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THE CURRENT: Biden in Israel and US diplomacy on the Israel-Gaza crisis

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. President Biden traveled to Israel on Wednesday as a show of American support for Israel following the brutal attacks by Hamas earlier this month, which killed at least 1400 Israelis. As Israel mobilizes for full scale war, here to discuss the latest in U.S. and regional diplomacy is Jeffrey Feltman, the John C Whitehead visiting fellow in international diplomacy in the Foreign Policy department here at Brookings and previously under-secretary-general for political affairs at the United Nations and formerly assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Jeff, thanks so much for joining us today.

FELTMAN: Thanks for inviting me.

PITA: So, Biden traveled to Israel on Wednesday - I should mention for our listeners, we are recording this on Wednesday afternoon, so any details are up to date as of that time. President Biden traveled to Israel, expressing solidarity, sharing the grief with the victims of the attacks, meeting with families of the nearly 200 Israelis held hostage. During his remarks, in addition to expressing his support, he also compared the attacks to 9/11, as many others have done. And he said a particular line, Jeff, I want to ask you about. He says, "I caution this, while you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it. After 9/11, we were enraged here in the U.S. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes." What can you tell us about how the president's visit was received there in Israel and the messaging he was delivering, this one in particular, how that was received there?

FELTMAN: Adrianna, I think the president, since these awful massacres from October 7th, has tried to focus on three different objectives. One, to show empathy, to show support for the victims of the massacres, the people whose families have been abducted and taken hostage. So, part of this is simply a message of support for the people, to the country that suffered at the hands of these terrorists. I think a second message was about the need for humanitarian relief, the need for humanitarian access, the need for the people in Gaza to have a sense of safety, somewhere, somehow. And the third message was to try to prevent escalation, to try to prevent this conflict, this war, from spreading. And it's that first message, the message of empathy, the message of support, the very strong words that the president gave from the White House as well as from Israel, that

gives him, I think, the credibility to be able to have that other message that you mentioned. That gives him the, that sort of indicates his moral compass, where his moral compass is, which is with the victims but also say, no, wait a minute, take your time, think about this, think about what your objectives are, and don't make the types of mistakes we made. He was undoubtedly referring to the decision to invade Iraq, which of course he had supported at the time and then later regretted. That was done at a time when we had national trauma. But I think that the linkage with the empathy and the support is what gives him the ability to make that message resonate with the Israeli public, that they have a sense that he understands the losses that they went through. He understands the trauma.

PITA: When it comes to the regional containment and the involvement of Israel's neighbors, obviously, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been engaging in a great deal of shuttle diplomacy during the last several days. The president was supposed to have a follow up summit in Jordan with Jordanian leaders, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt. That has now been canceled. What role have Egypt, Saudi, Jordan, etc. been playing in trying to manage in the sort of the regional reaction to this conflict? And how now has that been affected by especially by the public outrage over the terrible explosion at the al Ahli Hospital?

FELTMAN: Well, Secretary Blinken, of course, has been shuttling between a number of countries and there's different reasons, different objectives in each stop. The Egyptians have particular insight into what's happening in Gaza. They've long had ties in Gaza. The Qataris have hosted Hamas leadership as well as been sort of channels for messages back to Hamas. And I'm sure that the Egyptians and the Qataris both had had ideas on the American hostages and the other hostages that have been abducted into Gaza. Of course, the Saudis were leaning forward toward some kind of normalization with Israel. And it's unfortunate that the summit fell apart, but I think we all understand why it fell apart. You know, the public opinion across the Arab world was outraged by the explosion that took place in the Ahli Arab hospital. And frankly, that's one who we've lost the narrative, where the Israelis lost the narrative. I only know what I've read in the paper, I haven't seen any intelligence reports, but of course, the Americans, as well as the Israelis, have separately said that the attack on the Ahli hospital was a Palestinian militant group tied to Iran, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, one of their rockets aimed toward Israel that went awry and hit and hit the hospital. I doubt any Palestinian believes that, unfortunately. And you understand why; civilian infrastructure is being hit. Why would they necessarily believe this? But that made it politically very difficult for King Abdullah to host meetings of the Arab leaders with President Biden. I have no doubt that King Abdullah and the other Arab leaders want to see this battle come to a conclusion as quickly as possible. They want to see the humanitarian relief. And so the fact that President Biden has now said that there will be humanitarian access to Gaza - we haven't seen it happen yet - but that will help them manage their public opinion somewhat. But let's not underestimate the anger, the anger that Arabs and Muslims across the Middle East and beyond are going to be having. And we need to sort of talk about it, acknowledge it, deal with it. And it doesn't mean that we're ignoring the trauma that the Israeli families have suffered and are suffering.

PITA: I want to ask you to follow up on the humanitarian aid issue. The president had previously appointed former Ambassador David Satterfield to be a special envoy for humanitarian efforts. And in his visit to Israel, he announced that they were going to be putting together a \$100 million humanitarian aid package. So far, at least previously to this, there were relief supplies that waiting at the Egyptian border, the southern crossing into Gaza. Has there been any word about whether Egypt is going to be opening that border? Has there been any agreement about humanitarian aid corridors? Beyond the president's announcement, what do we know about what's going forward?

FELTMAN: I have not seen yet any reports beyond some reports that some water has been restored, some water flow has been restored to Khan Younis, which is a town in the in the center of Gaza Strip, one of the towns to which people have fled from the north under Israeli requests. I don't know that that the supplies have started flowing from Egypt across that Rafah border crossing you mentioned into Gaza yet. We have not we have not seen that. It's essential that it happens. And the Israeli statement that I saw said something like Israel will not block. I hope that

means Israel will allow this, these things to flow because there's probably going to be some security concerns on the Israeli part. Now, look how well-planned this massacre was on October 7th. Hamas has clearly worked for months, if not years, to plan the type of a brutal, sadistic attack that took place on October 7th. I can't help but think that they have supplies. That Hamas has water, food, fuel, medicine. It's the civilians in Gaza that are suffering from the current Israeli blockade. And they're the ones that this new aid should be reaching, and I hope soon.

PITA: Who would play roles in securing that, in getting it into the country in in making sure it gets not just to Hamas or it gets to the right people? Is it entirely just up to, would it be up to Hamas to get it to somewhere else? Who would be in charge of that of coordinating that?

FELTMAN: You know, there's been previous this is the fifth war between Gaza and Israel since the since the Israeli disengagement in 2005. And previously there was a European mission that was set up to look at security of supplies going into Gaza, to make sure that the arms weren't being smuggled in. So I don't know if they're looking at mechanisms like that now or not for the security and the delivery. The urgency cannot be overstated, that these people have relocated from the north, there was already humanitarian suffering in Gaza. So the urgency requires sort of immediate action, and I hope we see it.

PITA: Lastly, there has also been concern over whether Hezbollah would join from the north, whether they would also be coordinating with Hamas. You were previously the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. I think so far we've just seen exchanges of sort of rocket fire and that level of things on the northern border. The U.S., of course, has sent two carrier groups into the eastern Mediterranean to try and dissuade Hezbollah from doing anything more. What do we know about the likelihood of whether that could possibly escalate on that side?

FELTMAN: I think there's a real risk it could escalate. And this is a far bigger problem for Israel than Hamas, as horrible as the atrocities that Hamas committed were. This is a far worse -- Hezbollah, which is an Iranian-funded, supported armed militia in Lebanon, has estimates of 150,000 rockets, long-range guided missiles, etc.. It's a huge arsenal. And there have been casualties on both sides, including civilian casualties on both sides. But so far, the numbers have been relatively low, not to not to minimize any casualties, but the numbers have been relatively low. And so it seems to me that at least so far, Hezbollah is playing a very careful game here. Very dangerous, but careful game in that they're trying to demonstrate their resistance credentials, they're firing into locations in Israel or Israeli-occupied territories to be able to show that they have the resistance credentials that's part of the access that Iran has set up, but without triggering a full-scale war. Israel has responded in kind. Israel clearly would not want a two-front war. And so Israel is responding to each Hezbollah attack, but also in a way that seems to me so far designed to prevent an escalation into a second war. I was ambassador in Lebanon 2006 when Hezbollah and Israel went to war then. And Hezbollah badly miscalculated in 2006. And so the risk is always there that Hezbollah could misunderstand Israeli red lines. Israel's on high alert. Israel's traumatized over what happened October 7th. Does Hezbollah really know where Israel's red lines are? Could they miscalculate or could Iran decide that it's time for a second front because Hamas, which is another asset of Iran, is being battered sufficiently that a second front is opened? And so I think we cannot dismiss the risk of a second war, which would be far more dangerous than the current one.

PITA: All right, Jeff, thank you very much for talking to us today and explaining everything. And I want to let our listeners know that there will also be further discussion between Brookings experts on this subject on Monday, October 23rd. You can go to [Brookings.edu/events](https://www.brookings.edu/events) to learn more and to be able to watch that. Jeff, thank you.

FELTMAN: Thank you.