezbollah. The Biden administration is, right now, working around the clock to get Hezbollah to redeploy its forces north of the Litani River.

And the United States, along with our partners in the region, provided Israel with substantial help in intercepting Iranian missiles and drones on April 13.

We understand the existential threat that Iran poses to Israel. President Biden has made clear—and I agree—that Iran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

Anyone who understands the region also understands that certain groups, like the Houthis and Hamas, while they welcome the support they receive from Iran—or anyone else for that matter—they are not the puppets of Iran. They are not controlled by Iran. That is the view of U.S. intelligence and other officials. They are indigenous movements that Iran has supported with weapons because of their mutual antagonism toward Israel. But those two groups would be carrying out attacks with or without Iranian encouragement. They benefit from Iran’s supply of weapons.

We also understand that Iran supports these groups by opportunistically exploiting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But to say that Iran exploits those wounds is not to say they are not real. One way to help bind those wounds, rather than allowing Iran to exacerbate them, is to work with those who have long recognized Israel’s right to exist and seek peaceful coexistence, like the Palestinian Authority, and to address the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

That is why President Biden and Egypt and Jordan and Saudi Arabia and the UAE and others in the Arab world work to establish a framework that ensures the long-term security of Israel by also addressing those aspirations.

During my recent visit to Saudi Arabia, I met with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and senior members of his government. They are interested in reaching a bilateral agreement with the United States on security and other measures.

Once the war in Gaza ends, they are also willing to support reconstruction

efforts and work toward advancing a normalization agreement with Israel, so long as Israel is willing to implement an irreversible plan to achieve a two-state solution. That would significantly enhance security for Israel in the region.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Netanyahu has consistently rejected that approach in favor of the rightwing extremists in his coalition who want Israel to have all the land from the river to the sea.

We need leaders who are willing to make tough decisions for peace and security, not those who always put their own political ambitions first. As former Israeli Prime Minister Barak has stated, instead of urging Israelis to overcome their fears, Netanyahu is exploiting them, playing into the hands of his extreme rightwing allies. As Majority Leader SCHUMER has said on this Senate floor, there are many obstacles to peace in the Middle East. One of them is Mr. Netanyahu.

In my recent visit to Israel, I met with many Israelis who believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his dangerous, extremist partners are leading Israel down a very dangerous path, one that is weakening the bonds between the United States and the Government of Israel and will lead to Israel’s further isolation. I agree with their assessment.

I will not be party to a spectacle that will inevitably be used to create the illusion that Prime Minister Netanyahu is the protector of the U.S.-Israel relationship. He is not. As many hostages’ families have said, it would be better for him to stay at home and prioritize the release of their loved ones.

Those who really care about the relationship will work to ensure that it is based on our shared values, and, as the points I made today reveal, that is not happening right now. The Prime Minister and his extremist partners are undermining those shared values.

So, Mr. President, while I will continue to fight for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship based on shared values, I will not attend the joint session with Prime Minister Netanyahu tomorrow.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Iowa.

GAZA

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, over 290 days ago, Iran-backed Hamas brutally murdered more than 30 Americans and took a dozen more hostage. Today, eight of those kidnapped on October 7 remain in the Gaza Strip, held captive by an inhumane terrorist group that wants nothing more than the death and destruction of Israel and the United States: Edan Alexander, Itay Chen, Sagui Dekel-Chen, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Gadi Haggai, Judith Weinstein Haggai, Omer Neutra, Keith Siegel.

Eight of our fellow Americans, five of whom we believe to still be alive, are being held hostage right now—today—and yet too many people are seemingly unaware of this reality. It is shameful.

Today, I am working to help change that and refocus the attention on our hostages and their families.

As a mom, my heart aches for our hostage families. I simply cannot imagine the pain and the fear of waiting to hear if my daughter is alive and if I will ever be able to see her again and utter two simple but warm words: "Welcome home."

These families, whom I have repeatedly met with here in DC and in Israel, have waited far too long to be reunited with their loved ones. Every day that passes puts our fellow citizens at greater risk and diminishes our chances of bringing them home safely.

I am grateful for the opportunity to honor and rightly recognize our U.S. hostages. This is an issue that I have gained support for from my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, Republicans and Democrats alike. We all want to see each and every one of our countrymen released and have consistently urged the administration and those negotiating on behalf of the families to use every tool possible in our toolbox.

Hersh Goldberg-Polin is a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen born in Berkeley, CA. When he was 7, his family moved to Israel. His parents, Jon and Rachel, describe Hersh as funny with a dry sense of humor. He was a lover of soccer, music, reading, and travel.

Hersh even turned his passion for soccer into an opportunity to build bridges between Arab and Israeli students. Days after turning 23, Hersh and his close friend attended the Nova music festival along with thousands of other young people. Before Hersh left his house, his mother recalls his last words:

I love you. See you tomorrow.

Two hundred ninety-one days, and tomorrow has still not yet come for the Goldberg-Polin family.

On October 7, while at the peaceful music festival, Hersh and his friend were forced to flee for their lives as Hamas terrorists opened fire, killing more than 364 attendees.

Put yourselves in their shoes for just a second. One minute you are at a concert, enjoying live music, maybe dancing to the beat, and in an instant, your life changes. Rockets are flying overhead; guns blasting right and left; smoke, fire, chaos, and total confusion follow.

Hersh and his friend escaped the festival and ran into a nearby bomb shelter, a place to seek refuge from the attacks. After likely breathing a very temporary sigh of relief, Hamas threw a grenade inside that very shelter to maim and kill more innocent Israelis. Tragically, Hersh lost part of his arm due to the shrapnel from that grenade, and even more gut-wrenching: His dear friend lost his life.

Recent footage released by the Israeli Government showed Hersh being taken that day, with his arm wrapped in a tourniquet that he fashioned himself out of part of the shirt he was wearing, as Hamas fighters threw him into the

back of a pickup truck and lifted his head up by his hair, as he sat there dazed and bleeding, in order to take selfies with him, and drove him and the other hostages into Gaza.

Sagui Dekel-Chen. Sagui is a 35-year-old dual Israeli-American citizen who grew up in Bloomfield, NJ, and is the grandson of Holocaust survivors. For the past 10 years, he worked on a project to convert old buses into mobile classrooms for underserved communities in southern Israel.

Sagui was working near his Kibbutz Nir Oz home on October 7 when he noticed the Hamas terrorists entering the kibbutz. After ensuring his wife, who was pregnant with their third daughter, and children were safe, he joined the kibbutz security team to defend his community. His wife heard Sagui fighting off the terrorists, but despite their efforts, Sagui was taken captive. We know from hostages who have returned that Sagui has been seen in Gaza, and we pray for his immediate and safe return.

Since being held by the Hamas regime, his wife gave birth to their new daughter and named her Shachar, which in Hebrew means "dawn." We pray that the hope of this new life continues to bring light to Sagui's family as they wait in great anticipation for the day when they can all be reunited and a father can meet his precious daughter for the very first time.

Sagui and Hersh's stories are unthinkable for many Americans, but they are true. It is no myth; it is reality—one that no one should turn a blind eye to.

Hamas is a brutal regime—one that rapes women and children and preys on innocent civilians and one that we cannot trust to provide our fellow citizens who remain in Gaza with proper medical care and attention.

While the hostage families remain ever hopeful, as I am, that they will one day be able to embrace their loved ones again, it is incumbent upon the administration—especially at this crucial time—to remain focused on freeing our American hostages. At a minimum, President Biden and Vice President HARRIS should say their names, share their stories, and be unafraid to tell the truth about Hamas and the need for Israel to fully destroy this Iran-backed terror regime.

Today, my colleagues and I are standing up for these hostages and standing with their families and our friends in Israel. We remain committed to bringing our American citizens home now. This goal should not be diminished. Every second counts.

Joining me today on the floor are many of my colleagues, and at this time, I would like to yield the floor. I will yield the floor, Mr. President, to my colleague from Iowa, Senator GRASSLEY.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I thank Senator ERNST for bringing this

and continuing to bring the plight of the hostages to our attention.

I am glad to join Senator ERNST in speaking about just one of these: Edan Alexander. He grew up in Northern New Jersey. He was a champion swimmer for his high school team and a big fan of the New York Knicks.

Edan also had close ties to Israel. He was born there, had grandparents there, and had his bar mitzvah there. Still, his mother was surprised when Edan announced his senior year in high school that he wanted to postpone college and go to Israel.

Edan joined a program for young Jewish adults who want to explore serving in Israel's Defense Forces. Edan and 16 other American high school graduates, including a classmate from his high school, moved to a kibbutz in Israel. There they did 4 months of training before committing to serve in the IDF. Edan returned for a visit home in August and expected to return again in April for his brother Roy's bar mitzvah.

He was on patrol at the kibbutz on the morning of October 7. He called his mother after the Hamas terrorist attacks began. She said:

I'm here. I'm with you. I love you. Just protect yourself. Just be safe.

That is the last she heard from her son. Edan needs to come home now.

I yield the floor.

Ms. ERNST. Thank you to the Senator from Iowa for joining our colloquy.

I will yield the time now to a very, very good friend and fellow colleague of the Abraham Accords Caucus, Senator JACKY ROSEN of Nevada.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Nevada.

Ms. ROSEN. Thank you, Senator ERNST. I appreciate it.

Mr. President, 291 days—that is how long it has been since families of those being held hostage by Hamas have not been able to hug their loved ones—291 days, 9½ months of not being able to rest, to sleep, to breathe; 9½ months of heartbreak; 9½ months of agony beyond imagination.

I have met with these families in Israel and here in the Capitol many times since October 7, and my heart is shattered with each and every single conversation. And each time I met with them, their ask is clear: that we, the United States and the international community, do everything we can to help them reunite with their loved ones. Their resilience, their strength, their perseverance—it is nothing short of extraordinary.

Hostages who survived and have been released have shared stories about their inhumane treatment—being kept in dark tunnels with little to no food to eat, some even being tortured, not knowing if they would live or die, not seeing the light of day, and, surely, not knowing if they would ever see their beloved families again.

We have also seen evidence of Hamas's use of sexual violence both on

and after October 7, including women who were raped in captivity.

While some hostages have been reunited with their loved ones in the last few months, there are still families, including those of eight Americans held hostage by Hamas—still held hostage by Hamas—who have yet to be whole again—yet to be made whole again, and we will not forget them—291 days.

And there are families whose ability to see or hug their loved ones have been taken away forever—forever—by Hamas terrorists, their loved ones having died at the hands of those terrorists, like the family of Itay Chen.

I met with Itay's father, Ruby, just days after the October 7 terrorist attack. As a mother, as a Jew, and as a human being, my heart broke when hearing about Itay's story and the unimaginable pain his parents are carrying. They are with us here in the Capitol today.

I want to apologize. I am sorry I have to give this speech. I know how much you loved your son.

Itay was multitalented, fun-loving, a Boy Scout who played basketball. He was an American who served in the Israeli Defense Forces and was only 19 years old when Hamas launched its brutal terrorist attack on October 7, when Hamas murdered him.

For months, we didn't know about Itay's condition, whether he was held hostage or even if he was alive. We held out hope. We held out hope. But the unimaginable heartbreak of going through this nightmare, it didn't stop Ruby. It never stopped Ruby.

He has come to Congress multiple times to remind us of our responsibility to his son and to all of the hostages being held by Hamas. His strength—your strength, Itay's parents—and resilience is an inspiration to us all.

Earlier this year, we learned Itay was one of the many souls who Hamas brutally murdered—again, beyond imagination. And while it was reported that he was killed 291 days ago, his body—his body—is being held captive by the Hamas terrorists who murdered him, and this has denied Ruby, denied Itay's parents and his family, the right to bury him, to mourn him, and to sit shiva for him.

It matters to the family. He and his wife Hagit and Itay's siblings have just been forced to live in grief and in limbo, and it is a tragedy that no one should ever have to go through.

There is a proposed deal to free the hostages. And with reports of progress in these negotiations, now is the time to see it through to the end. We must free the hostages for Itay, for his family, for the seven other Americans held by Hamas, for the remaining 120 hostages from two dozen countries—hostages who are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist; who are someone's sons or daughters, sisters or brothers, mothers, fathers, loved ones who Hamas refuses to release. These are someone's loved ones. Hamas refuses to release them.

And as we continue to pursue every viable path to bring them home, we will hold them in our hearts and hold Hamas's feet to the fire. We stand with the hostages and their families. They are not forgotten. Our work isn't done until we bring them home.

Thank you again, Senator ERNST, for bringing us all together today.

I yield the floor.

Ms. ERNST. Thank you, Senator ROSEN.

Joining our colloquy now is the senior Senator from Maryland, BEN CARDIN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MARKEY). The Senator from Maryland.

Mr. CARDIN. I want to thank Senator ERNST for arranging this time. This is a critical moment. We are close to having a deal where the hostages can be released. It is important that we all speak out. I want to thank Senator ERNST for arranging this time.

To Senator ROSEN, thank you for your incredible leadership on this issue. I thank you for your comments. I certainly concur in those comments.

We just left a meeting with the hostage families that are here. I have been meeting with the hostage families regularly since October 7. I first want to acknowledge their courage for putting a face on these issues and motivating us to do more.

I made a commitment when I was in Israel in October that I would do everything in my power to get the hostages released. And, every day, I look at opportunities and I ask my staff to look for opportunities so we can get the hostages released.

Let me make this clear. Hamas is responsible for the hostages. They have taken them. They never should have. Some died under their custody, and there are still hostages who haven't been released after 291 days.

I had the opportunity to be in Buenos Aires last week, representing the United States at the 30th commemoration of the AMIA bombing, the Jewish community center where 85 lost their lives. It was a very moving ceremony in which the families of the victims of the Jewish community center bombing spoke. They want to make sure we never forget the names of those 85.

And they demanded justice. It has been 30 years, and justice still has not been handed down to Hezbollah and Hamas and Iran, who are responsible for those attacks.

We are demanding the release of the hostages that were taken on October 7, and we will not forget their names—the eight Americans who have not yet been accounted for.

Omer—I just met his family—a 22-year-old born leader, grew up in Long Island. He was the regional president of the United Synagogue Youth and captain of many sports teams. He is being held by Hamas.

You heard about the others: Itay, Edan, Hersh, Sagui, Keith, Judith, and Gadi. They are just the eight Americans that are being held. All the hos-

tages need to be released, and they need to be released now. Two hundred ninety-one days—it is outrageous.

Mr. President, I wanted to join Senator ERNST today to make it clear that there is no justification for the holding of the hostages. We have an opportunity to reach an agreement. Let's do this. Let's get it done. Let's get the hostages home. Let's hold the perpetrators accountable for the atrocities that they have perpetrated. And let's find a path for real security and peace in the Middle East, for the Palestinians and the Israelis.

There is no room for peace in the Middle East with Hamas. They need to be held accountable for these atrocities, and the hostages need to be released today. Let us all join together in unity to get the hostages home.

I yield the floor.

Ms. ERNST. Thank you, Senator CARDIN. Thank you for your leadership.

Senator TED BUDD represents the great State of North Carolina. He is unable to join us, but he did want to make sure we read his constituent's bio.

Eight of these remaining hostages are Americans. Our final American hostage is a native of the State of North Carolina, and his name is Keith Siegel.

I have joined North Carolina Senator TED BUDD in meetings with the families of hostages, as well as former hostages, like Keith's wife, Aviva. Keith and Aviva have four children, alongside five grandchildren.

We have heard their stories, and I can attest that Senator BUDD and I look at their photos every single day. We have heard the stories, and these families must absolutely live with horrible pain, and they have an uncertainty that is absolutely unacceptable. The fact that we stand here after 291 days and the fate of these eight innocent souls is not the primary topic of conversation on our national media and from the current administration is shameful.

Now is the time for all nations to rally together and use all available pressure to force Hamas terrorists to release all of our hostages.

I do want to thank my colleagues—Senator ROSEN, Senator CARDIN, and Senator GRASSLEY—for coming to the floor and joining in this colloquy to ensure that the American people don't forget that we have eight Americans that are still being held. Let's bring them home now.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to speak for 15 minutes and Senator BLACKBURN for 15 minutes prior to the scheduled vote.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ISRAEL

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss the state of the war