

The Political Costs of Biden's Support for Israel's War Are Mounting



A protester holds a sign depicting President Joe Biden reading "Come November We'll Remember" on December 8, 2023, in Los Angeles, California.
DAVID MCNEW / GETTY IMAGES

By Stephen Zunes

It would not be an exaggeration to say that President Joe Biden's support for Israel's ongoing carnage in Gaza puts him in the same position as George W. Bush with the invasion of Iraq, Ronald Reagan with his support for death squads in Central America and Richard Nixon with his bombing of Vietnam. Like the other conflicts, the civilian death toll is extraordinarily high, the United States is largely isolated in the international community and the majority of Americans — particularly Democrats — oppose the policies. In similar parallels, the administration is marginalizing the United Nations, attacking the international legal system and dismissing reports by reputable human rights organizations.

Despite all this, due to the threat of a second Trump presidency and the lack of any viable Democratic challengers, there has been a reluctance within the liberal mainstream to recognize just how extreme the Biden administration's policies have been.

Indeed, there has been a concerted attempt by the Democratic congressional leadership to effectively obscure the extent of the carnage as a means of shielding the Biden administration from responsibility. For example, in mid-January, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) introduced a resolution invoking Section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act which allows either the House or the Senate to request a State Department report on human rights practices by any country that receives U.S. aid. The resolution would require the Biden administration to issue a report within 30 days about possible abuses and how U.S. weapons have been used in Israel's war on Gaza. While it would not have restricted U.S. aid to Israel, the Biden administration and Senate Democratic leaders, refusing to even acknowledge that Israel was committing war crimes with U.S. weapons (and thereby fueling further public opposition to the administration's policies), worked to suppress the measure. With the Biden administration opposing the measure, it was roundly defeated, with only nine Senate Democrats joining Sanders and one Republican voting in favor.

Biden admits that Israel is engaging in "indiscriminate bombing" in Gaza but still refuses to demand a ceasefire or to condition the unconditional transfer of offensive military aid. Even though the January 26 ruling by the International Court of Justice found plausible arguments that Israel was violating several counts of the Genocide Treaty, the State Department — which had earlier claimed the charges were "meritless, counterproductive and completely without any basis in fact whatsoever" — doubled down, insisting: "We continue to believe that allegations of genocide are unfounded."

Meanwhile, Biden has cast doubts on the high civilian casualties, saying despite detailed records of the names and circumstances of over 20,000 civilian deaths: "I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed." Though he acknowledged there were civilian casualties, he said it was simply "the price of waging a war."

This harkens back to President Bush's claim that a Johns Hopkins University study which found Iraq had experienced more than 600,000 civilian deaths as a result of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was "not credible," and insisting without evidence that the study's methodology was "pretty well discredited," even while acknowledging that "a lot of innocent people have lost their life." It is also reminiscent of the Reagan administration's coverup of the 1981 El Mozote massacre by U.S.-trained forces of the Salvadoran junta, in which over 1,000 peasants were killed over a period of several days. Similarly, the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths from the "free fire zones" declared by U.S. forces in areas of

South Vietnam controlled by the leftist National Liberation Front and the carpet-bombing of North Vietnamese cities were routinely downplayed by the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

The isolation of the United States in the international community was underscored in early December when it was one of only 10 countries in the 193-member United Nations General Assembly to vote against a resolution calling for a ceasefire. The other dissenting votes came from small countries economically dependent on the United States or those under right-wing leadership.

Later that month, the Biden administration followed up on its October veto of a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire by again blocking an otherwise unanimous ceasefire resolution. It then blocked another otherwise unanimous resolution simply calling for an “urgent suspension of hostilities.” Biden finally allowed a resolution to pass that only recommended creating “the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities” and, even then, abstained rather than joining the other countries voting in favor.

Biden and the congressional leaders of both parties insist the bombing must continue, and that those who are calling for a ceasefire – virtually all the world’s governments, global religious leaders, peace and human rights groups, academics specializing in the region, and two-thirds of the American public – are wrong. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN that as far as the duration and the conduct of the war on Gaza, “these are decisions for Israel to make.”

Indeed, the position put forward by the Biden administration and its supporters regarding Israel’s war on Gaza bears remarkable parallels to the Reagan administration and its supporters’ policy of supporting the Salvadoran junta and the Nicaraguan Contras back in the 1980s: that there should be no ceasefire; that counterinsurgency campaigns involving the mass killing of civilians constitute “legitimate self-defense”; that the U.S. taxpayer should provide the weapons to facilitate the killing; there should be no conditions on military aid regarding adherence to international humanitarian law; that antiwar and human rights activists are supporting terrorism and autocratic ideologies; that human rights organizations that document war crimes are not reliable and are motivated by an ideological bias against U.S. allies; and that the United Nations and the World Court are similarly biased and should not be involved in resolving the conflict.

The United States was similarly isolated in the international community during the 1980s, vetoing otherwise unanimous UN Security Council resolutions and being among a small minority in the General Assembly voting against resolutions seeking to end the Central American wars. And, in another striking parallel, most Americans opposed U.S. support for the right-wing forces engaging in war crimes in these wars as well, mobilizing in huge demonstrations in Washington and elsewhere, yet were largely ignored by the administration in power.

The charges during the Cold War of Moscow and Beijing funding and facilitating protests by peace and human rights activists is also seen today. Last weekend, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi claimed that calling for a ceasefire in Gaza “is Mr. Putin’s message,” adding that “Some [pro-ceasefire protesters] I think are connected to Russia” and that she plans to “ask the FBI to investigate” supposed Russian funding of pro-ceasefire demonstrators. Two days later, when antiwar protesters outside of her home correctly pointed out that a majority of Democrats support a ceasefire in Gaza while she continues to stridently oppose it, the former house speaker responded by shouting, “Go back to China where your headquarters is!”

Unlike in the 1980s, now there is a Democratic administration in charge and the majority of Democrats in Congress support U.S. policy. And this is many constituents that typically would comprise Biden’s voter base. Indeed, the single most important variable regarding how well Democrats have done in recent elections has been youth and voter of color turnout. When it’s high, they win. When it’s low, they lose.

According to the latest poll, 72 percent of voters ages 18 to 29 disapprove of Biden's handling of the war on Gaza. That is a higher percentage of young voters than those who disapproved of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq, Reagan's handling of the wars in Central America or even Nixon's handling of the war in Vietnam.

Supporters of peace, human rights and international law are divided as to how to respond. Letters, protests, civil disobedience and citing polling numbers have led to growing dissent among a progressive minority in Congress, but has done little to change administration policy or that of the congressional leadership. Many believe that the system has failed and are refusing to support Biden or other pro-war Democrats, even if that means the takeover of government by reactionary autocratic Republicans.

Biden is apparently willing to risk a wider war in the greater Middle East rather than try to stop the Israeli onslaught. U.S. support for Israel's war on Gaza has provoked attacks by pro-Iranian militia in Syria and Iraq, thereby leading Biden to bomb those countries, resulting in angry reactions — not just by the Assad regime in Syria but also by the ostensibly allied government of Iraq. Similarly, Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea have resulted in major U.S. airstrikes on Yemen, leading to massive anti-American demonstrations.

The United States has been supporting Israel and allied dictatorships for years, but the death rate of civilians is the highest of any war in recent decades and, thanks to advances in media technologies, is being more closely followed than in U.S.-fueled conflicts in the past.

Biden comes from a generation of U.S. politicians who believed that support for Israel had only positive political impact at home and only limited and temporary negative impact abroad. The world has changed, however. The question is: How soon will he finally get the message?

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