

# [***Biden backs Schumer after senator calls for new elections in Israel***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJN-1R61-DYMD-60T1-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden expressed support Friday for Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer after the senator called for new elections in Israel, the latest sign that the U.S. relationship with its closest Middle East ally is careening toward fracture over the war in Gaza.

Schumer, a Jewish Democrat from New York, sent tremors through both countries this week [*when he said*](https://apnews.com/article/schumer-netanyahu-israel-palestinians-elections-1ebf21e4c9c0f6f42478bb26e1db7a9b) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has “lost his way” and warned that “Israel cannot survive if it becomes a pariah" as the Palestinian death toll continues to grow.

“He made a good speech,” Biden said in the Oval Office during a meeting with Ireland’s prime minister. “I think he expressed serious concerns shared not only by him but by many Americans.”

The Democratic president did not repeat Schumer's appeal for Israel to hold elections, a step that would likely end Netanyahu's tenure because of mounting discontent with his leadership. But Biden's comments reflect his own frustration with an Israeli prime minister who has hindered efforts to [*expand humanitarian assistance*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-hot-mic-gaza-885b97a75d15d15ae7f7a47d0125c918) in Gaza and opposed the creation of [*an independent Palestinian state.*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-01-18-2024-73d552c6e73e0dc3783a0a11b2b5f67d)

The latest point of friction has been Israel's goal of [*pursuing Hamas into Rafah*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-02-10-2024-2d80dc890a5030757e2ae76684fa75da), a city in southern Gaza where 1.4 million displaced Palestinians have fled to avoid fighting in the north. Netanyahu's office said Friday that it approved a military operation that would involve evacuating civilians, but U.S. officials are concerned about the potential for a new wave of bloodshed.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking from Vienna, said, “We have to see a clear and implementable plan” to safeguard innocent people from an Israeli incursion.

“We have not seen such a plan,” he said.

However, Blinken said tough conversations between Israeli and American leaders do not mean the alliance is fraying.

“That’s actually the strength of the relationship, to be able to speak clearly, candidly and directly,” he said.

It’s possible that an attack on Rafah could be avoided. Negotiations over a cease-fire and the release of hostages are underway in Qatar, where Netanyahu agreed to send a delegation to continue talks.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. would not have its own team at the negotiations but will remain engaged in the process.

He also said it's “up to the Israeli people to decide" whether there should be elections. Asked about why Biden praised Schumer's speech, Kirby said the president appreciated the senator's “passion.”

Biden's rhetoric on the war has evolved since the conflict began on Oct. 7, when Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis in a surprise attack. The president immediately embraced Netanyahu and Israel while also [*warning against being “consumed” by rage.*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-israel-hamas-gaza-palestinians-a85cb682fdc61b80285cf4ab354354ce)

Since then, Israel has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza. And while Biden continues to back Israel's right to defend itself, he's increased his criticisms of Netanyahu.

After his State of the Union speech earlier this month, Biden said that he needed to have a [*“come to Jesus”*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-red-line-frustration-gaza-0f23fa8d02288c1b9d862ddc4035872e) conversation with Netanyahu. He also accused Netanyahu of [*“hurting Israel more than helping Israel”*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-israel-hamas-gaza-civilians-ceasefire-2d4e5657db45ccbe2bb793f06f74c913) with his leadership of the war.

Biden is trying to navigate between a Republican Party with an “Israel right or wrong” mindset and a deeply divided Democratic Party, said Aaron David Miller, who has advised administrations from both parties on the Middle East.

He described the U.S. approach to Israel as “passive aggressive,” with escalating rhetoric but no concrete steps like withholding military assistance.

“I haven’t seen it,” Miller said. “And we’re six months into the war.”

Americans have increasingly soured on Israel’s military operation in Gaza, according to [*surveys from The Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-poll-biden-war-gaza-4159b28d313c6c37abdb7f14162bcdd1). In January, 50% of U.S. adults said the military response from Israel in the Gaza Strip had gone too far, up from 40% in November. It’s a sentiment even more common among Democrats, with about 6 in 10 saying the same thing in both surveys.

Reckoning with shifts in Israeli and American ***politics*** has been challenging for Biden. [*A self-described Zionist*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-israel-gaza-dachau-holocaust-hamas-919058eec36dca4c06cf9fc4355fe302), Biden's political career began several decades ago when Israel was led by liberal leaders and the country enjoyed broad bipartisan support in its battle for survival against its Arab neighbors.

Since then, the failure of peace talks with Palestinians and the growing power of conservative Israeli politicians has led to a growing tension.

Biden's praise for Schumer could upset Netanyahu, who has already chafed at what he sees as American meddling in Israeli ***politics***.

“One would expect Sen. Schumer to respect Israel’s elected government and not undermine it,” said a statement from Likud, Netanyahu's political party. “This is always true, and even more so in wartime.”

Netanyahu has a long history of defying U.S. presidents, particularly Democratic ones. He fought President Barack Obama's push for a nuclear deal with Iran, and he accepted a Republican invitation to address Congress to demonstrate his opposition. Before that, he clashed with President Bill Clinton over efforts to create an independent state for Palestinians, who have lived for decades under Israeli military occupation.

Democratic anger over Israel's siege of Gaza has focused on Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister who leads [*a right-wing coalition*](https://apnews.com/article/politics-israel-government-benjamin-netanyahu-west-bank-2aadcdf4de57c54c59e619478bac63dc) that includes ultranationalist politicians. He also faces corruption charges in a long-delayed trial and declining popularity over his failure to prevent Hamas' attack or secure the return of [*all Israeli hostages*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-01-22-2024-d092205024c6064eb0440f0bfe06657f) being held in Gaza.

Public opinion surveys suggest that, if elections were held now, Netanyahu would likely lose to [*Benny Gantz*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-gantz-netanyahu-gaza-war-5174c723b53747229cc43b254f1768a7), a former military leader who is a centrist member of Israel’s war cabinet.

“Netanyahu has an interest in buying time,” said Gideon Rahat, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and professor of political science at Hebrew University. "That's always his interest, not to have elections, to stay in power.”

Rahat also said a different Israeli leader might approach the war differently, causing less strain with Washington.

“Another government would pursue not only a military but also a diplomatic and foreign affairs solution, one involving the PA," a reference to the Palestinian Authority that operates in the West Bank, Rahat said. “Another government would give more aid to Gaza and would run the war with a better distinction between Hamas and the Palestinians.”

However, replacing Netanyahu would not necessarily end the war or stop the rightward shift that has been underway in Israel for years.

Jewish Israelis believe by a slim majority that their leaders' judgment should be prioritized over coordinating with the U.S., according to a January poll from the Israel Democracy Institute. In addition, the Israeli Defense Forces receive wide support for their performance in Gaza.

Gantz also criticized Schumer's remarks, although not as harshly as Likud did. He wrote on social media that the senator is “a friend of Israel” who “erred in his remarks.”

“Israel is a robust democracy, and only its citizens will decide its future and leadership," Gantz said. "Any external interference on the matter is counter-productive and unacceptable.”

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Julia Frankel in Jerusalem and Matt Lee in Vienna contributed to this report. Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux and Darlene Superville contributed from Washington.

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