

Michigan now determines US Policy in Hamas War

February 25, 2024

By Raphael Benaroya

Immediately after Hamas's 10/7/23 attack on Israel, President Biden sounded a firm commitment to Israel's objectives of destroying Hamas and freeing the hostages. Biden's moral justification was clear to all in the face of Hamas's atrocities and its continued threat to Israel.

But things have changed. The White House is now, astonishingly, criticizing Israel as Israel continues to pursue its objectives by attacking Rafah, Hamas's last stronghold in Gaza.

Why?

The Biden administration's handling of the Israel-Hamas war is a serious issue for many U.S. voters—on top of domestic problems with inflation, immigration, crime, and national debt. Indeed, Gaza might be THE deciding factor for several key voting blocs: Muslims and Arab-Americans, Black Americans, and voting-age American youth.

The U.S. presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 were decided by a few critical swing states, including Michigan and Wisconsin. With no clear Democrat or Republican majority, these states will also be high-stakes battlefields for their decisive electoral votes this November.

Michigan is home to 300,000 Muslims, or 2.75% of the state's population, and Wisconsin has about 70,000 Muslim residents. In 2020, President Biden won Michigan by only 150,000 votes and Wisconsin by just 20,000. As the Wisconsin Muslim Journal noted, "Muslims constitute an influential voting bloc that cannot be dismissed." And some Muslim/Arab groups in Michigan are actively campaigning against Biden's 2024 presidential bid because of his handling of the Gaza war.

It must be of utmost concern to the Biden campaign team that Muslim/Arab communities in these critical states harbor deep resentments about the effects of the Gaza war on

Palestinians. Abdullah Hammoud, the mayor of Dearborn, Michigan, which is 40% Arab-American, called Israel's actions the "genocide in Gaza."

That emotionally charged phrase is echoed by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, one of the most prominent Black religious institutions in the United States. AME leaders have called for the U.S. to end financial aid to Israel because they believe Israel's actions in Gaza equate to "mass genocide."

According to the Voice of America, Black community leaders say that Black Americans who support the Palestinians "see the [Gaza] conflict through the lens of racial justice, with a solidarity of a minority group that knows how it feels to be oppressed, displaced, and deprived."

This sentiment must be another major concern for President Biden. According to a poll cited by *USA Today*, Black voter support of Biden has declined from 87% when he took office to 63% in January 2024. There can be no doubt that the White House's position on Gaza is disenchanting Black voters.

The voices of voting-age youth in American also sound loudly against the President's policies in the Israel-Hamas war. Tens of thousands of young people march on college campuses and city streets to support Palestinians (and by extension, Hamas). They wear Palestinian keffiyeh headdresses, wave Palestinian flags, and shout inflammatory slogans: "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free"; "Genocide Biden"; and "America is a terror state." These protests extend even to supporting the Houthis, Iran's proxy, who launch missiles at Israel and threaten U.S. Navy ships and international maritime traffic in the Red Sea.

This youthful activism compounds the President's reelection concerns. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, some 8 million Americans between 18 and 24 years old (30% of all people in that age group) voted in the last midterm election. In Wisconsin and Michigan, respectively, 49% and 47% of that young group cast votes.

President Biden is also feeling pressure from the far-left Democrats in the House of Representatives, who are aggressively calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

It's no wonder, then, that the President's campaign team is doing all it can to influence U.S. policy to appease these pro-Palestinian/pro-Hamas groups. As these voter blocs have exerted pressure on the President to reduce U.S. support for Israel and push for a ceasefire in Gaza, the White House's public remarks, policy statements, and dialog with Israeli leadership have shifted. Instead of the unequivocal support that the President gave to Israel in the wake of Hamas's horrific 10/7 attack, the Administration is now pressuring Israel to limit its efforts—before it can achieve its campaign objectives.

For example:

☒ A top White House advisor told Arab and Muslim community leadership in Michigan that the administration had made “missteps” in supporting Israel’s war against Hamas, giving a “damaging impression” of “how much the President ... values lives of Palestinians.”

☒ President Biden has told Black faith leaders that he understands their empathy for the Palestinians’ “trauma, death, and destruction” in light of the “pain and passion felt by so many here in America.”

☒ As Israel prepares to root out Hamas hideouts in the city of Rafah, the President has said that an invasion there “would be a disaster” and called Israel’s conduct in the war “over the top.”

☒ The President has further stated that the “military operation in Rafah should not proceed without a credible plan ... for ensuring the safety and support of more than 1 million people ...[and] we oppose any forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza.”

☒ The State Department is investigating Israel’s alleged misuse of U.S. weapons to kill civilians.(While it is important that Israel uses these weapons in accordance with U.S. policy, the U.S. should let Israel conduct its own investigation first—just as the U.S. investigated its own military incidents in Afghanistan, while rejecting the right of other countries to lead such investigations.)

America does still support Israel. The U.S. was the sole vote against a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. And to be sure, Israel depends on and greatly values that support. But sympathy for Israel has been deeply eroded by anti-Israel, anti-Semitic, pro-Hamas, pro-Palestinian voices.

How does the President balance the moral right of Israel to defend itself and secure its citizens with the political realities of the U.S. election this November? Clearly, the risk of a protest vote (or no vote) against his Gaza policies—especially by Muslim/Arab-Americans in swing states like Michigan—changes Biden’s electoral calculus. The President is walking a tightrope; he is softening the U.S’s unmitigated support of Israel to improve his chances for reelection.

Israel should just hope that its ground campaign in Gaza ends quickly, with a dismantling of Hamas leadership and the safe return of the Israeli hostages.

Otherwise, thanks to the White House’s changing priorities, Hamas will remain a threat to Israel, the U.S., and the free world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raphael Benaroya is an American businessman, philanthropist, and vice chairman of Business Executives for National Security (BENS), a nonpartisan NGO based in Washington, DC. He has been active in national security matters

concerning the US and Israel for over 30 years. He has been published in many American publications, including Foreign Policy New, Real Clear Politics, and Politico.