

Biden's Moral Failure in Israel

di Peter Beinart

Joe Biden's presidency has a distinct origin story. As he tells it, he was [done with politics](#), happily retired from public life. That changed after Donald Trump's equivocal response to the 2017 white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Va. It was then that Mr. Biden realized that Mr. Trump and his allies threatened what he called the "[soul of this nation](#)": its commitment to equality. So he re-entered the fray.

Ever since, Mr. Biden has argued that championing equality is the key to preserving American democracy at home and enhancing American influence abroad. He began a 2019 campaign [announcement video](#) by noting that Charlottesville was home to Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the words "all men are created equal." In his [acceptance speech](#) at the 2020 Democratic National Convention, he claimed America's "great purpose" was "to be a light to the world once again. To finally live up to and make real the words written in the sacred documents that founded this nation that all men and women are created equal."

In his 2021 [Inaugural Address](#), he described American history as a "constant struggle between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart." He promised to make the United States once again a "beacon to the world." Since taking office, the president has framed a commitment to equality as the answer not only to the rise of domestic white nationalism but also to the authoritarian powers who threaten democracy overseas.

This self-presentation now lies in ruin. Through his unwavering backing of Israel, Mr. Biden has effectively supported its unequal treatment and oppression of Palestinians — especially in Gaza — and undermined the ethical rationale for his presidency.

Domestically, Mr. Biden counterposed equality to his predecessor's ethnonationalistic tendencies. Mr. Trump has repeatedly implied that Americans who aren't white and Christian are not truly American. In 2016, he [said](#) that Gonzalo Curiel, a judge born in Indiana, could not rule fairly on civil lawsuits against Trump University because of his Mexican heritage, given Mr. Trump's promises to build a wall between this country and Mexico. In 2019, Mr. Trump demanded that the four congresswomen of color who constitute the so-called Squad — three of whom were born in the United States — "[go back](#)" to the countries they were from. Mr. Biden, by contrast, [declared](#) in a May 2023 speech to Howard University's graduating class that America was based on an idea — equal rights — "not religion, not ethnicity." Throughout his presidency, Mr. Biden has depicted himself as defending that principle from authoritarian impulses both at home and abroad.

But Israel's political system is explicitly based on religion and ethnicity. Its controversial 2018 nation-state bill declares that Jews alone can "[exercise national self-determination](#)." Most of the Palestinians under Israeli control — those in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — can't become citizens of the state that dominates their lives. A minority of Palestinians who live within Israel's 1967 borders do enjoy citizenship and the right to vote. But when Arab Israeli politicians advanced a bill that would have made legal equality between Arab and Jewish citizens a foundation of Israeli law in 2018, the speaker of Israel's parliament [refused](#) to allow a vote on it because it would "gnaw at the foundations of the state."

As I have previously [argued](#), there was a Zionist tradition that envisioned Jews living equally alongside Palestinians in a binational state — although many Americans now take for granted that Israel gives Jews legal supremacy.

But when it comes to Israel, Mr. Biden hasn't supported equality under the law. The war in Gaza has made that contradiction impossible to ignore. It is most glaring when Biden expresses deep empathy for Israeli suffering but [relative indifference](#) to the far larger number of dead Palestinians, or when his administration seems to distinguish even between American citizens, showing more concern for those [murdered](#) by Hamas than for those [killed](#) by Israel's military.

No wonder, according to a September [survey](#) by the Institute for Global Affairs, Democrats consider Mr. Biden's policy on Gaza his greatest foreign policy failure. Young Americans are especially alienated by the chasm between Mr. Biden's actions and his stated ideals. A March [poll](#) by Harvard's Institute of Politics found that more than three-quarters of Americans under the age of 30 disapprove of his policy toward Israel's war in Gaza.

Mr. Biden's near-unconditional support for Israel's actions has damaged his reputation overseas, as well. He has long [claimed](#) that the United States, unlike Russia and China, defends a "rules-based" order in which all countries, irrespective of their power, are bound by certain standards. That rhetoric reached a crescendo after Russia tried to overrun Kyiv in February 2022. At stake in Ukraine, Mr. Biden [told](#) a Polish audience the following month, was the choice "between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force." That September, Mr. Biden [told](#) the United Nations that members of the Security Council should "refrain from the use of the veto, except in rare, extraordinary situations." It was another swipe at Moscow, which during Mr. Biden's presidency had [employed](#) its veto seven times, and an effort to associate the United States with a fairer international order, in which even the most powerful nations cannot act with impunity. To strengthen those rules, the Biden administration in July of last year reportedly [ordered](#) the United States to share evidence on Kremlin officials that could help the International Criminal Court in its investigation into possible war crimes in Ukraine.

Then came the Oct. 7 massacre and Israel's subsequent invasion of Gaza. In the war's first seven months, the Biden administration vetoed [four resolutions](#) concerning Israel and Palestine. Mr. Biden [denounced](#) the I.C.C.'s chief prosecutor for requesting warrants for the arrests of Hamas and Israeli leaders. While Mr. Biden has warned against Israel's "indiscriminate" bombing of Gaza and the loss of civilian life, he has also repeatedly reiterated his support of Israel and supplied the country with vast quantities of arms.

Whatever chance Mr. Biden had of convincing large numbers of foreigners that the United States believed that international law applies to all has now largely collapsed.

Over the past year, according to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of people who trust Mr. Biden “to do the right thing regarding world affairs” has dropped by double digits in [Britain, Japan, Australia, Spain and Sweden](#) — all key allies in the great power struggle Mr. Biden is waging against Moscow and Beijing. Britons, Canadians and Italians have [less faith](#) in Mr. Biden today than they had in George W. Bush in 2003, the year he invaded Iraq.

Last month, in his final speech to the United Nations, Mr. Biden [acknowledged](#) that “many look at the world today and see difficulties and react with despair.” What he didn’t acknowledge is that for many who believe in the vision of equality Mr. Biden himself once outlined, he has contributed to that despair — by effectively treating Palestinians as lesser human beings, and by treating Israel as above international law. A few days before Mr. Biden’s speech, the Gaza Health Ministry released a catalog of the names and ages of Palestinians killed in this war. According to [The Guardian](#), the first 100 pages are composed entirely of the names of children who died under the age of 10. Their lives will need to be accounted for when historians gauge how Mr. Biden shaped the “soul of this nation.”