

Explaining Israel's Just War of Self-Defense to America

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COMMENTARY

On July 27, Iran-backed Hezbollah launched a rocket from southern Lebanon – part of the militia’s near-constant bombardment of northern Israel since Oct. 8, 2023 – striking a soccer field on the Golan Heights and killing 12 Druze children and wounding dozens more. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised a “harsh” response. Thus far, in Beirut, Israel has killed Hezbollah’s most senior military commander while in Tehran, exiled Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh was killed, according to the New York Times, by a bomb smuggled into the state guest house where he stayed. Both Hezbollah and Iran have vowed to exact revenge. Diplomats fear a ruinous regional war. In part to explain the larger historical and geopolitical context of Israel’s multi-front war with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies, Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress on July 24 at the invitation of House Speaker Mike Johnson.

That day, thousands of anti-Israel protesters, many wearing kaffiyehs, took to the streets of Washington to denounce Netanyahu and Israel. Cries of “Free, free Palestine” rang out on Capitol Hill. Signs screamed “Arrest Netanyahu” and “End all U.S. aid to Israel.” Rioters defaced American monuments with pro-Hamas graffiti and took down and burned the American flag.

Although the rioters regard Israel and America as criminally culpable for the Gaza carnage and Hamas as blameless, the facts say otherwise. On Oct. 7, 2023, Iran-backed Hamas jihadists rampaged through southern Israel, massacring some 1,200 people, among them several Americans, and kidnapping 255, including several Americans. Over the last 10 months, Israel has sought to secure the hostages’ return while destroying Hamas’ ability to wage war and govern Gaza. Israeli military operations, according to Hamas’ Gaza Health Ministry, have killed almost 40,000 Palestinians (that number includes combatants but does not distinguish between them and non-combatants). Fighting has reduced large swaths of Gaza to rubble. Yet Hamas can end the fighting instantly by laying down its arms, releasing the remaining hostages, and renouncing its formal commitment to destroy the Jewish state.

Netanyahu’s powerful if problematic speech countered the intense anti-Israel propaganda that has distorted American views. While major Israeli political figures praised the remarks, Netanyahu’s visit provoked consternation, even outrage, among Israel’s domestic opposition. They deplored Congress’ invitation to Netanyahu and President Biden’s White House meeting with him.

Thirty-three distinguished Israelis – from national security, government, commerce, and the academy – published an open letter to congressional leaders arguing that Netanyahu should be seen as beyond the pale. He remains on trial for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. He was recently served notice by an Israeli state commission of inquiry – which is looking into Israel’s and Egypt’s purchases of submarines from a German company – that he is suspected of making “decisions that endangered national security and harmed Israel’s foreign relations.” And, critics maintain, he tore the country apart last year with an ill-conceived proposal to overhaul the judiciary, shoulders responsibility for the worst security lapse in Israel’s history, and, after more than nine months of fighting, has not defeated Hamas, freed the hostages, advanced a plausible plan for stabilizing and governing post-war Gaza, nor established quiet on the northern border.

These Israeli-opposition grievances played into American progressives’ longstanding antipathy toward Netanyahu, whom they see as the chief obstacle to establishing a Palestinian state. Accordingly, about half of House and Senate Democrats – as well as Vice President Harris, who would normally preside over a joint session of Congress – skipped the prime minister’s speech.

Nevertheless, in plain but rousing language, Netanyahu made a compelling case for America to support wholeheartedly Israel’s fight against the “ring of fire” that Iran has built around the Jewish state. Iranian-funded militias – Hamas in Gaza, Hamas in Judea and Samaria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, proxies in Syria and Iraq – and Tehran itself seek not only Israel’s destruction but also the defeat and subjugation of the American-led West. “Our enemies are your enemies, our fight is your fight, and our victory will be your victory,” Netanyahu declared. “Working together, I’m confident that our two nations will vanquish the tyrants and terrorists who threaten us both.”

Netanyahu stressed the failure of pro-Hamas protesters “to make the simple distinction between those who target terrorists and those who target civilians, between the democratic State of Israel and the terrorist thugs of Hamas.” That elementary distinction conflicts with the interests of a key patron of the protesters. “We recently learned from the U.S. director of national intelligence,” said Netanyahu, “that Iran is funding and promoting anti-Israel protests in America.”

Netanyahu also rebutted the protesters’ blood libel that Israel is committing genocide against Gazans by starving and targeting them. “Israel has enabled more than 40,000 aid trucks to enter Gaza,” he stated. “That’s half a million tons of food, and that’s more than 3,000 calories [per day] for every man, woman and child in Gaza. If there are Palestinians in Gaza who aren’t getting enough food, it’s not because Israel is blocking it, it’s because Hamas is stealing it.”

The charge that Israel deliberately targets civilians is just as false and obscene. “The IDF has dropped millions of flyers, sent millions of text messages, made hundreds of thousands of phone calls to get Palestinian civilians out of harm’s way,” said Netanyahu. “But at the same time, Hamas does everything in its power to put Palestinian civilians in harm’s way. They fire rockets from schools, from hospitals, from mosques.” They take pride in those “Palestinian women and children” who “excel at being human shields.” And they “shoot their own people when they try to leave the war zone.”

One reason that Netanyahu devoted a significant portion of his speech to setting the record straight about both Israel’s extraordinary steps to honor the international laws of war and Hamas’ monstrous indifference to them is the Biden administration’s dereliction of duty. It has done too little to clarify to Americans Israel’s just-war aims and the U.S. national interest in Israel’s defeat of the jihadists and could do much more to parry anti-Israel propaganda.

Nevertheless, and quite properly, Netanyahu expressed gratitude to President Biden “for half a century of friendship to Israel and for being, as he says, a proud Zionist” as well as “for his heartfelt support for Israel after the savage attack on October 7.” Biden’s support has been rhetorical, material, and highly personal. “He rightly called Hamas ‘sheer evil,’ ” recalled Netanyahu. “He dispatched two aircraft carriers to the Middle East to deter a wider war. And he came to Israel to stand with us during our darkest hour, a visit that will never be forgotten.”

Nor is that all that President Biden and his administration have done to advance Israeli war efforts. Notwithstanding controversy over the provision of heavy bombs in connection to Israel’s Rafah operation, the administration has overseen the delivery of billions of dollars of vital munitions and additional military equipment to the Israel Defense Forces. In mid-April, the United States led a coalition that operated with the IDF to fend off the more than 300 drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles launched by Iran at the Jewish state. The administration has on many occasions reaffirmed Israel’s right to defend itself and condemned antisemitism. In May, Biden called the International Criminal Court application for arrest warrants of top Israelis “outrageous” and rejected any equivalence between Israel’s actions to defeat Hamas and Hamas terrorism.

At the same time, the Biden administration has lent credence to the anti-Israel protesters through its skewed framing of the issues.

The administration placed the onus on Israel to agree to a cease-fire, and treated Americans killed and kidnapped by Hamas as a peripheral issue. The White House should have demanded immediately and often that Hamas unconditionally surrender and release all the hostages.

The administration implied, or let stand the accusation, that Israel bears primary responsibility for the suffering of Gaza Palestinians. The White House should have consistently and forcefully blamed Hamas for the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza. Hamas' Oct. 7 massacre, its kidnapping of civilians, and its military operations in and under cities manifestly violated the international laws of war. This grotesque illegality is the source of the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, which Hamas could end at any moment by ceasing to fight, freeing the hostages, and repudiating its ambitions to destroy Israel.

The administration declined to tell the American people that Gaza was one of seven fronts in Iran's war against Israel. The White House should have explained that this multi-front war against the Jewish state does not end with Israel. It is also directed at America's Gulf Arab partners and ultimately at the United States, liberal democracies, and their principles of individual freedom and human equality.

As Israel enters the 11th month of its war of self-defense against Iran and its proxies, the administration owes it to the American people to explain America's interest in, and the justice of, Israeli victory.

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