

Biden Has Defended US Allies' Use of Lethal Force Against Civilians

What human rights groups condemn as war crimes, Biden calls “legitimate self-defense.”

In an October evening in 2002, while quietly embroidering on the porch of her home in Nablus in the West Bank, 60-year-old [Shaden Abu Hijleh](#) was shot and killed by Israeli occupation forces. A grandmother and community activist involved in promoting the arts, women’s and children’s advocacy, serving the needy and nonviolent resistance to the occupation, she had no links to any violent or extremist organizations. No protests or other violent disturbances were taking place nearby, and her killing is widely believed to have been a targeted assassination.

In July the previous year, [Isaac Saada](#) was gunned down by an Israeli helicopter gunship outside of his home in Bethlehem. He was the father of 11 children and a beloved teacher at Terra Sancta, a Roman Catholic school in that West Bank city. Saada was actively involved with the peace education program of the Israeli-Palestinian Center for Research and Information. The day he was buried, he had been scheduled to take part in a joint seminar with Israeli teachers on improving understanding and cooperation between the two peoples. Saada was well-respected for his efforts to teach young people to love and work for peace.

Abu Hijleh and Saada were just two of scores of Palestinian activists murdered by Israeli assassins in the early 2000s. Though many of the targets were militants affiliated with armed groups, and included some suspected terrorists, Abu Hijleh and Saada appear to have been targeted simply for being locally prominent Palestinians opposed to the occupation.

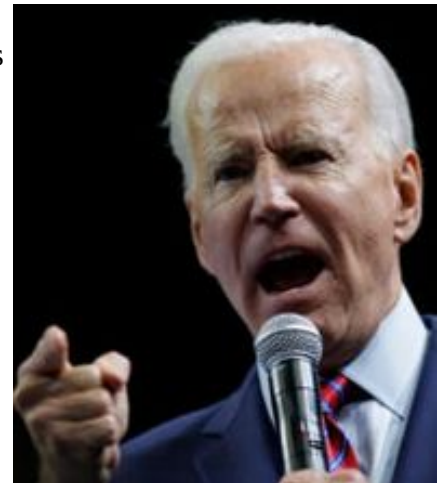
The Bush administration condemned the Israeli government’s policy of extra-judicial killings, which a report from [the United Nations](#) noted “are grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 147, and of international humanitarian law.”

On Capitol Hill, however, [the chairman](#) of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee defended Israel’s use of these assassination squads, saying, “I don’t believe this is a policy of assassinations” since “there is [in] effect a declared war.”

His name was Joe Biden, a senator from Delaware, future vice president and currently a leading contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

A look at Biden’s Senate career has shown repeated occasions in which he has co-sponsored resolutions and issued statements defending Israeli attacks against civilian targets in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon as legitimate self-defense. Biden has defended Israel despite well-documented reports by human rights groups that Israel had engaged in serious war crimes.

[Human Rights Watch](#), in its investigation of Israel’s 2006 war on Lebanon, noted, “In dozens of attacks, Israeli forces struck an area with no apparent military target. In some cases, the timing and intensity of the attack, the absence of a military target, as well as return strikes on rescuers, suggest that Israeli forces deliberately targeted civilians.”



Similarly, [Amnesty International](#) has reported that Israeli forces “carried out indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on a large scale,” including “those on civilian infrastructure” and “direct attacks on civilian objects.” Furthermore, the organization reported, “These attacks seem to have been aimed at inflicting a form of collective punishment on Lebanon’s people” and that “based on the available evidence and in the absence of an adequate or any explanation from the Israeli authorities for so many attacks by their forces causing civilian deaths and destruction, when no evidence of Hezbollah military activities was apparent, it seems clear that Israeli forces consistently failed to adopt necessary precautionary measures.”

Dismissing such reports, [Biden insisted](#) that Israel’s five-week onslaught on Lebanon was a “totally legitimate self-defense effort.” Biden also co-sponsored [a resolution](#) offering unconditional support for the war which claimed that the hundreds of Lebanese deaths were the fault of Lebanese, not Israelis, on account of “exploiting civilian populations as shields” despite investigations by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), the [U.S. Army War College](#) and others finding no evidence that Hezbollah, despite engaging in other war crimes, ever used human shields.

Similarly, during Israel’s 2002 military offensive in the West Bank, [Amnesty International](#) documented cases of Israeli forces engaging in “unlawful killings, destruction of property and arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian civilians,” including actions that “targeted medical personnel and journalists, and fired randomly at houses and people in the streets.” Biden, however, co-sponsored [a resolution](#) insisting that Israel had simply taken “necessary steps to provide security to its people by dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in the Palestinian areas.”

Much of the criticism of Biden’s foreign policy history has been focused on [his key role](#) as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in convincing his colleagues in the Democratically controlled Senate to vote to authorize the [invasion of Iraq](#) and, more recently, his [false claims](#) that he opposed the decision to actually go to war despite the return of UN inspectors and the absence of any of the “weapons of mass destruction” and weapons programs he claimed that Iraq possessed.

However, Biden’s defense of an allied government’s use of lethal force against civilians in the name of fighting terrorism raises serious concerns about his possible future conduct as commander-in-chief. Not only is there [little indication](#) that he has changed his position regarding Israeli attacks on civilian targets since his time in the Senate, but he has refused to condemn Trump for the thousands of civilian deaths resulting from the U.S. bombing of ISIS strongholds in Raqqa and Mosul.

It is unlikely that such questions about civilian casualties will come up in any of the presidential debates. That doesn’t mean, however, it shouldn’t be an issue to consider.

Related Story -- [News Analysis Politics & Elections](#)

[Let’s Not Rewrite History to Defend Joe Biden’s Record of Dog-Whistle Politics](#)

Invoking "different times" as a defense of candidates who promoted racist or bigoted policies should be challenged. By [Kevin Gosztola](#) & [Brian Sonenstein](#) , [Shadowproof](#)

