

THE HILL

Harris must flex her muscles on national security — and fast

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Published Oct. 7, 2024 9:00AM ET



As the United States sends soldiers to the Middle East and Israel wages brutal parallel wars against Hamas in Gaza and Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Democratic ticket of Kamala Harris and Tim Walz must quickly assert its foreign policy prowess.

As America's potential first female president — and after Walz's "shaky" performance on the debate stage — Harris must particularly flex her muscles to show she can dominate

on the world stage.

The U.S. has been left behind as President Biden, Harris and their G7 allies fail to mediate an end to the rapidly escalating war in the Middle East. That lack of engagement reflects poorly on Harris, leaving her in an awkward position as she attempts to argue that she, Biden and the Democrats are the best poised to put out the tinder keg in the Middle East and protect the United States from retaliation, while expressing calibrated sympathy for Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian civilians.

The timing of Israel's lethal actions is not coincidental, coming just before the anniversary of Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023 murderous rampage into Israel from Gaza, which killed more than 1,000 people and resulted in the kidnapping of more than 250 Israeli civilians, soldiers and children. Hamas and its fellow pro-Palestinian terrorist groups still hold 101 hostages, their fate in limbo as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wages his war on Hamas and Hezbollah and its proxy supporter, Iran.

Poll after poll reveals that national security is a top priority for voters, after economic security. In a Pew Research Center poll released in February, 63 percent of voters said that “defending against terrorism” was a top policy priority, second only to 73 percent who said the most important policy priority is “strengthening economy.” In a more recent Pew poll, taken last month, foreign policy was the fourth top issue for voters, after the economy, health care and, interestingly, Supreme Court appointments.

Harris has attempted to position herself as a security expert both in her speeches and symbolically, but insufficiently so. She got off to a good start in her debate with former President Trump, taunting her Republican opponent for exchanging “love letters with Kim Jong Un” and having such a close relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin that, if he were in office now, “Putin would be sitting in Kyiv right now.”

Indeed, her hawkish stance won her the endorsement of more than 700 national security and military leaders from both sides of the aisle. But with just weeks to the elections, and security looming on voters' minds as the Middle East devolves, Harris must leverage

those endorsements to convince voters in the middle that she has the capacity to tackle the major global crises that she will confront if she takes office, including Israel, Ukraine and Iran.

Otherwise, she could easily lose this tight race.

According to RealClearPolitics, an average of recent polling from seven key swing states shows Trump is up by 0.1 percentage points. The former president is predicted to win Electoral College ballots in the seven swing states with 219 votes, compared to 215 votes for Harris.

To win over voters, Harris could frame her national security message through the lens of 9/11, given the similarities in scope and scale of the attacks on 10/7. Although the presidential debate fell just the day before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack, surprisingly, Harris didn't harken back to one of the most powerful moments in our history to bring home to Americans what this election is really about — protecting America's national security and democracy.

Trump didn't mention 9/11 either, but he did tell television viewers in the "spin room" that he'd be attending the memorial services in New York the next day. Harris was also at the services in Manhattan, along with Biden and other leaders. Even there, the vice president won in optics, thanks to Trump's controversial companion, Laura Loomer, a far-right personality who last year shared a video with the irresponsible conspiracy theory that "9/11 was an Inside Job!" Even Republicans like Sen. Lindsay Graham advised Trump to distance himself from Loomer, who posted a social media message after the 9/11 ceremony that "the White House will smell like curry" if Harris is elected president.

The chaos in Trump's brand — his lack of focus, punctuated by bizarre messages about cats and dogs and, now, curry — gives Harris an opening to differentiate herself as a coherent leader of strength. She should use the historical lens of the 9/11 attacks to communicate her focus on security, powerfully incorporating it into her final campaign speeches.

In future speeches, she must tell voters that she participated in the memorial services in New York to commemorate the 23rd anniversary of the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001, reminding them that nearly 3,000 innocent Americans had been killed in the worst terrorist attacks in history on U.S. soil.

Harris must connect 9/11 to 10/7, explaining why the issue of national security is so important — and why these elections are so vital. And she must make clear why our global alliances, which her opponent scorns, mocks and wants to destroy, are so essential.

Indeed, the White House's national security communications adviser, Adm. John Kirby, just made that point in a conversation with CNN host Jake Tapper. Kirby said the White House had been concerned about a direct confrontation between the U.S. and Iran “almost from the beginning,” with the conflict now widening into a regional war.

Describing the U.S. support for Israel as “iron-clad,” Kirby pointed out, “This is an ally, this is a partner. And they are under attack every single day.” He added, “If we were here in the United States facing those kinds of missiles, those kinds of drone attacks from neighboring countries, I can guarantee that the American people would want to make sure that we are doing what we can to protect them. And we are going to continue doing what we can to protect the Israeli people.”

A reminder of the tragedy of 9/11 with the parallel of 10/7 would allow Harris to argue why it's now so important to support NATO and America's allies in their time of need. Like any relationship, it's a long-term investment. Harris can then hammer home that the many senior national security leaders who have briefed her over the years say she is ready for the job.

To end her new national security speeches, Harris should say that, today, the enemy is both foreign and domestic. Russia, Iran and China are engaging in malign foreign

influence in an insidious attempt to corrupt U.S. elections and threaten U.S. and European sovereignty. Americans must fight hard to defeat them.

She could end her reflections with a call to all Americans to remember the lessons of 9/11 and 10/7 forever, to teach their children and grandchildren about these tragedies, to heed their lessons and to remember that with strength — specifically, her strength — comes security.