



## PERSPECTIVES

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# President Biden, Assure Decency Toward Israel when Reengaging with Institutions

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** President Joe Biden regards himself as a champion of decency. He is equally committed to reengaging with international institutions. Assuring decency toward Israel in United Nations fora would be a good way to demonstrate both.

President Joe Biden takes pride in the fact that he is a decent person. His warning to the newly appointed in his administration that that he will fire “on the spot” any official, however senior, for disrespectful behavior toward either their colleagues or their juniors won him justifiable praise.

Receiving even more attention are Biden’s repeated statements that he will undo former President Donald Trump’s legacy and reengage with international institutions. On this point, Biden’s word appears indeed to be his bond: the newly instated president announced that the US will rejoin the World Health Organization, which the US under Trump left on the grounds that it had kowtowed to Beijing by delaying warning the world of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in China.

Hopefully, the new administration will wed these two fundamentals—decency and a renewed commitment to international institutions—together to counter the great indecency (if not outright discrimination) many international institutions and the member states operating within them display toward the State of Israel.

Implementing an integrated policy that conjoins these elements can begin at the UN, the cornerstone of the international institutional architecture supported by successive US administrations.

There is nothing decent about the fact that over 60% of UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the behavior of states are addressed toward Israel. There are too many gross violations of human rights to count in Darfur, the Central African Republic, Iran, North Korea, Russia, China, and almost everywhere else in the majority of states that are not liberal democracies. Often, the initiators of the resolutions condemning Israel are themselves some of the world's worst human rights offenders.

But the General Assembly is only the tip of the iceberg of indecency within the UN.

A recent report published by a supposedly "professional" UN body, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), makes clear just how much work President Biden's staff will have to do to assure both decency and a commitment to international institutions when it comes to Israel.

The quest for decency begins with the title of the report itself, which, together with an executive summary, was widely disseminated in media outlets: "Economic costs of the Israeli occupation for the Palestinian people: the Gaza Strip under closure and restrictions."

One can, of course, point out the falsity of the claim that Israel occupies the Gaza Strip, as Israel ended its control over the Gaza population in summer 1994 and withdrew from the Strip completely in 2005. The claim also fails to jibe with Hamas's boast that it liberated Gaza as the first step in the "liberation of all of Palestine" (i.e., Israel's destruction). The sole Israeli who has violated "the closure," a person with a long history of mental illness, entered Gaza in 2014 and has been incarcerated there ever since. One might also wonder how, if Israel occupies Gaza (an area about the size of Manhattan), it was not able to prevent the launching from Gaza of over 14,000 missiles at Israeli population centers since the 2005 total withdrawal.

More interesting is the use of the term "closure" in the title and within the report. The executive summary instead uses the more sinister term "blockade," and repeats it three times. This is curious, as the economists who drew up the report explicitly state in a footnote in the report itself that "We would advise against the use of the word 'blockade'." And they had good reason for this caution. Thousands of trucks regularly enter Gaza from Israel, importing over 400 items. This is hardly the description of a "blockade."

A sense of decency is often relative. The same economists who were fair enough to concede the inappropriateness of calling Israeli measures restricting imports that are used by the Hamas to wage missile terror on Israel a "blockade" also claim that "The performance of the regional Gaza economy

has always been far below its potential owing to the occupation and its accompanying restrictive measures”—that is to say, even before the so-called closure of Gaza after the Hamas takeover.

However, they give away how ludicrous the “occupation” argument is to explain Gaza’s economic situation by pointing out elsewhere in the report that while Gaza’s GDP grew by a mere 0.20% annually from 2007 to 2018, the West Bank economy grew by a whopping 6.2% annually over the same period, despite being under what they term “occupation.” If the “occupation” is to blame for Gaza’s economic performance, how is it that the “occupied” West Bank had a growth rate bettered only by China during the period?

President Biden’s staffers will no doubt determine the real explanation for the figures: the Palestinian Authority’s cooperation with Israel over their mutual security concern of Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorism. Security cooperation enabled Israel to increase the number of Palestinians employed in the Israeli marketplace, where they earned at least twice as much as workers in the PA itself. This phenomenon, coupled with massive international aid, was responsible for the economic boom the West Bank enjoyed.

So eager was Israel to improve the economic well-being of Palestinians that it turned a blind eye to the hefty salaries the PA paid to terrorists in Israeli prisons, which topped average salaries by at least a margin of two to one and which encourage more terrorism.

Hamas took the opposite route, turning butter into missiles. In fact, the closure of Gaza was initiated by Hamas, not Israel. Long before their takeover of Gaza, Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacked Israeli border crossings with the express purpose of closing them and forcing Gazans to buy produce brought in via Hamas’s underground tunnels into Egypt. Hamas’s taxation of that produce generated the revenue that financed its manufacture of missiles and building of offensive tunnels into Israel.

Decency, fair play, and judicious thinking are important virtues in any setting. President Biden could contribute to a better world by using his influence to etch them into the operation of international institutions. Assuring these virtues in UN fora regarding Israel is as good a place to begin as any.

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