



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Are Biden and hurricanes this US election's October surprise?



It has taken a hurricane, or rather one approaching hurricane, another recent one and the lies and manipulations of the Trump campaign, to keep Joe Biden in the country in the run-up to the US presidential elections.

He had been **scheduled** to look presidential on a visit to Germany, for the highest-level meeting on Ukraine thus far, and then be packed off to Angola, yes, in Africa.

Given the paucity of Biden's campaigning, and public appearance in general, the past two months since he withdrew from the elections and let Harris take over as candidate, there can be little doubt about the distance that her campaign seeks to create between the two. But not too much to look disrespectful, which is where a foreign trip might have come in handy.

Instead, Biden is for now tethered to his administration's response to hurricane Milton, trying to prevent the misinformation that the Trump campaign unleashed over the handling of the previous hurricane, Helene, from gaining more traction.

It behoves the leader of a country facing a natural disaster to remain at his post, yet it appears to upend the Harris campaign's plans to give the vice-president the stage almost unchallenged.

How wise such a move would have been, can be seen from the own goal that Harris scored when she **accused** Florida governor Ron DeSantis of politicizing the hurricane response, only to have Biden then praise him for being cooperative. If the hurricanes themselves are not an October surprise, the interplay between Harris and Biden might become one.

The cost of living

The way Biden is handled by the campaign speaks directly to some of the central problems Harris is facing in her bid for the White House.

As vice-president she is inextricably linked to the administration's record and to a degree, to Biden's personal popularity. Yet, she has to convince the electorate that she is her own woman, has her own agenda and vision, and will handle things differently, especially some of the big-ticket problems that could torpedo any incumbent's chances of re-election.

The main challenges facing Harris as part of an incumbent administration are first of all the continued pain that many Americans feel over the **cost of living**, only worsened in recent weeks by a new spike in the price of oil. And secondly, the main reason for that rise in the oil price, the crisis in the Middle East.

Arab-American voters in places such as Michigan and even Pennsylvania can make the difference in a tight election

While the administration, by many metrics, has done an admirable job managing the economy, and Biden has achieved some remarkable domestic policy successes, the fact remains that life, for many Americans, has again become more expensive than it was.

This might be partly outside the administration's control, and also part of a longer-term trend, yet a painful increase took place on its watch. The country might be doing well, the people are hurting.

But this is something that holds true across the country and has not, it seems, dented the Harris lead in the popular vote. The way that Biden has handled the Middle East crisis, or rather as the optics will have it, failed to handle it, can hurt Harris much more in strategic swing states.

Arab-American voters in places such as Michigan and even Pennsylvania can make the difference in a tight election. Polls show that they are now evenly split between Trump and Harris, while they went for Biden in larger numbers in 2020.

The Middle East conundrum

If offered a third-candidate choice, the prospects for Harris are even worse. They identify her too much with Biden's failure to rein in Israel's operations in Gaza and now Lebanon.

Given the chance in recent **interviews** to stake out her own position, Harris has come across as robotic and uninspired. She dodged calling Benjamin Netanyahu a good ally of the US but could have done more to differentiate her support for Israel from her position on the Israeli Prime Minister. At least Biden is reported to have called him "a fucking liar".

The Middle East conundrum is more maddening as it lays bare the limits of US presidential power. The next test of this will be whether Biden is able to restrain Israel's response to last week's Iranian missile attack.

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A recalcitrant ally, in this case Netanyahu, has shown the ability to take control of the narrative of the campaign for the White House, especially so close to the elections.

The Biden administration should have seen this coming and taken steps much earlier, after several months of fighting in Gaza, to prevent this situation from arising.

The Middle East crisis is not only undermining Harris among a key voting bloc in some swing states, it also makes the American president, and thus the country, look weak. Trump is exploiting this by saying he would have done better, without, of course, offering any specifics.

A visit to Africa

In that respect, giving Biden a chance to shine

on Ukraine during his trip to Europe, and sound tough on China, during his visit to Angola, could have served to slightly shift the narrative.

Volodymyr Zelensky is in many respects a model ally, certainly compared to Netanyahu. Ukraine can be counted as something of a Biden success and he could have done worse than bask in it for a few days.



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But it's not without risk either. Ukraine's frontline is under pressure and Russia could strike another blow at the administration's image if it manages more significant advances before 5 November, as it is poised to do.

The extension of Biden's trip to Angola would under normal circumstances have been unremarkable. A visit to Africa has been long overdue. It is being framed by many observers, both in DC and in Africa, as a chance to counter growing Chinese influence on the continent. Biden would, among other things, have inaugurated part of a rail project that will ultimately run from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

Angola, with its enormous reserves of oil and other raw materials, its strategic position and a stable and increasingly US-friendly government, is also a logical choice for Biden. Yet, it was destined to hardly register with the American public, especially in the weeks leading up to the election.

South Africa, and even Nigeria or Kenya, might

have meant slightly more to most voters. However worthy Angola is, it made the trip look even more like an attempt to keep Biden out of the way. Now a hurricane has blown him back into the campaign's path.